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Public Regional Colleges Were Already Struggling. Covid-19 May Push Some to the Brink.

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8–10 minutes



It's late January, and Bart J. Patterson is cradling loose dirt with a golden shovel, flanked by Nevada's governor and a flock of local dignitaries. A flurry of camera snaps capture this historic moment for the institution Patterson leads, Nevada State College: a

groundbreaking ceremony celebrating the construction of a \$62-million building for the School of Education.

Less than 100 days later, the regents of the state's System of Higher Education [approved](#) budget cuts of \$68 million to \$124 million for its central office and member institutions. With the state's gambling and tourism [suffocated](#) by the coronavirus outbreak, Nevada is [expected](#) to face immediate billion-dollar budget shortfalls. At the same time, its public universities and colleges entered the pandemic [underfunded](#) relative to the levels of support they received before the Great Recession.

Following that economic crisis, public regional universities and colleges fared especially poorly in austerity measures taken across the country, as they lacked access to the alternative streams of revenue available to some private colleges and state flagships. Now, as the United States enters a downturn that might prove even more devastating, advocates and academics worry that federal and state policy makers have not yet grasped the important role played by public regional institutions.

“Regional colleges are disproportionately dependent on aid from the state government, and they have limited availability of alternative revenue sources. They do not have significant endowments, or wealthy donors to turn to,” said Thomas L. Harnisch, vice president for government relations at the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, commonly known as Sheeo. “They serve disproportionate shares of low-income students, first-generation students, and students from historically underserved communities.”

Indeed, more than 60 percent of the undergraduates enrolled at Nevada State College in the fall of 2018 were not white. Nearly half of the college’s incoming freshmen were Pell Grant recipients. And in less than five years, the campus’s undergraduate population [grew](#) by 2,000.

Before the pandemic, the college had expected to scale up its operations to meet that burgeoning student demand. But now, hiring freezes will indefinitely delay job searches for full-time faculty members and people in student-support services. And it's not certain if the state will have the appetite to finance needed campus construction projects. There may not be another groundbreaking ceremony for some time.

Still, Patterson is optimistic about the role his institution will play at this extraordinary moment in Nevada's history.

"We are going to provide the work-force training that is going to bring us out of this economic situation," he said.

Very Different Universities

Painful restructuring is already underway at several public regional institutions.

In March the Board of Trustees at Central Washington University [issued a proclamation](#) of financial exigency, imbuing the president with certain emergency powers, including the means to discontinue or reduce programs and lay off tenured faculty members.

In Ohio the University of Akron [announced](#) last week that it would eliminate six of its 11 colleges to balance its budget. The university faces a shortfall of \$65 million to \$70 million.

And for a brief moment, the closures of three public regional institutions appeared imminent in Vermont. But following a public outcry, the Vermont State Colleges system [withdrew](#) its proposal.

Still, the system's chancellor [estimated](#) last month that the colleges would need \$25 million to remain solvent.

Faced with shifting demographics and stagnant public funding over the last decade, public regional colleges and universities have had to adapt, said Matthew R. Johnson, an associate professor of higher education at Central Michigan University. The coming months and years will be no different.

“You’ll see the consolidation of some colleges. You’ll see the elimination of some VP positions. I think you will have some smaller cuts to places like athletics,” Johnson said. “I mean, what does that cost of football look like when no one is in the stands?”

At other institutions, mass layoffs are underway. Western Michigan University [terminated](#) 240 employees at the end of April as it sought to balance its budget. New plans to lay off a “substantial number” of employees were [announced](#) by Western Michigan’s president on Monday. And at Ohio University, 140 custodians and at least three professors were [let go](#) after their jobs were eliminated.

Typically located in the rural outskirts of their home states, public regional institutions like Western Michigan and [Ohio University](#) are often their city’s top employer; sometimes they are its major economic engine. But such reliance on a single, central entity can compound the economic stress faced by a particular area in an economic downturn. To update an old saying, “When Northern Illinois University sneezes, DeKalb catches a cold.”

“The disinvestment from this space will have a huge impact on

these regions and their ability to get the economy going after this crisis,” warned Sheeo’s Harnisch.

A More Equitable System

Without additional federal stimulus funds, Harnisch said, the road ahead for public colleges will be extremely challenging. The financial health of many institutions will also depend on the continued spread or treatment of Covid-19, as well as how students and parents behave in the fall.

The coronavirus pandemic, though, has only brought into sharper focus what policy makers, academics, and advocates have known all along about the financing of public higher education, said Cecilia M. Orphan, an assistant professor of higher education at the University of Denver. Historically underfunded institutions can’t go it alone forever. A more deliberate model of federal-state partnership is needed, she said, to give states incentives to reinvest in their public universities and colleges.

“Maybe there are federal block grants given to states, contingent on their commitment to gradually increase funding for public education over a period of time,” Orphan proposed.

She also suggested that the federal government invent a new classification for certain institutions, similar to those colleges and universities designated as [minority-serving](#): a “rural-serving institution.”

Like Nevada State’s Patterson, Kayla Elliott, a senior policy analyst for higher education at the Education Trust, an advocacy group, believes public regional institutions will play an important role in an eventual economic recovery. But in order for that recovery to be

both equitable and consequential, some of those institutions will need to do a better job of increasing their enrollments' racial diversity and recruiting more low-income students. In turn, Elliott said, policy makers need to stand by public regional colleges and universities.

"Allowing those institutions to fail," she said, "is failing low-income students and minority students."