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THE KEY: INSIDE HIGHER ED



THE KEY WITH INSIDE HIGHER ED

EP 60: COVID'S IMPACT ON THE RETURN TO CAMPUS

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DOUG LEDERMAN

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DOUG LEDERMAN: Hello and welcome to this week's episode of The Key, Inside Higher Ed's news and analysis podcast. I'm Doug Lederman, editor and cofounder of Inside Higher Ed, and we're meeting up today a few weeks into another semester in which the COVID-19 pandemic is casting a larger shadow than many of us thought and certainly hoped just a few months ago.

We've been largely focused on other topics in recent episodes of this podcast and it struck me that it might be time to deal with the elephant in the proverbial room. Many topics in higher education are hard to generalize about because of significant variations in institutional types and missions. This one has the added complication of enormous variation in how the coronavirus and politics related to the pandemic are playing out in different parts of the country. Plus the situation is so fluid that trying to keep tabs on it is next to impossible and assertions made one day may be out of date a few days later.

With those caveats made, I invited onto this week's episode my colleague Elizabeth Redden, who has driven Inside Higher Ed's coverage of the pandemic since its earliest days, and continues to track its impact on institutions, students, and instructors as closely as anyone. In the last few days, she wrote pieces about how students are complying with their colleges' vaccination mandates and the regional differences in institutions' COVID policies. We'll dig into those and other topics in the conversation ahead as we try to make sense of how the pandemic is affecting higher education now and is likely to shape it going forward.

First, though, a word from D2L, which is supporting today's episode.

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DOUG LEDERMAN: Now on to my discussion with Elizabeth Redden, senior reporter at Inside Higher Ed. She's been a core member of our editorial team since 2006 and has unexpectedly added the global pandemic to her areas of expertise, alongside such topics as international higher education and religion. Elizabeth, welcome to The Key and thanks for joining us.

ELIZABETH REDDEN: Thanks for having me.

DOUG LEDERMAN: So I'd love to give listeners a little peek behind the curtain at how we work. How have you approached trying to cover the pandemic's effects on higher education, given the many strands that it entails and how varied the effects are on different groups of constituents within higher education and on different types of colleges and universities? It's a big, broad terrain to cover.

ELIZABETH REDDEN: That's a very good question. Especially in the early days it felt quite overwhelming because you could write, virtually any story would be a pandemic story, you know, every aspect of university life was impacted by the pandemic, university museums, libraries, research labs, professors, lives, careers, students, you know, everything was a pandemic story. Everything is still a pandemic story to some degree.

And the impact did vary, you know, and continues to vary, significantly across campuses, across different student groups. The degree to which different groups are personally being affected by the pandemic and the trauma that it's causing, that really varies a lot across institutions, ways in which some of the bigger picture impacts are playing out in such a way that might provide a window for other institutions, might provide some insight, some examples.

So I think certainly there's some deep dives with individual cases, with the individual nuances, but a lot of increasingly trend coverage as well, you know, looking at some of the big picture trends, some of the big picture issues that colleges are battling with across the board, issues like vaccine mandates,

politicization of public health measures, the degree to which colleges are using online learning this fall versus in-person learning. And that does vary across institutional types, across regions.

So really trying those sort of broader stories to get a good range of colleges of different types, and from different geographical areas in the United States, even while realizing that any single story is always going to be a sampling, right? Pretending to comprehensiveness is not going to be helpful.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Yeah, and that's something we struggle with pretty constantly, but it's probably exacerbated like so many things by the pandemic. And what we've seen, the usual things we're thinking about when we think about sort of the diversity of institutions... Geography is playing a role now in a way that's that probably greater than normal because of the differences in red states and blue states and regions. And one story that we just published touches on a lot of those themes you must flagged. It was a story about sort of how colleges with vaccine requirements are faring in getting students to comply. And that's evidence both of the sort of differences across different regions and of the fluidity that I talked about earlier in the introduction. Can you tell us a little bit about what you found in that pretty wide-ranging survey of institutions?

ELIZABETH REDDEN: Of course. Part of why I wanted to write this because I was talking with some institutions in the summer in July, some of the institutions that were early adopters of vaccine, COVID-19 vaccine requirements, that set deadlines of August 1st, August 15th, somewhere in those ranges for, you know, for students to report their vaccine status or their vaccination status. And, you know, I was hearing some level of nervousness in the summer. The portion of students who had reported at that point was fairly low. The big caveat was the deadline hadn't past yet, right, and you always might have a flood of students at the end. And most colleges had also built in some time to follow up with students once that deadline did pass.

So nevertheless, I think there was some nervousness. I mean, I don't think there was any question that the elite universities could get good compliance. But more tuition-dependent, you know, enrollment-driven institutions, would they have significant numbers of students who say, no thanks, I'm going to go elsewhere? And that doesn't seem to have come to pass. Institutions I spoke with, I mean, generally had fairly small numbers of students who did not comply at all, you know, who just decided to take a leave of absence or to take their classes online. There weren't institutions that were seeing gigantic exoduses of students. The number of students who either didn't get vaccinated or applied for and received an exemption was relatively low at most of the places I looked at.

I will say there are still some colleges that are, especially some that announced mandates on the late side in August, or after the Pfizer vaccine gained full approval in late August from the FDA. I think that their deadlines hadn't past yet, so they're still trying to get students to report their information. I mean, one thing that's quite clear from the data are the different vaccine uptake rates at flagship campuses versus regional campuses, for example. University of New Mexico, for example, I believe their deadline is, I think it's September 30th for students to submit their vaccine information. So they still have some time, but at this time they're seeing higher compliance, or higher vaccination rates that have been confirmed at the main campus at Albuquerque, as opposed to the branch campuses, so there it's different student demographics.

And so I think how colleges are handling this varies too, and there have been some that have taken a very hard line. If you don't get your vaccine by this date, you are being disenrolled or you're being disenrolled from in-person classes. You're going to be locked out of campus. There are others that are taking a bit of softer line. Okay, the deadline's September 30th. The University of New Mexico would be an example of this. Actually, for students, the deadline's September 30th. If you don't meet it, we're still going to let you stay on campus this fall and finish your classes if you submit to weekly testing, but you're going to have to go somewhere else for the spring, basically.

But by and large, colleges, I think, are seeing pretty decent compliance with these requirements. I do think one variable that was the percentage of students that were getting and receiving exemptions for the these vaccine requirements. In the examples I looked at, which was probably about 15 different colleges in my most recent story. You know, in that group I think the percentage of students who had received exemptions in general was somewhere around 3 percent to 12 percent, it does seem that some schools are being more and less liberal in whether to grant exemptions, particularly religious exemptions, and more or less liberal on how vigorously they wish to police those sorts of claims.

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DOUG LEDERMAN: And what standards they're using too? Or are they, do they need a letter from a clergy person, or is it just, or is in most cases just an assertion?

ELIZABETH REDDEN: Basically, states don't have to allow religious exemptions to vaccine requirements, but if they do, the courts have basically ruled that you can't discriminate between an organized religious belief and your own personal religious belief. I spoke with Peter McDonough, you know, who's vice president for the American Council on Education, and he told me that, generally speaking, colleges have

to consider, is their religious belief sincerely held? Is it in fact a religious belief, and is there an undue burden of imposed on the university for accommodating it? So a college could take a different position in regards to some of those questions. Is it sincerely held? Do colleges want to be in that position of questioning that?

DOUG LEDERMAN: Shifting to what we're seeing this fall, I'll admit to being a bit surprised by how relatively smoothly things have gone on many campuses so far. With the inevitable need for a big fat asterisk, and it's still early days, we haven't had cold weather forcing people in doors, etc... But we haven't seen lots of campuses having to shift all instruction online or put huge numbers of people into quarantine, let alone to consider closing down their campuses. Do you share that point of view? And if so, what do you attribute it to?

ELIZABETH REDDEN: I do share that sense. But I also remember last year, there was campuses with large numbers of cases that kept going. So I think the decision to suspend in-person operations, there are other considerations other than just the health impact [CROSSTALK]...

DOUG LEDERMAN: 100 percent... [LAUGH]

ELIZABETH REDDEN: The political will to close an institution or close in-person learning, even if it... You know, we saw campuses close for much smaller numbers, you know, much smaller percentages while other campuses kept going [CROSSTALK]...

DOUG LEDERMAN: Absolutely. Yes...

ELIZABETH REDDEN: So I think that fact that, you know, there's this kind of marching on. I think at this point in the pandemic, there's a strong sense of let's march on. Let's continue on. This is to some degree our new normal now. I have been a little surprised that I haven't heard a whole lot from colleges that are really in some of the hotspots affected, some of the Southern states that have real strains on their hospital systems right now. You know. And I really credit... I think there's probably a few things at play.

One is the vaccines, right? I mean we are in a very good... Even at schools that don't have vaccine mandates, even at schools that have, or colleges that have relatively low vaccine uptake in the scheme of things, you're still looking at 60, 70, right, 80 percent of students that are vaccinated and are largely

protected against severe outcomes. Add that to the protection many might already have just by virtue of age, you know, although, unfortunately, that's not perfect. We do know in general college age, traditional college age students, I should say, have less severe outcomes. Their demands on hospitalization are low. You know, faculty and staff vaccination rates are high, even at colleges that don't have vaccine mandates. I'm not sure I've done enough research to say this comprehensively, you know, but I've seen 80+ percent even at places that aren't requiring vaccines. There's a ton of support among higher ed professionals for vaccination, I think. And obviously, the vaccine, you can still get it, but it makes you less likely to get it, it makes you less likely to spread it. And it certainly makes you far less likely to have severe outcomes. So I do think that, obviously, it's helping greatly.

I also think, too, some of it is what do we not know. Like it's actually interesting, one of the schools that did partially flip online. It gave faculty the right to teach online for two weeks was Duke University. And Duke has been one of the most aggressive colleges on testing, COVID-19 testing since very early in the pandemic. And they have a highly vaccinated population, and they have a vaccine mandate. At the time, I believe that this happened, they were saying 98 percent of their students were vaccinated. And they had a pretty intensive surveillance testing program, and they turned up hundreds of cases, most of which were asymptomatic. So at a college that has less testing happening, we're not going to turn up those cases. As an asymptomatic case among a vaccinated individual, on the one hand, we know that person's far less likely to spread. It's still not impossible they could spread to an unvaccinated member of the community. So think that's part of it too.

So you know, how much information do we have and not have about the actual conditions of COVID on a campus, there is far more testing happening this year than happened last year, where there was virtually nothing other than... This time last year, colleges were starting to ramp up their surveillance testing operations around this time. But with the exception of a relatively small number of very wealthy institutions, more had very little, no surveillance testing happening at this time last year, and, you know, were just doing symptomatic testing. So there's more of that happening this year, but still the amount of it is less.

DOUG LEDERMAN: And then there's the question of how transparent they are to the outside world, which is another layer. You could have places that might be fairly well aware internally and are a little less transparent to the rest of the world. And I certainly don't want to make it sound like we've sailed through this. And again, it's only, it's not even, we're in the second half of September. I was pretty blown away by those couple of Saturdays ago watching the huge football crowds, and was sort of expecting that we would see big outbreaks. And again, people aren't symptomatic and they're not being tested regularly, maybe we don't know the full extent, but I'm not sure we've seen major outbreaks in a lot of places, which, again, sort of surprises me.

ELIZABETH REDDEN: Yeah. I think one thing I've been watching closely that I haven't seen, in so many colleges that were sparsely populated last year are full this year. And I was expecting more strains on quarantine housing to be reported than I've seen anecdotally. But that's something I definitely want to keep watching, because if even the student is asymptomatic or mildly symptomatic obviously, there are questions about where they'll be housed in that environment.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Yeah, yeah.

ELIZABETH REDDEN: Is there enough housing for that?

[MUSIC]

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DOUG LEDERMAN: We're talking about the pandemic's continuing effects on higher education with Elizabeth Redden, senior reporter at Inside Higher Ed. You just mentioned testing and the potential underreporting of asymptomatic cases, etc. What are some of the other areas of the pandemic's effect on higher education that are just sort of least clear at this point, either because we don't have good windows into it or because it's probably too early to really be able to gauge it? What are the other areas you're sort of thinking about and that our listeners should be watching for as you think about it?

ELIZABETH REDDEN: Yeah, last year a lot of people took heart from contact tracing suggesting that transmission was very limited in the classroom. Given that the Delta variant is far more contagious and far more transmissible, I've been thinking about that issue. I think that also might be an area where there might be differences in colleges in terms of how aggressively they'll be doing that contact tracing. But I think that's certainly a question I have. To what degree do some of the fundamentals that we see over and over again last year, are they questioned by what's essentially in many ways a very different virus than what we were encountering on campuses last year? You know, I think certainly the impact on enrollment and finances, I think...

And how long this goes on, right? We're in this weird, somewhat back to normal a little bit, but not really. And residential life is still somewhat curbed and you still have to wear masks inside, and we can't just hang out in the dining hall all day, and... I'm just, you know, how this impacts the student experience, the student learning experience, depending on how long it goes on is a sort of muddling kind of normal, but not totally normal. You know, is spring going to look a lot like this? I think that's going to have a lot of implications for just how appealing a four-year residential college experience is, and how much people want to go out of pocket for it. And I just think that's the question. You know, what's sort of the endgame here? What's the... There was a lot of hope that vaccines would bring an end to the pandemic, and obviously, they're doing a great deal, but, you know, we're not where we wanted to be in May, I think, all of us... [LAUGH]

DOUG LEDERMAN: Those are all good questions. I mean, the question of whether the student experience, part of me feels like maybe we should take our whole reporting team and send them out, and follow some students around, because it just is hard. And I have various nieces and nephews out there on campuses, and I'm getting reports. And there's no question that the experience isn't the normal one. These basically three groups of freshmen that we have on campus this fall --the new freshmen, the sophomores, and to some extent the juniors who really spent, you know six or eight months maybe, they're all returning to campus to some extent for the first time, and having... But again, not the experiences I think they were hoping for, the question sort of how changed it is remains a struggle for me, sitting here in our homes, not on campuses. and I think that's, certainly seeing anecdotal reports from publications elsewhere and our own coverage. But it's a hard one to gauge.

ELIZABETH REDDEN: I agree, and I think it differs how changed it is by campuses, you know. There are colleges that don't have mask mandates, and that life is continuing on. I mean, another question for me, a big picture question...

A major theme of my reporting over the past few months has been, you mentioned earlier, Doug, the geographical differences, obviously, and the political context differences. But I really, this division of colleges between those who can implement vaccine requirements and mask requirements, and are free to do so compared to those that cannot, either by state law, or... Mississippi, the other day it was reported that the higher ed board there blocked the universities from having vaccine mandates. Especially, obviously, vaccine requirements are not new for universities. It happened for mumps, meningitis, and all sorts of things, so, measles... So, you know, especially with COVID, hopefully, as the pandemic recedes. It's widely viewed that this is going to become an endemic virus that we live with, but maybe not of pandemic proportions, hopefully, for too much longer.

ou know, I do think that division between colleges that are able to require vaccines and those that can't, how that's going to impact higher ed in these areas longer term, and whether that changes. This is not just a higher ed question, but sort of changing political circumstances. I mean, another example of politicization really impacting higher ed operations fundamentally, and that, I think, is one of the biggest changes from this year to last year.

You know, last year, there weren't fundamentally, basically, richer, wealthier, and more selective colleges had more testing, they had more... But most campuses had mask mandates, most campuses had reduced density on campuses. You know, there was a certain toolbox, right? This is what we do, and basically, the variable was how much testing you were able to do was biggest variable you saw. But this year, we're just seeing such divergent approaches, depending on what state you're in.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Yeah, absolutely. And it's another way, as if we needed another reminder of, I don't know if it's right to say two countries, but certainly different countries depending on where you are. And I think it's affecting higher education in all sorts of ways. We're seeing it around certain curricular matters. We've seen some of those for long time, but this is acute in a way that has a bigger impact than I think we're used to.

he other area that has become an increasing focus of ours generally, and I think is going to be an even bigger one going forward, is on all the questions around equity in higher education. And the pandemic is another one of those things that is more of a separator and something that expands the gap between those that have and those that don't in our society. And I think we're absolutely seeing that impact in higher education, both in enrollment, but even in what you were just talking about. If wealthier institutions are, quote, better able to take better care of their people than less wealthy institutions. And in general we see more diversity and the neediest students, more of those students at the less wealthy places... I mean, it's just... There's a sort of expanding of the divide that COVID drives a bigger wedge through.

ELIZABETH REDDEN: Absolutely, I mean, I think there's a lot of... When I think about some of the questions, some of them are questions that become more questions the longer this persists, right? So study abroad was suspended from the pandemic. A lot of places have resumed study abroad in more limited ways. You know, that being an example widely considered to be a very impactful educational practice. And access to it has now been curtailed for, this is the fourth semester, that access to it would have been curtailed. Internships... You know, I...

There's all sorts of quality of education questions, I think, that maybe in the first semester, or even the first fall, we, you could kind of just grant a little bit because it was an emergency, but as this persists... And, you know, these are really hard questions to answer. I don't have good answers... I don't have good answers, but I think this is one of the areas that I would expect colleges to be looking at even in their own practices. How has... You know, department by department, class by class, how has delivery of this class been impacted in this ideal... And certainly there are ways in which the expansion of online has actually helped, right? I mean, obviously, people have learned new ways of teaching, and there's a new toolbox. People have expanded their own toolbox for when it might be appropriate to teach something online or to use a poll, etc., etc. But how it serves the quality of education, then impacts it...

DOUG LEDERMAN: It doesn't help that we have never been all that great at gauging quality in learning. So the questions of, is this lesser than is a hard one to answer when your baseline isn't very good in terms of understanding. The other phenomenon that we've seen that I think is absolutely fascinating is that, to the extent that, and this is greatly oversimplifying, but in the past, to the extent that we've had administrators in general being more interested in technologically delivered instruction, and faculty members less so. We're seeing a pretty interesting flip right now where for a wide range of reasons we have faculty members more interested than maybe normal in not being in the classroom physically and administrators having more incentive than they might have normally to really want students back, and how that dynamic plays out, as you said, the longer this lasts is going to be really interesting.

ELIZABETH REDDEN: One of the topics I did some reporting on, maybe about a month back, was faculty who were seeking accommodations through the Americans with Disabilities Act law to teach online for health-related or disability-related reasons. One person I spoke with kind of pointed out the irony that it's being seen as this crazy, you know, that some administrators were seeing this as this unreasonable accommodation we would never grant before the pandemic. I think they were offering \$5000 incentives to faculty who would teach a course online. So it's gone completely upside down.

DOUG LEDERMAN: That was Elizabeth Redden, senior reporter at Inside Higher Ed, who has helped lead over coverage of the pandemic since it began. Her last few words, completely upside down, continue to describe how a lot of the world still looks to most of us. Elizabeth and her fellow reporters and editors at Inside Higher Ed are doing our best to help you make sense of upside down world, every day on our website, through our frequent webcasts and reports, and in venues like The Key, which turned 60, episodes that is, this week.

We can't do it without your help, though. Please tell us about the topics you'd like us to explore, the

stories and perspectives we're missing, and what we can do to help you and your institutions best fulfill your missions. You can write me at doug.lederman@insidehighered.com, or if it's easier to remember, at editor@insidehighered.com, or send me a direct message on Twitter or a note on LinkedIn. And if you're finding The Key to be worth listening to, please subscribe on Apple or Google Podcasts, Stitcher, or your favorite podcast platform.

That's all for this week's episode of The Key. I'm Doug Lederman, and until next week, stay well and stay safe.

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