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As Coronavirus Drives Students From Campuses, What Happens to the Workers Who Feed Them?

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A dining area at the U. of Texas at Austin, which on March 13 announced it was suspending operations.

The University of Texas at Austin [announced](#) on Friday that it would suspend operations in response to the coronavirus pandemic and Covid-19, the disease it causes. The university suspended campus visits and in-person admission events, as well

as all university-sponsored international and domestic travel through at least April 30.

In doing so, Texas joined the ranks of institutions like Rice University, which has elected to [suspend operations](#) on its campus, in Houston, for the rest of the semester. But those suspensions, accompanying shifts from in-person to online classes, have raised concerns about the effects on nonacademic workers and those employed by independent contractors.

Industry watchers, though, say that despite the chaos experienced by faculty members and students as campuses close, there has

not been a rush to issue pink slips to those workers.

“At this time, we are not aware of any planned employee layoffs,” said Andy Brantley, president and chief executive of the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources, in a written statement. “In fact, we are hearing stories from across the country that emphasize how our higher-education leaders are working to continue services, create teleworking plans, and expand leave options to help employees bridge any gaps that temporary Covid-19 closures will create.”

Earlier this week Washington University in St. Louis joined many institutions in [announcing](#) that it would shift toward a temporary online-only course model, and asked students not to return to campus after spring break. David Cook, president of the union that represents the campus’s food workers, said there also were plans to reduce the number of dining-service workers employed by the Bon Appétit Management Company, which contracts with the university to supply and serve food on campus.

Typically, around 300 Bon Appétit workers serve the campus, Cook said. But reduced operations would require only about 50 workers or fewer, he added, with the remaining 250 left in limbo. Fearing the loss of competent workers, Bon Appétit was trying to retain those with uncertain futures in any way it could, Cook said.

Henry S. Webber, executive vice chancellor and chief administrative officer of the university, told *The Chronicle* that the 250 Bon Appétit workers would continue to be paid for the rest of the fiscal year. Though workers’ duties might shift to adapt to the new reality on campus, Webber said, there would be no layoffs of Bon Appétit’s rank and file before the summer break.

But for Washington University, like nearly all other colleges wrestling with the pandemic's fallout, there remain [countless unknowables](#). Most campus food-service workers are employed seasonally, with reduced staffing during breaks that gears back up when students return. But whether this fall semester will bear any resemblance to those of past years remains to be seen, and with it, the employment prospects of these and other workers.

'Essential' or 'Nonessential'

Fallout from the current crisis will be a major test for many already-struggling private universities and colleges, said Robert Kelchen, an assistant professor of higher education at Seton Hall University. After paying its expenses, for instance, Washington University had a [\\$1.39-billion surplus](#) at the end of the 2018 fiscal year. The 12-month cost of its Bon Appétit contract? [Just over \\$17 million](#). But fewer and fewer institutions have a balance sheet that looks like Washington's.

If the outbreak persists, some private universities and colleges with tighter cash flows will have to cut costs. Most institutions will delay cuts in personnel as long as possible, Kelchen said, for fear of losing competent employees, who can be difficult to replace.

But institutions could be forced to make tough decisions: Should they reduce payments to certain contractors in order to invest in better distance learning? Or perhaps terminate some “nonessential” employees in order to continue to pay those deemed “essential”?

By classifying employees as either “essential” or “nonessential,” contingency plans aim to maintain the continuity of an institution’s academic and business operations, said David J. Hubeny, executive director of Binghamton University’s Office of Emergency Management and chair of the International Association of Emergency Managers’ Universities and Colleges Caucus.

Universities and colleges function like [small cities](#), Hubeny said, and can’t simply be mothballed until trouble passes. Heating and water utilities still need to be maintained by a critical mass of facilities workers. A certain number of security officials or law-enforcement officers need to be on campus and on call. If key labs must remain open, or certain research experiments can’t be delayed, a whole set of staff members must be retained for monitoring, safety, and services. And for all of those employees, as well as those working remotely, someone still needs to process paychecks.

Kelchen pointed to the diverging policies on campus housing that have been announced by hundreds of institutions this week. Generally, he said, the colleges that told students to leave are the richer ones. Should students or parents seek refunds, those institutions are better situated to write off that lost revenue, Kelchen said.

Other, less-affluent institutions have taken less-draconian measures. Some have asked, not required, students to move home to their families, thereby sidestepping potential ethical and contractual issues. Still other institutions have resisted any and all changes in their operations.

“You’ll see colleges exercising both an abundance of caution towards students but also an abundance of caution towards their financial stability,” Kelchen said. “For some colleges, that potentially can be difficult to balance.”