

Community colleges get creative to survive spring, while prepping for a surge next fall

By **Lauren Lumpkin**

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Latease Jordan's college, like most colleges, is basically closed. Classrooms have shuttered, offices are locked shut, courses have shifted online.

But Jordan is waiting to move into a new home and doesn't have Internet access. So Tuesday, she drove a half-hour from her friend's house in Southeast Washington to the University of the District of Columbia in Van Ness, so she could go to one of the few places on campus that *was* open: the library. It's farther than Jordan's usual study spot, U-D.C.'s community college on North Capitol Street, but with most of the college shuttered, it was her only option.

Cleaning crews had sanitized the keyboards, computer monitors, door handles and light switches. Signs on the chairs reminded students about social distancing. But it was open. It has to be, said Erik Thompson, the school's vice president of real estate and facilities management, so students like Jordan, who at 31 is pursuing an associate degree in respiratory therapy, can attend virtual lectures and complete their assignments. Sometimes Jordan brings her 3-year-old daughter, Lareia, so she can play educational video games recommended by her pre-K teacher.

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“I need the library’s resources,” said Jordan, a mother of two. Jordan’s 16-year-old daughter, Amoni, lives with her grandmother. “I come here every day.”

Colleges and universities across the country have closed facilities in recent weeks, in hopes of slowing the spread of the novel coronavirus. But Washington-area community colleges are leaving certain spaces open for students who don’t have reliable technology access or WiFi at home, an accommodation leaders say is necessary to ensure students earn credits and graduate on time. They’re also tending to students’ more basic needs, by donating food and cutting checks for rent.

Those same college leaders are looking ahead to future semesters. Uniquely suited to respond quickly to a changing economic landscape, community colleges could serve an important role for students, families and communities hit hardest by the coronavirus.

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“Students who are the most vulnerable, right now, are made even more vulnerable,” said DeRionne Pollard, president of Montgomery College in Rockville.

Like four-year schools, community colleges have moved quickly to end face-to-face classes and migrate instruction online. But the shift has exposed a wide gap between those who can access the Internet and those who cannot.

That has forced officials to find creative ways to make sure students stay engaged — and stay safe. Northern Virginia Community College left computer labs open at first, but officials found it hard to regulate the number of students using them, said spokeswoman Hoang Nguyen. So campuses instead expanded WiFi networks to parking lots, allowing students to stay socially distanced while connecting to the Internet on laptops and smartphones. (The stay-at-home orders issued this week in the District, Maryland and Virginia make exceptions for people traveling to and from school.)

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Montgomery College has responded to technology-access issues on its campus by donating hundreds of laptops to students and faculty so they can continue to learn and teach from home. “We occupy a special place in this whole situation,” Pollard said.

Charlene M. Dukes, president of Prince George’s Community College, said faculty and staff have spent spring break making sure students can access course content on any device, not just laptops.

“If students have any kind of electronic device, and a cellphone particularly, they should be able to connect,” Dukes said. The school has joined others in offering remote academic advising and mental health services.

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Still, much is subject to change.

“We’re going to take this one step at a time,” said Ronald Mason, Jr., president of U-D.C, where 1,800 community college students account for more than 40 percent of the school’s enrollment. “We know our student population and we can maintain healthy practices, especially things like social distancing.”

College leaders are also taking steps to help students survive the economic fallout. Regular users of Prince George’s County Community College’s on-campus emergency food pantry are getting grocery store gift cards. Northern Virginia Community College recently launched an emergency aid fund for students facing furloughs and layoffs. The school is trying to raise \$750,000; the college’s fundraising arm has committed \$250,000. Students can use the money however they want, from buying groceries to purchasing a laptop for class, Nguyen said.

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A similar effort has taken off at Montgomery College, where leaders are working to bolster an existing emergency fund to meet increased student demand, Pollard said. The school has reallocated funds from canceled events, including graduation, to a scholarship and grants account, allowing it to disburse about \$137,000 to students in need of laptops, software and food. More than 730 students have requested assistance.

These measures are designed to get students through the semester. Looking ahead, leaders are bracing for a potential enrollment surge if the economy — left floored by the coronavirus — continues to deteriorate.

Community colleges are “uniquely poised to help fill the workforce pipeline,” said Martha M. Parham, spokeswoman for the American Association of Community Colleges. The schools are designed to respond quickly to the demands of the regional job market, and leaders work closely with local businesses to create relevant curriculum.

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The virus could also have an effect on enrollment at four-year colleges and universities, sending more students to community colleges. Between 2007 and 2010, as the American economy collapsed, the share of full-time community college students increased from about 41 percent to 43 percent nationwide, according to data from the American Association of Community Colleges. By 2017, that number had fallen to about 37 percent.

Dukes said enrollment at Prince George’s Community College went up “somewhere between 10 and 15 percent” after the Great Recession. “We were prepared then,” she said. “And we would be prepared if something like that happened.”

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