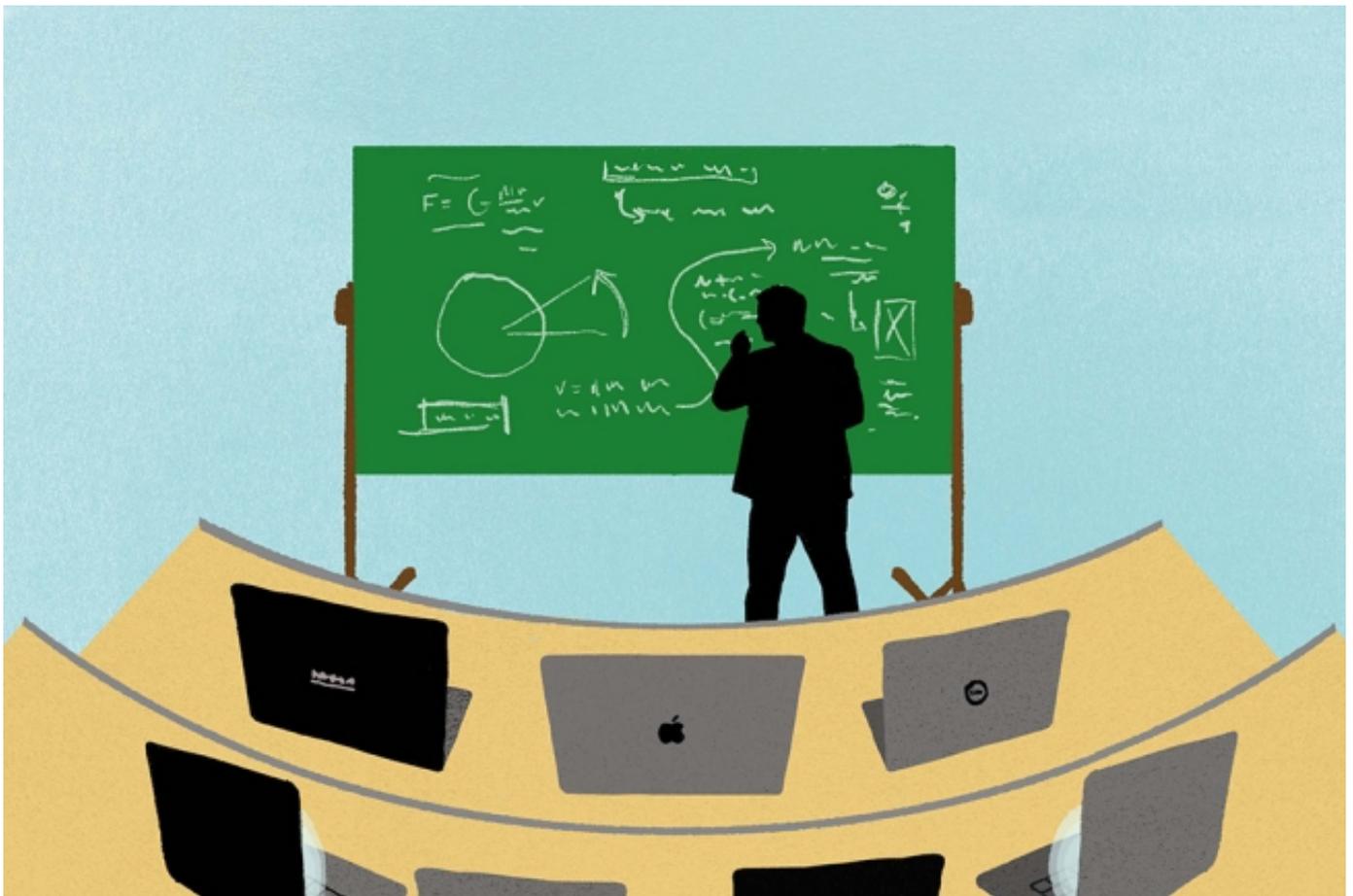


Academe's Coronavirus Shock Doctrine

Faculty members are already stretched thin, and now they are being asked to do more. They should hesitate before doing so.



David Senior for The Chronicle

By Anna Kornbluh March 12, 2020 Premium

As the home of expertise across the research and medical sciences, public policy, and human expression, universities are taking a leadership role in responding to this pandemic, especially given the absence of a functioning

federal government. Being on the front lines means that universities are acting rapidly to take the kinds of dramatic steps necessary to flatten the contagion curve and limit harm. But unlike some elementary schools or businesses, U.S. universities are not simply closing; they are ordering faculty to ensure "continuity of instruction" by moving classes online.

Online education has several benefits and has seen experimentation and progress, often thanks to big budgets. Yet the mandate for this sudden conversion of large swaths of higher education to an online format threatens to trigger a breakneck paradigm shift with unforeseen ramifications. Shock doctrines make emergencies the new normal — they turn temporary exertions into permanent expectations. American higher education has already endured several slow-moving disasters over the past 40 years: the radical defunding of public institutions, the casualization of academic labor, the militarization of campus security, and the erosion of faculty governance. As a result, the very instructors now tasked with the herculean transition are already working in extreme conditions: Somewhere between two-thirds and three-quarters of college and university teaching is performed by non-tenure-track faculty members or by graduate students, many of whom conduct heavy course loads without health insurance and with suppressed wages, housing insecurity, and stifling debt.

The directive for immediate transition conceals a tremendous labor intensification. Faculty are being asked to redesign their courses and reinvent their pedagogy on an emergency basis. Are there appropriately urgent ways to limit virus exposure while also allotting time for these laborious undertakings? Could all courses be suspended for a week to give faculty time to survey students about their internet access, computer ownership, and data limits — and to give institutions time to redress inequities in student access? What about time for faculty to reconcile the lack of alternatives to face-to-face learning for laboratories, ensembles,

seminars, and studios? Time for disability services offices to train faculty members in online accommodations? Time for institutions to devise support systems for faculty teaching from "home" when home might be scrambled by young children whose own schools are closed? Time to develop collaboration workarounds with crucial staff, who should also be afforded "social distancing"?

While we need institutional support for these transitions, we also need to be involved in decision making. We are the experts in the classroom, so we should have a seat at the table whenever redefinitions of "classroom" and "instruction" are taking place. We must have autonomy over the new paths for our courses. We are the ones who meet students face to face, so we know not to underestimate the uncertainties confronting those whose families may be sick or vulnerable, whose employment prospects may be uncertain, whose campus lives are disintegrating. The edict that students continue the labor of education amid calamity is its own strain-normalizing spike. Students want to learn, and faculty members want to teach, desperately so in devastating times, but crisis learning must not exacerbate the existing crises in higher education.

What comes after the shock? If instruction is going to be utterly transformed, then other protocols and systems must be too, and faculty members ought to insist upon assurances and protections now. Intellectual property rules by which universities claim ownership over materials uploaded to course-management software must be completely suspended; we cannot willingly contribute to the rebranding of education as "content delivery." Universities must explicitly ensure that third-party platforms will not monetize our words for Big Data and our faces for surveillance industries. Faculty performance reviews (crucial to renewal for contingent faculty, to merit pay, to tenure proceedings) should be reformatted to account for the derailed "outputs" when conferences and guest lectures

have been canceled, publications slowed, and alternate teaching strenuously improvised. Student evaluations should not be proctored or employed as usual. Face-to-face learning is irreplaceable — even in a virtualizing culture, even when classroom infrastructures are overcrowded and outmoded, even when administration has become the dominant sector in education. Absent firm administrative commitments to resume ordinary instruction after the virus subsides, and in the presence of administrative memos specifying "indefinite" and "permanent" dimensions of the transition, faculty as a group should pause before making the extraordinary efforts now demanded.

Societal straits present openings for reinvention. The history of capitalist crisis shows how often these reinventions have come at the expense of average workers. But faculty are a creative lot who should be able to anticipate and deflect the risks of coronavirus shock doctrine. We must seize this moment to organize for student-debt relief, student and faculty health care, and the public goods of research and expertise. Tasked with conjuring continuity in a pandemic, we find ourselves at a precipice that clarifies how much we have overworked to weather the structural adjustment of higher ed, and how much we have in common with each other — with the hourly employees who make the university and its surrounding businesses go, with our students, with the school teachers who've been struggling and striking nationwide. A cataclysm is here. What can we collectively rebuild?

Anna Kornbluh is associate professor of English at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She gratefully acknowledges communal conversations about faculty concerns in various social media venues.