

# Commonwealth Post-Pandemic Education Compact Or A Manifesto for the New University?

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The global COVID-19 pandemic has been catastrophic and created deep unease about the future. This radical uncertainty makes post-pandemic planning for higher education institutions rough. The virus has killed hundreds of thousands, infected millions, and left national economies and the global economic system in ruins. Millions are without work and are in debt. Several of the state's euphemistically-named Gateway Cities are in economic and education shambles. Lowell, like so many cities, has ground to a halt. The streets are empty, the schools are closed.

There is an urgency here. The state unemployment rate in April 2019 was 2.9 percent. In April 2020 it is pushing 20 percent and in June it will likely be closer to 25 percent. Middlesex County's unemployment rate was 2.2 percent in April, just under 20,000 people out of work. One year later, that figure is 101, 536 or approximately 12.6 percent of the county's labor force.

Small businesses that made Lowell so alive are in deep trouble. The festivals, art shows, and music that make the mill city so vibrant are canceled. The many great non-profits that serve the community so well are stretched thin. Besides this devastation Lowell and other Gateway Cities have one thing in common: public institutions of higher education.

But UMass is often ignored by the press. The Ideas section of the May 24 *Boston Sunday Globe* featured an extended essay by David Scharfenberg titled "Disrupting College." It raised several issues on where, post-pandemic, higher education might end up. What was striking about the piece was the failure to consider seriously the question: Wither public higher education? Is this reflection of a bias in favor of the Commonwealth's private educational institutions? Or typical of the lack of attention paid to public higher education? We who believe and value public higher education need to address this hole in the Globe's thinking, and to emphasize the enormous economic, social and innovative contribution that the UMass system makes to Massachusetts.

For example, in 2018, nearly \$700 million in funded research was undertaken statewide and the UMass system's impact on the economy was just over \$6.2 billion. In addition, just over sixty percent of graduates remain in the Commonwealth's workforce, many in key fields like nursing, primary care medicine, biotech research, public education, and computer and life sciences. At UMass Lowell patent applications are up and incubator space for medical device and biotech start-ups is on the upswing. In the long rethink required to get these and other communities back on their feet, public universities like UMass Lowell have much to offer.

But we should be clear, a 'return to normalcy' will not suffice. 'Normal' was not working before Covid 19, so there is zero reason to advocate for a return to normalcy. Every critical institution, except for that of frontline health workers, has failed. As a state, we are barely making do with the switch to online education in both public and private institutions. We are failing to help thousands of students across the Commonwealth, and to contend otherwise is foolishness.

To admit this does not mean we are not trying. Many have worked extremely hard to make the best of it. While UMass Lowell, its students, staff, and faculty have done great work, in extraordinarily difficult circumstances, to shift learning online, by building on existing expertise, but the inequities existing before the pandemic that made access to education unequal remain and are now profoundly exacerbated. These mirror those that existed in healthcare and of which we are now only too aware. And things are far, far worse today. Decades of trying to run a state and a nation on a neoliberal model of austerity, tax cuts for the wealthy, a rigged political system, slashed aid to the folks who need it, and complete capitulation to the “market” have wrecked our social and political systems. We need to dismantle 'normal,' not call for its return.

To reiterate, it may take years to recover, and recovery requires a complete rethink of how we work, learn, socialize, and protect citizens. Many of our institutions will be casualties of this epidemic, not least of which are our public colleges and universities unless the renovation is sweeping, right down to the studs. As people begin to figure out how to reopen colleges and universities, that reopening ought not to be a return to what existed pre-pandemic.

We know that change is hard, and we know that many of the suggestions below seem impossible -- but calamitous times require bold ideas. But none of these changes and proposals will work unless people are willing to take risks and be inclusive in thinking and deciding what do – and that means having everyone (staff, students, faculty, unions, and representatives from the Lowell community) at the table.

So, let us start with the ways we might rethink our universities, particularly our very own UML.

- **End** the tyranny of 14-week semesters and the traditional course meetings. Why not intensive five-week courses taught over the entire year and during evenings and weekends? Have smaller classes, staggered course time, and develop hybrid learning models that mix real and virtual time and include practical and engaged activity in the community.
- **Repurpose** the campus infrastructure and its spaces and open it up fully to community use.
- **Fundraise** specifically to make nursing education free to students who agree to ply their craft for five years in Massachusetts after graduation and do the same for students in the School of Education, who make the same pledge.
- **Investigate** and report on economic recovery in the city by using faculty and students of the in the social sciences, humanities, and the business school.
- **Encourage** and support creativity in all forms. Establish a Creative Economy Think Tank to better coordinate and capitalize on its growing inventory of arts and culture-related activities, using faculty and students from the College of Fine Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences. Build on the model developed under Difference Makers and integrate into the City’s development strategies. Pull in students and faculty from engineering to come up with new ideas and new technologies that serve the community.
- **Commit** to purchasing a significant portion of the food available for faculty, staff, and students from local restaurants and vendors. Allow students to use at least half of their meal plan points in downtown Lowell restaurants.

- **Systematically** boost City-Campus connections by engaging retailers, city officials, and the University to develop strong links between the thousands of students, faculty, and staff who already know there's a lot to like about Lowell.
- **Nurture** the Green City Initiative. This was started before the crisis hit to build a partnership between UML and the City around sustainability. The original Commission has good representation from the organizations and communities of Lowell. Rename it **Fresh Green City** and use as a think tank to reimagine Lowell. Create Task Forces to examine all the issues for a post-pandemic city.
- **Establish** Lowell as a Learning City. Use idea of Lowell as classroom without walls for long term community discussions about the future of Lowell.

Across Academia we should:

- **Forego** student debt, thereby pumping a trillion dollars into the economy that will play out over the next 20 years and free graduates to work at jobs that support the community and the disadvantaged.
- **Make** all public higher education, including community colleges, tuition-free.
- **Demand** that all public higher education institutions pursue a deep commitment to genuine civic and community engagement by faculty and students.
- **Direct** research and learning at understanding and solving global, national, and local problems in public health, global warming, inequality, immigration, prejudice in all forms, the promotion of human rights, and the creation of sustainable economic and technological innovation. Do this as an interdisciplinary research and teaching curriculum focused on breaking disciplinary barriers.
- **Engage** students in creating student-developed courses of study and student-developed majors, creating, and emphasizing student-centered pedagogy
- **Re-think** faculty merit and the tenure and promotion process and change the incentive and reward system.

Let's start a conversation about how we reimagine Lowell, its educational institutions, and its economic base in a post-pandemic world.