



COVID-19 Creates a Differently-Unfair System

Lara Schwartz

Director of American University's Project on Civil Discourse

[2019-2020 Fellow](#)

Many have written that the rapid switch to online education deepens inequities in education. Students who are caring for younger siblings, have limited access to broadband and computers, who have privacy concerns, or live in distant time zones face higher hurdles than many of their peers. As someone who focuses on inclusive pedagogy and universal design for learning, I am compelled to say that the move to online isn't about a fair system becoming unfair—what we have now is differently unfair.

For example: students who work to meet their expected family contribution have less time to study than those who are not financing their education. But while universities have policies to accommodate student athletes who miss class due to practices or games, many lack similar protections for students who work. Online learning is differently unfair- not uniquely unfair.

Economic insecurity doesn't only affect academic opportunities; it can also chill free expression. In the course of our research into self-censorship and self-editing, my fellowship partner and I encountered many students who felt they could not speak out about pressing political issues for fear that their campus work supervisors would disapprove or their financial aid would be at risk. Free speech, as it turns out, isn't free.

Secondly, many of the systems we're using now- including video conferencing- would benefit students with disabilities and chronic illness for whom in-person instruction is not always accessible. Disabled self-advocates have expressed frustration that schools have refused to offer these alternatives until abled students needed them. If universities (and others) had paid more attention to disabled self-advocates' voices, we would all be more experienced and prepared for this moment. Free speech and expression are hollow liberties if we do not listen, and COVID-19 has shown how poorly we have listened to self-advocates about common-sense accessibility fixes.

So my two take-aways from the COVID-19 era to date are (1) we need to address the way economic status affects the educational experience even when we're all in the room together; and (2) we should keep trying to make classes accessible to those who can't be in the room with us, recognize that efforts to make our classes more accessible will ultimately benefit everyone, and take extra care to listen when we're told that education is inaccessible.