APSA Presidential Task Force on Coronavirus Statement on Federal and State Support for Institutions of Higher Education

Executive Summary:

The COVID-19 pandemic has destabilized most institutions of higher education, financially and organizationally. In the below statement, APSA makes observations on political science’s potential contributions to public policy choices moving forward, and makes recommendations for federal government support for faculty, staff, and students at colleges and universities. These recommendations include further relief funding for institutions and clarification of the visa process to better support international students, faculty, and staff.

The global COVID-19 pandemic raises many issues relevant to political science, particularly given the discipline’s collective expertise in the study of government and public policy. In the United States the pandemic has posed enormous challenges to national, state, and local elected officials and those who advise them, and their decisions have had and continue to have enormous consequences for all institutions and sectors of the society. Universities and colleges, no matter their size, structure, and location, are no exception. The virus puts a number of groups at particular risk, including those living in group-based housing, a core feature of residential campuses. Large universities by design bring together individuals from every state and many nations across the world in an environment of sharing and close social and physical proximity, which creates ideal conditions for the spread of the virus. Since many members of the American Political Science Association study governmental response societal problems, and live and work in such university and college environments, we must sound an alarm, indeed several of them.

APSA is nonpartisan, and only takes positions on matters of public policy that directly affect its ability to function as an association and conduct business for the good of its members. These observations and recommendations are rooted in the association’s responsibility to advocate for the wellbeing of our members and APSA’s recognition that a sustainable higher education system is essential to the continuation of the profession. We offer two empirical observations about political and policy dynamics of recent months that set the context for appropriate policy actions going forward essential to sustaining higher education in America:
First, the difficulties of managing the many inter-governmental relations within the federal system have overwhelmed government officials. Institutions of higher education, like much of the country, are paying the price for misdirection by the national government and the long-term degradation of county-level government agencies, particularly health departments. There have been glaring miscommunications, miscues, and missed opportunities associated with procuring needed supplies, coordinating testing policies, and deciding when to strengthen or relax social distancing requirements, and in other areas of the response to the pandemic. While it is fair to say that these challenges have been unprecedented and that our public health infrastructure was not built with this particular crisis in mind, there remain many lessons to learn and corrective actions to be taken. Members of the political science profession should be able to help in many ways.

Second, the problems associated with the pandemic response are not limited to failures of public administration. There are political and cultural issues at play as well. Our nation’s partisan polarization has led many to question the need for public safety measures that others see as straightforward, and we have observed clearly partisan differences in discretionary decisions by local elected officials. These have been enormously consequential for how colleges and universities of all kinds navigate the next stages of the pandemic. Members of the profession, well versed in the origins and impacts of such polarization, should be able to help in clarifying when partisan commitments conflict with the public interest and the common good.

Of particular concern to the American Political Science Association and its members is the specific vulnerability of colleges and universities to the pandemic and the policy choices that affect their futures. They are almost perfectly designed for spreading this disease. Universities bring together large numbers of students from many locations, concentrate them in close proximity, and send them back home at the end of the term. During the time the students are on campus, they come into contact with generally much older faculty and staff members, as well as many service workers in university housing, dining, and other units who often come from especially vulnerable population groups. Universities are struggling now with plans about opening up in the fall or anytime during the 2020-2021 academic year, but face severe financial pressures to offer something akin to the “normal” college experience so that students will continue to enroll. It is easy to foresee a financial catastrophe for many colleges and universities if they do not open for on-campus instruction, and a health care catastrophe if they do. We expect many institutions will open, will bring tens of thousands of students back to campus from every state and all around the world, and outbreaks will occur.

Therefore, in the specific interest of its members and the profession it represents, the APSA endorses government action to remove the financial part of this decision-making quandary and ensure the health and safety of political scientists in associated academic institutions.

- The federal government should ensure the financial viability of institutions of higher education during the more extended periods of closure that may be required, and help state governments continue essential investments in their public universities, colleges, and community colleges.
Leaders at all levels of government must ensure workplace health and safety for political scientists, other instructors, students and employees in higher education settings by acknowledging the current context of the pandemic and enforcing appropriate standards and protocols.

The federal government must clarify the visa authorization process for international students so that it accounts for the myriad teaching platforms emerging in colleges and universities in response to the pandemic, and allow for variability in said platforms in a manner consistent with public health recommendations designed to ensure the health of all people in higher education, without the threat of the discontinuation of programs of study, or of involuntary removal to their home country.

Our nation can be proud of the best system of higher education in the world, a fundamental driver of innovation and economic prosperity. But many institutions of higher learning are facing existential threats if they close for fall semesters or quarters, and others not threatened so severely will nonetheless suffer greatly as well, with additional adverse consequences for the communities in which they are located. We must not engage in wishful thinking when the lives of so many are at stake and the nation’s universities represent such a petri-dish environment for the spread of this disease. Responsible decision making on the health care front will have heavy financial implications, and government support has to be part of that equation.

Finally, we echo the statements of other professional organizations in asserting that no faculty members, graduate students, instructors, or other individuals should be forced to participate in face-to-face instruction if they judge doing so during the time of this pandemic threatens their health and safety. Further, no explanation for this discomfort should be demanded, since it should not be subject to verification. And the financial cost of participation in remote instruction, including internet access and needed equipment, should be borne by the employer, not the employee. We are particularly concerned here about the most vulnerable members of the profession.