

# The Coronavirus Effect on College Admissions

By *John R. Vile, Ph.D.*

The coronavirus outbreak may well be the defining event of this generation, much as the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Kennedy assassination, and the 9/11 attacks were to earlier generations. Although there are some historical precedents, for example, the 1918 influenza pandemic, they occurred long before large numbers of students were enrolled in colleges and universities and thus offer relatively little in terms of current prognostication.

As of now, it is unclear whether the coronavirus will largely constitute a once and done event, or whether it may be the first of many renewed outbreaks—which may, in turn, largely depend upon whether scientists are able to develop a vaccine and how long this will take. It is even less clear how long and how deep the virus will affect the stock market, unemployment rates, and other economic indicators. As Yogi Berra reputedly said, “It’s tough to make predictions, especially about the future.”

As difficult as predictions are to make, prognosticators have been suggesting for some time that many colleges will face an enrollment cliff beginning in about 2026, based simply on the demographics of fewer high school graduates, largely as a result of the last recession. It seems likely that, after weeks of forced family togetherness, that there will be a baby bump or boom in about 18 years, but that

is probably too far out to offer much near-term hope for institutions of higher learning that are currently struggling.

I think that shorter term enrollment effects are fairly predictable and that they are most likely to benefit state community and four-year colleges and universities with large local populations. They may also benefit small colleges and universities in relatively isolated areas where disease may be less likely to spread than in more densely-populated areas, although only if there is an assurance of adequate health care in the case of a disease exigency. Clearly, colleges and universities with nimble faculty members who have mastered on-line classes will be at a continuing advantage.

The coronavirus has had at least two major effects—psychological and economic. Psychologically, the virus has increased fear of contact with outsiders. Long before state governors began to tell individuals to hunker down in place, many families had already retrieved their students from out-of-state universities to keep them out of harm’s way.

Families will surely notice that some universities literally closed all residence halls forcing students to return home or seek shelter elsewhere. If such actions look as though they could occur again, it will make far more sense for students to attend a school that either took less drastic measures (allowing students to remain in residence halls if they chose) or to choose a school



close to home. Even if such students chose initially to live in a dorm, they could move home more easily if that became a necessity, without bearing the cost and inconvenience of an extended trip.

Many schools tout foreign exchange and foreign study programs, but, at least in the short term, the thought of being abroad during a pandemic (especially to hot spots like Italy and Spain) might seem far less enticing than in the past. The national government hasn't helped this situation by calling graduates who had enrolled in Peace Corps home leaving them unemployed.

It is possible that the virus will make schools with large sports programs far less enticing, especially if the fear of being in large gatherings continues. Nursing and medical schools might take a hit if stories about the stress on medical personnel predominate, or they might attract even more altruistic individuals who hope to make a difference in future pandemics.

To turn from psychological to economic factors, a look at the recent gyrations in the stock market are enough to indicate that the coronavirus has wiped out a great deal of wealth and created great uncertainty, particularly among families whose businesses have closed. Traditionally, college enrollments increase during recessions as individuals seek to retool themselves, but the coronavirus is so unique that this is hardly a sure thing.

What does seem likely is that in times of economic downturns or uncertainty, families will be more likely to choose state schools where they can take advantage of lower tuition rates and where transportation costs will be kept to a minimum. An article by Paul N. Friga



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entitled "The Great Recession Was Bad for Higher Education. Coronavirus Could Be Worse" in the March 24, 2020 issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* observes that during the last recession, state aid to public institutions of higher learning declined and philanthropic giving to most schools decreased while tuition costs rose, which could mitigate some of the price differentials between state and private schools.

Yet another study conducted by the Art & Science Group, and also reported in an article by Eric Hoover in the March 25, 2020 issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, suggests that as many as 17% of high school graduates who expected to attend college next year may wait out a year. In such a case, any advantage that state institutions may have may be comparative. All institutions could face declines in enrollments, albeit with larger state-supported schools feeling the impact less than others.

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Dr. Vile is a graduate of the College of William and Mary who earned his Ph.D. in Government from the University of Virginia. He has served as Chair of the Department of Social Sciences at McNeese State University, as Chair of the Department of Political Science at MTSU, and (since 2008) as Dean of the University Honors College. Vile

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