

July 25, 2020

Opening Schools

Your blogger (YB) and his Department Chair spent three days this past week scheduling an in-person exam. The experience reinforced YB's long-standing fears about the problems of reopening schools. In a nutshell, things will be time-consuming, costly, and potentially dangerous.

YB's place of employment is no secret (Wayne State University in Detroit), and YB has been proud of the University's response. The President who is both a physician and an epidemiologist, has been (almost brutally) honest about the problems of reopening. He has put together an outstanding set of committees to try to foresee the problems, and to come up with solutions. The University has been solicitous of faculty preferences in terms of coming in to teach, teaching hybrid courses (some meetings in person, some online), or going entirely online. YB is old enough to worry about in-person classes (he receives Social Security), and has some underlying health risk factors. He is grateful for the University's support. Wayne State has been good to him.

In our economics department, as in most US economics departments, students take "qualifying exams" in microeconomics and macroeconomics. We postponed our May 2020 exams to late August because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This summer, we decided that we would have to administer these two exams, and late August (just before Fall classes begin) seemed to be a good alternative. Our Department's Graduate Committee voted to hold the qualifying exams in person. Because no one is taking both of the exams, we can hold them at a single time, in a single place.

Recognize, please, that scheduling an exam for eight people is usually simple. Find a classroom nearby, set the time, assign proctors to oversee the exams, and let them start. For this exam, we need to do the following:

- Go to the University Public Health **and** Academic Restart committees for approval to hold the exam;
- Find a room that will accommodate 45 to 50 people, in order to maintain the social distancing that will allow us to seat eight examinees plus a proctor;
- Provide a set of social distancing and mask rules for the examinees;
- Make sure that all students and the faculty proctor complete the *Warrior Safe Training* (the proctor should ask to see proof) and that they also complete Campus Daily Screener every day beginning two days before the exam and the day of the exam.

We will also have to set up rules about what to do if a student:

July 25, 2020

- shows up without having taken the screener and refuses to leave;
- calls up reporting ill the day of the exam;
- falls ill during the exam.

Multiply this by a million or so, and we have the logistical problems of reopening the K-12 schools, as well as our universities. It will be far worse in situations other than ours. Our graduate students are cooperative adults who have chosen to devote several years of their adult lives to graduate education. Move this model to elementary or high schools, or to undergraduate education. Are we prepared to schedule every in-person school activity this way? Are teachers to become the “screening police”? We have seen what happens at convenience stores or restaurants where clients are told to put on their masks. And the scenario described here is occurring at a university which is taking reopening very seriously.

YB does not have a solution for all of this. He does advocate a “stadium model” for entering the campus. When YB want to go to a Tigers game, he must go through a “turnstile” where his ticket is scanned. No ticket, no game. We can provide turnstiles and barcodes, and we must provide “ticket takers”. Once the students have shown their valid tickets, they can enter the appropriate locations. Faculty members have far more on their plates than to serve as screening police.

Let us turn to the CDC and Department of Education mandates to send children back go the schools. To paraphrase tennis “bad boy” John McEnroe, “They can’t be serious!” If they are, more’s the pity.

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