

Transcription for

**The Key with Inside Higher Ed**

EP. 24: FEDERAL POLICY AND PART-TIME STUDENTS

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THE KEY INSIDE HIGHER ED

EP. 24: FEDERAL POLICY AND PART-TIME STUDENTS

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PAUL FAIN: Hello, I'm Paul Fain, a contributing editor at Inside Higher Ed. I'm coming at you again from my basement in DC with another episode of The Key with IHE, a podcast focused on the pandemic's impact on vulnerable college students. This week we're looking at the fears of a possible exodus by lower income students from postsecondary education and what federal lawmakers could do to help. First off, I spoke with Morna Foy, president of the Wisconsin Technical College System. We talked about the barriers many students across the system are facing.

MORAN FOY: You know, when students were coming back to us in economic downturn, they were usually continuing to work. And now, they may not have that option at all or they don't have the same option for a flexible and reasonable paying job part-time.

PAUL FAIN: She also explained by she and other community college leaders are pushing hard for federal stimulus aid to help part-time students. Also joining me was Lexi Barrett, an associate vice president at Jobs for the Future, who leads the group's state and federal policy efforts.

Barrett gave me some national context to the enrollment crunch many community colleges are facing, as well as some practical solutions federal and state policymakers could use to help more students stay on track with their educations.

LEXI BARRETT: I think that the real change that we need is not going to be just driving funding or solutions through one silo, but seeing how we can connect across them to serve these students better.

PAUL FAIN: Let's get to the conversation.

Hello, I'm speaking with Morna Foy. How are you?

MORAN FOY: I'm very well. Thanks a lot, Paul.

PAUL FAIN: So it goes without saying, a challenging time for community colleges or really any institution of higher education right now in terms of serving students whose lives have been disrupted. Can you give a sense in how in this term things are shaping up in terms of enrollment or the barriers that students are facing?

MORAN FOY: Yes, it's actually a very hard time for most of our students. I think you know and most people know that community colleges around the country, just like the Wisconsin Technical College System, we serve a lot of the most, what are considered the most vulnerable higher education population--working adults, parents, students of color, students of low economic status. And so the vast majority of our students are working, and they are also working in the jobs that have been most hard hit by the pandemic changes. So there's been a lot of conversation about why enrollments at junior colleges and community colleges have not gone through the roof like they have in previous economic downturns.

I mean, most recently the late naughts, 2008, 2009, you know, we were putting students in hallways at desks. We were doing all sorts of things trying to manage this huge influx of students. And that's not happening to the same extent this year.

You know, we have RAMC members, which is a group of some of the largest two-year systems in the

country. We haven't been experiencing quite the declines as are being reported on a national level, but we are still experiencing declines. And that is because the pandemic actually has affected all of the structures that exist in a normal economic downturn that allow students to go to school.

So your typical two-year college student, you might be in your late 20s, maybe you have a kid or two at home, and suddenly you lose your job. Now your kids that would have been in school aren't, they're at home with you. Your kids that may have been to be put in daycare can't because the daycares aren't available to the same degree as they were. If you have another wage-earner in the family, they may have lost their job as well. And so instead of... When students we're coming back to us in economic downturn, they were usually continuing to work. And now, they may not have the option at all, or they don't have the same option for a flexible and reasonable paying job part-time. So now we're working more hours, potentially for less money, and trying to make up not only for our own job loss but possibly our spouse or other adults in the household. And so that has really complicated it. Transportation options aren't available as much. I mean, there's just a whole series of things we kind of take of granted being available to us when we have to make a job transition.

And I think overlying all of that, there's real change in our students, in all of our attitude about future planning. So lots of times students will come to a two-year college because they are looking to make a career change or they're looking to keep up with changes in their workplace. There's an element of future-looking--I'm looking toward the future, I'm looking about what I'm going to be doing five years from now, and where do I want my life to be and what career do I want to have. Based on conversations that we've been having with students, they are not looking that far into the future. They're trying to figure out how am I going to get through the next week of home schooling. How am I going to get through the next four weeks of not being able to get to my part-time jobs easily, because I'm afraid to ride the bus. all of those things are contributing to why we're seeing some enrollment decline right now when normally we would have expected the opposite.

PAUL FAIN: I know we can't really underestimate the impact of anxiety and uncertainty and the ability to plan, as you mention. It's hard to look out a week these days, let alone to a career track. So can you talk a little... I mean, a technical college system, you've got a lot of programs that require some hands-on training, I know. How have you been able to function in the kind of hybrid remote environment right now?

MORAN FOY: Well, we've made a lot of changes very, very fast. So that has been big part of that transition process. It started last spring. It's continued into the summer. And we bought a lot of technology. We made a lot of computers and software available to our students. We created a lot of

internet access points, so we had to do that by putting up, hanging up hotspots, but just outside of our buildings, but we operate, as do a lot of two-year colleges in a lot of rural areas that just don't have good internet service or broadband. So it's been common historically that students would come to our campuses to use the library. They would sit in the parking lot in their cars in the evenings so that they could use the Wi-Fi and do their homework that way. And so we had to expand that out. We put hotspots now in gas stations, outside gas stations so that they have parking available there. We've tried to make it just easier for students who can go to school virtually to do so.

But that has taken a lot of work besides just the physical equipment and internet access, because students who want to go to community colleges, they tend to want, I often refer to it as a private school experience for a public school price, which means their instructor knows them by name and they know about them. They can get support services, a tutor, an adviser. They can meet with their classmates in small group settings. So they want that experience, and we have tried very hard to recreate it in a virtual format.

But that takes work and practice by our students, and also by our faculty and our staff, who are not used to having to interact with students like you and I are interacting right now through a screen. It really has changed their relationship. And so we've spent time and effort on the professional development, if you will, side of our activities, trying to get people more familiar and comfortable with these new technologies, both in the teaching and the learning process. And then also being more creative in how we use technology.

And that has been a huge change in a lot of our more hands-on delivery models, things like nursing, allied health, anything that involves a clinical setting, anything that involves a hands-on assessment. It's very difficult to do those things virtually, so we can and we have, thank God for advancements in technology, robotics. We now can, you know, we have simulators that can recreate childbirth, can recreate heart attacks. They can talk, they can sweat. You can take their blood. You can do surgery procedures on them. But still not a replacement for an actual human clinical experience.

And so that has actually been a big barrier, and it's one of the things that is affecting our enrollments I think right now, is that those opportunities have also been downsized because of the pandemic. Health, hospitals, healthcare providers, law enforcement opportunities to conduct live training exercises, all of those activities, we have to do them in smaller groups. We have less options. It takes longer than to put through a class of 20, through that experience. And it takes more teaching time, because the ratio of teacher to student, even though it was a lot better at two-year colleges than it has been a four-years over the years, we've had to drop it even further. So less than 10 students in most states, and that just

prolongs the process. You just cannot put people through those experiences as quickly.

PAUL FAIN: Well, obviously a bunch of resource-intensive changes and adjustments for the system, and not to mention the financial barriers you mentioned for your students.

Let's talk about what can be done to help. You know, I know there's concern in the sector and from some of your colleagues in the RAM coalition about the last federal stimulus. Who knows what's going to happen with the next one... They're talking about it, but we'll see. Either way, what would you like to see from the federal government, or frankly, from your state to try to help out both students and institutions ride this time out?

MORAN FOY: Well, from the federal government we really appreciate the efforts in Congress to revisit how any kind of COVID response or assistance funding is distributed in the higher education sector. So the first CARES Act, of course, you know was distributed based on full-time equivalence, so that's where we count up credits and divide by what makes for a full-time student, and then we get a number. And that's been historically a very common way to measure higher education outcomes and resource needs.

But it doesn't work in this setting because of the kind of assistance and support that we have to provide students is based on them as individuals, not on the number of credits that they're taking. And just, you know, a real quick example. I'm a part-time student. I'm taking two classes, and you are a full-time student and you're taking four classes. You would be twice as much as an FTE as me but yet we both require the same laptop. We both require access to the internet. We both require a virtual adviser to somehow have virtual technology to interact with us on a personal, private, protected way. So those expense of the institution are exactly the same, whether you are a full-time student or a half-time student.

And under the original CARES Act, funds were actually distributed, institutions with full-time students would have gotten double the money, even though they may not have had as many students, human beings that they had to serve. And so that's why we're really hopeful that future pandemic-related support from the federal government will rely on a headcount distribution formula. Just taking into consideration that the costs that we're experiencing right now are really related to human beings that we have to help, and not how many classes they're taking.

PAUL FAIN: Sure, and I just wonder historically how focused federal aid has been on full-time students. I

know primarily, but more importantly, are you seeing a shift. I mean, we're talking all the time in Washington and state capitals about working adults, the folks who struggle most to take a full slate of courses. I mean, are people more receptive to the needs of that student population in your experience?

MORAN FOY: I think that they are more receptive, but on a practical basis, it gets tricky, because they are used to using data systems and reporting systems that are credit based. That has just been the historic measure of both our activity, our outcomes, our costs. Everything has been based on the credit and that is, you know, historically, that seemed like a fair way to do it because it measured how much time you were spending teaching as a sense, you know that that was the main expense when it came to education. The actual classroom instructor and the time in the classroom...

I think we have done a lot of work, two-year colleges, over the last decade. RAMC has been instrumental in those conversations where there is, you're right, there is a much better understanding and appreciation for working adult students. They make up an increasingly significant portion of our higher education student populations. And yet the systems that we have for monitoring effort and expense and activity in higher ed are based on an old model. They don't necessarily do a good job of documenting that student population for policy makers. And that's tough, because they want to want to use data to make decisions too. And the data doesn't always paint a good picture of community college activity. So while I think there is a growing appreciation for the needs of the majority of higher education students these days, we don't necessarily have the best data out there to get that acknowledgement into policy, like CARES Act funding distributions.

PAUL FAIN: Well, yeah, it's not the first time I've heard limitations with federal data causing problems on the ground. I really appreciate you talking through. I know time is short for you and others, so I'll let you go here, but good luck and I hope you can keep in touch as this interesting fall takes shape.

MORAN FOY: Thank you very much, Paul.

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I'm speaking with Lexi Barrett from Jobs for the Future. How you are doing, Lexi?

LEXI BARRETT: I'm doing all right, Paul. How are you?

PAUL FAIN: All right is good enough these days.

LEXI BARRETT: That's good enough.

PAUL FAIN: So among other challenges that we're all watching closely is the question of potentially large numbers of vulnerable students leaving the postsecondary education and training pipeline. Community college enrollments are down. What are you worried about? What are some of the concerns you see as most pressing in addressing that question?

LEXI BARRETT: Yeah, I'm really worried when we look at the economic trend lines happening right now, where you're seeing the real disparate impact between... There's really a class divide, right, that middle income-high income folks are doing okay through the pandemic economically. And lower income individuals are really just bottoming out in terms of their economic sustainability, in terms of their wages, in terms of their job loss.

And we know that community colleges and technical colleges have historically served a really important role in communities in serving those individuals. Right? Community college students are not typically students right out of college, they tend to be older, they tend to be individuals looking to come back and make a career shift or make a career move. And in typical recessions, community colleges see their enrollment going up, right, so people are losing their jobs, and they need to go back and get some education and get some skill development. And that is often what then helps to propel us out the recession, right, that you have a set of individuals in a region who have new skills and they can put those to use and help to pull the community back up.

And I think all of us who work closely and think about this population of students is really concerned when we see those numbers going down. Because that, it looks like they're not going somewhere else. They're just not enrolling in higher education right now, and that's a real concern. If they're losing jobs,



those jobs may or may not come back. And it makes getting more education, getting more skill development all the more critical for their future. To see those numbers come down is really concerning.

PAUL FAIN: On the question of whether this recession crisis will defy previous precedent, you know, it just seems like there are different barriers right now. I mean, you and I were just talking about the K-12 barrier. That it's one thing for us, but a lot harder for a lot of the folks that community colleges serve. Other issues that you see might make this recession different than others in terms of what these students are facing? And just to tee that up, we're seeing anecdotally the interests in staying, you know, in pursuing a credential but maybe not the enrollment at this point.

LEXI BARRETT: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I think you take a lot of the constraints that adult students were often facing in a community college context, where many of them are parents, right? Many of them are working. And some of them are still working now. And, Paul, you and I both have kids and are working parents with children who are not in fulltime school anymore. And it's impossible for me to imagine throwing some college courses on top of that. So I totally understand why really you're adding that additional hurdle for so many of these individuals who might normally consider going back to school during this time themselves.

And then in addition to that, you look at online coursework and the broadband demand, the computer and technology demands, and we know that there are students that that's just not possible for them, right? They don't have the connectivity, they don't have the right devices, they can't make it work.

And then I think on top of that too, you also put in the uncertainty factor. Even lots of labor economists cannot tell you exactly what the economy and what the jobs are going to look like in a couple of years. So if you expect an individual to be able to project for themselves, oh, this is what I need to study. This is what's going to get me on the best path.

It's a murkier, harder time, and I think all of those barriers and all of that uncertainty is what's driving a lot of that hesitation. And of course, on top of that, the very real financial challenges of actually affording to go back to school.

PAUL FAIN: Yeah, you know, obviously we've seen data. I know Strada's pulling data that how important anxiety and uncertainty is as a barrier right now. And speaking of uncertainty, you know, folks still watching to see what might happen in the city that we live in, Washington, in terms of stimulus. What

are you watching, what do you hope for, how could the federal government in a relatively quick timeline make a difference to help this population?

LEXI BARRETT: Well, there's a lot that they could be doing, and there's very little that they are.

I mean, I think when we look and I take out by Washington, DC crystal ball, which has not been functioning very well recently, there's still the potential, right... Negotiations are ongoing. I think we've heard that some nuggets that Speaker Pelosi and the administration are trying to work out a deal, but it really is terrible that it has gone on this long. Right? The last major bill was passed back in the spring, so we've gone the whole summer, which was really key timing for colleges and for individual students and prospective students to make these choices and get ready. So it was a real missed opportunity for Congress to not act earlier. I think there's still a chance they would do something now. It sounds like they're mostly arguing over what the top number is.

But they you also have to consider that that's going to be a bill that includes everything, right? We have a backlog now of issues of which higher education is just one of many that lots of different folks are looking to be addressed. So you would need to think about what of that could actually fall to helping this population versus of lots of other very real issues--the K through 12 schools, state and local governments. There's a lot that is kind of out there and in the mix. So I think there's a chance something could still get done pre-election, but I think what most people are looking toward at this point is the potential for there to be a shake-up in terms of the administration, a shake-up in terms of Congress. That could present some new opportunities come January for something bigger and something more sustained.

PAUL FAIN: As higher education's and its proxies' push for assistance for their students and their institutions, you know, the numbers that they're putting out are pretty big. It sounds like the need is pretty severe. One of the issues we've been tracking is the tier sector saying we need more help for our part-time students, you know, the argument that Morna Foy made in my previous interview for this episode, that part-time students can't be left out of that formulas, they should get more aid.

What are your thoughts watching that issue and beyond? You know, what are some other initiatives maybe aimed at helping the employment pathway that you're watching?

LEXI BARRETT: Yeah, absolutely. So I fully agree with Morna on needing to rethink any future formula

that's going to higher ed to make sure that it's not disadvantaging community colleges and part-time students like it did in the CARES Act. I tend to think that that was not purposeful so much as something that was being written very, very quickly and the full implications were just not completely thought through. But that's not a mistake that should be made again, especially when we know that there are lots of reasons why individuals would be needing to go part-time right now, all of the things that we just talked about. And that's not something that we should be disincentivizing, because that is ultimately then sending fewer resources to some of the colleges that are serving the students, and that's unfortunate.

When I think about some of the other things that we'd like to see the federal government turning to, I go back to looking at those barriers that we just talked about, right? That you have an interest in going and getting additional education, but anxiety and uncertainty and an inability to make it work.

And I always think that policy works the best when we're actually trying to look at the source of those issues, and trace it back. And not limit ourselves to just the place where that's playing out, right? So I think you can look at it and say, oh, this is a higher education problem. But it doesn't take long to talk to those students or to talk to the college presidents who are interacting with them to see how much bigger these issues are and the wider range of policy solutions that we need to be looking at to really address their needs.

So I think first and foremost, we should definitely look at the affordability factor, right? So in that case getting money directly to colleges. We also at JFF have talked about whether there is something that we could do to like look at what Michigan is doing with their frontline workers fund that they've developed. Okay, so it's a little bit building off of the college promise idea, but making it, looking at a targeted population, looking at career advancement opportunities that could be really interesting.

And I think that also gets to one of the main barriers, which is about outreach and about navigation, right? A community college cannot enroll a student who never shows up at their door. So where the students who could be coming to a community college, why are they not getting there? How do you find them where they are? And I think that's why you need to look at what are those outreach programs that can be done. How can the federal government help support that?

And look at where they are now. One of the issues that JFF has been advocating for in terms of the stimulus is more funding for our nation's workforce development system. The workforce development system is dealing directly with individuals who are losing jobs every day. They serve a really important

career navigation function, which often means advising and navigating individuals who have lost jobs into community colleges, back into higher education. And they've just been slammed and swamped by unemployment requests, by out-dated technology. And I think there's a real partnership that you could see here between the workforce development system and higher education institutions to help find those individuals who aren't even showing up at the door, and help guide them into a program that's right for them.

I think similarly looking at high schools, right... That's another pathway. It's been interesting to see that in a lot of cases dual enrollment has been trending up, at least initially during this time. I think that's not entirely surprising, given kind of the chaos in the nation's high schools right now. But is that an opportunity too to help get those students some early college credit, and there's a lot that policy can do to help make that easier. So that navigation, that advising component is really critical.

And then I also think about the broader range of support that these students will need. So thinking about a national broadband plan, right? Thinking about the ways that we can leverage connectivity differently. And I... Lots of schools were doing that through the CARES Act funds and through other funds, but we really need a more national strategy about how we're going to make this work. And not just for now, right? Like these connectivity issues have been problems in rural communities for a really long time, and have the potential to really open up a lot of doorways for these students that they haven't before.

And then you have to address issues around childcare and the other emergency support and things that these individuals might need.

So it really does present itself as an opportunity to pull a lot of these different systems together that have always been supporting individuals and have policies think more holistically about how to connect across them, which is not something that we're particularly good at in the policymaking space. We tend to like to think in our silo. But I think the real change that we need is not going to be just driving funding or solutions through one silo, but seeing how we can connect across them, to serve these students better.

PAUL FAIN: That all makes a lot of sense. And, you know, I also like the way you started with treating, looking at the actual symptoms of the problem, you know, the causes I should say, what's driving the uncertainty that's preventing folks from enrolling. I mean, it's pretty obvious that seeing a pathway to a job that's worth your time and investment when it's even harder to do that is really hard right now.

I just very briefly wanted to return to the frontline workers fund in Michigan. I mean, is something like that on a national level possible, or something like that would help folks see that pathway more easily?

LEXI BARRETT: Yeah, and the data that we've seen out of Michigan looks like they have had more enrollments than they expected from that program, so there's something about it that's working. I think it's the kind of program that you could see in a different Washington, perhaps not this Washington, but maybe a Washington that could come to pass within the next couple of months, of having something that could be a big push, right, and really focusing on the individuals, many of whom are frontline workers who have been the most devastated but also the most important over the past six months in our country. And how we can better support them in making their next step in their career path.

And I do think the point that you raised about the connectivity to careers is so essential and important, because I think that is a little bit of what is driving some of the challenges right now too, is that individuals, they need that immediate connection. They need to be able to see that finish line before they're going to commit in this time of uncertainty. And we at JFF, we run a group called the Policy Leadership Trust with a group of community college leaders.

And Marcia Ballinger out of Lorain Community College in Ohio is one of the leaders in that group. And Lorain is doing a program right now where they have put in place more shorter term certificates and credentials that aligned with some of more immediate openings and opportunities in their community. They've seen a lot of success from that. So looking at the very work focused shorter-term programs...

Now, you have to answer the longer-term question too about how are you stacking these along the career trajectory, so you're not just solving someone's immediate problem but you're really setting them up for long-term career success and growth and economic sustainability. But I think that is something that's really important for us to be thinking about and looking at those successes that we're seeing where the trend is the opposite, right? So there are, we see the trend generally of decreasing enrollment, but where isn't that happening, and even within an individual community college, where is something going against the trend, and what can we learn from that?

PAUL FAIN: Well, I think you've done a really great job laying this out, and, frankly, I wouldn't say I don't feel hopeful, but you gave some real specifics of something that could make a difference, particularly in a different Washington, so I hope we can keep talking about this in coming months. And good luck with

the schools issue on your end as well.

LEXI BARRETT: Thank you very much.

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