



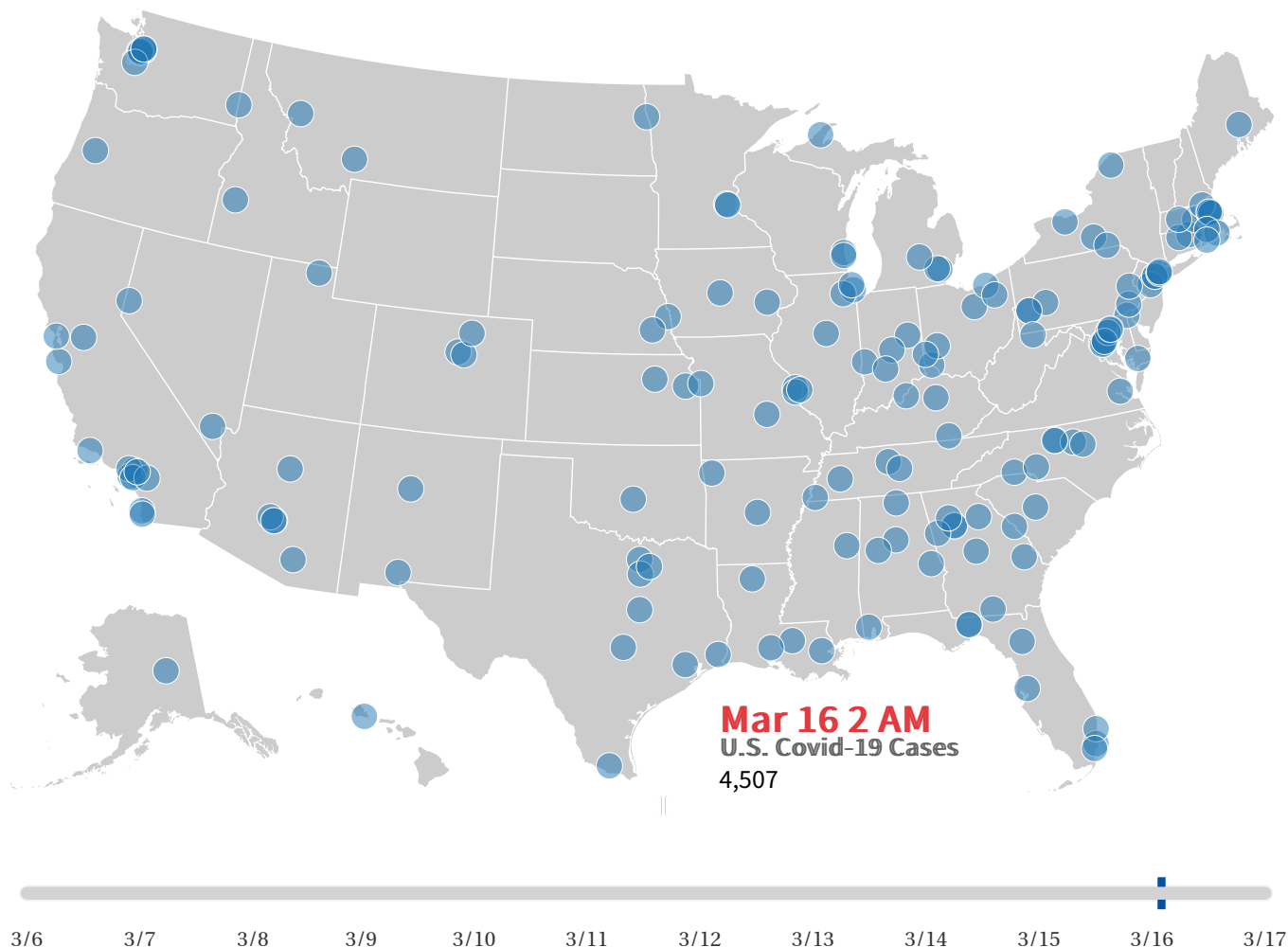
## 4 Colleges, 2 Weeks, One Choice: How Covid-19 Scattered U.S. Higher Education

As the pandemic spread, campus presidents came to grips with a reality that had once been unthinkable — and helped pave the way for the rest of the country to follow suit.

By *Lindsay Ellis*

APRIL 8, 2020

**Over 11 days, more than 100 institutions announced plans to take instruction  
online**



ABOUT THE DATA: The map above does not represent all colleges who went online, but rather a subset of over 100 institutions for which *The Chronicle* was able to gather the dates and times on which they announced their plans. The closure information was found through universities' websites, social-media posts as well as by contacting university staff.

There's a story the president of Claremont McKenna College used to tell to describe what makes his college special. It goes like this: A prospective student chatted with her host student in the lobby of a campus building. In just 30 minutes, 17 people interrupted their conversation.

The anecdote showcased the college's warmth, its connectedness. A student is one point in an ever-growing web, with countless lines extending outward — to peers, to professors, to alumni, and beyond.

But as the novel coronavirus took hold, the president, Hiram Chodosh, saw the story in a new light. Seventeen students in 30 minutes. Every two minutes, an interaction. Say one person tested positive for the virus. How fast might the disease work through the web?

Chodosh responded to the pandemic by upending everything. He and hundreds of other college presidents pushed students away, shut down international travel, and scrambled classes. In effect, they stopped the heart of residential higher education: the serendipity and in-person connections that until March prevailed at Claremont McKenna and colleges from coast to coast.

Colleges in Seattle, seeing the first terrors of an outbreak uncontrolled, [were the first to move courses online and attempt to disperse students](#). Soon after, with little warning, universities nationally decided that they, too, had to tear up their playbooks — even if disaster seemed far off, even if it meant a perilous financial blow. The decentralized U.S. higher-education system came to one improbable decision with unprecedented ramifications: hundreds of thousands of students displaced, costly research projects halted, and future enrollment prospects imperiled.

The choice was not easy, and no part of the country was left untouched. Midland University in Nebraska — far from the viral epicenters — was one of the first to act. A veteran leader at Prairie View A&M University faced fiscal and practical challenges but ultimately gave the order. And for Union College, in New York, a positive diagnosis on campus changed everything.

Their choices, collectively, helped pave the way for the rest of the country to follow suit, shuttering everything from sports leagues to coffee shops.

The other consequences of higher education's big decision — on scholars, colleges, and the country — will not soon be fully known. This is the story of how that decision came to be.

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| Cases | Deaths |
|-------|--------|



MARCH 2

**0 Covid-19 cases** had been reported in the U.S. **0 of these** was in New York.

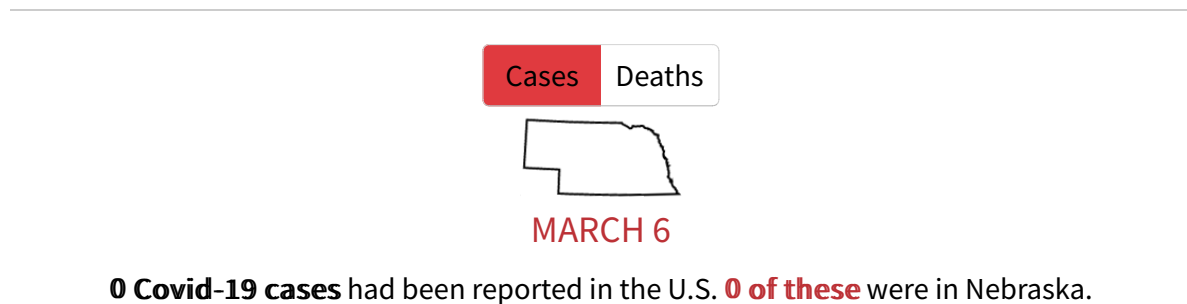
**F**or David Harris, president of Union College, a trip to California over the week of March 2 was like a visit to the future.

On the East Coast, the coronavirus was primarily affecting international travel, not day-to-day campus policies. Union, in Schenectady, N.Y., had canceled a study-abroad program in Florence, Italy. Harris himself had picked up his daughter — a Boston College junior whose study abroad in Parma, Italy, ended early — at the airport before he left for California.

At a board meeting in late February, he said, he had just one slide on Covid-19 in his president's report. Virtual operations hadn't been on anyone's radar.

Not so on the West Coast. Microsoft was allowing employees to work from home. Twitter encouraged it. In a meeting with Harris, a California-based alumnus received several jarring text messages — a work-event cancellation, his child’s school shutting down. And campus leaders started to think virtual, too. Harris met the president of Stanford University and the incoming president of Occidental College that week. Both campuses by week’s end published some guidance on virtual operations.

[Then, on March 6](#), the University of Washington announced it would move to virtual instruction. Harris was surprised. Still, he thought, it made sense, given the rapid spread of the disease in Washington. That was nothing like what New York was seeing.



**A**s the buzzer sounded, Merritt Nelson watched his ninth-grade twin daughters cry on the court. They’d just lost in the Nebraska state basketball semifinals. Nelson wanted to find them, hug them tight, and tell them he loved them.

That day, March 6, the state had just announced its first case of the coronavirus, aside from passengers on the Diamond Princess cruise who were quarantined at a Nebraska medical center. But the disease was far from Nelson’s mind. His family was focused on the tournament.

The crowds cleared the gym. Nelson’s phone rang. It was the head of the local health department. He declined, and she texted moments later. “I need to visit with you quick if possible.”

He picked up the phone. What Nelson, who leads enrollment and marketing at Midland University, heard next was alarming: The new case was a woman who, a

week prior, had been at the local YMCA for a Special Olympics basketball tournament. Dozens of Midland students had volunteered at the event, the health official estimated. It was in Fremont, less than a mile from campus. They may have been in close proximity.

Outside the gym, in the concourse, the winning team took pictures and chattered excitedly. He saw his daughters, and his wife and older daughter hugged them.

He turned away from his family. He needed to get the university's president on the line.

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| Cases | Deaths |
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MARCH 6

**0 Covid-19 cases** had been reported in the U.S. **0 of these** were in California.

**T**hat morning, Chodosh, the Claremont McKenna president, woke up before his alarm. As was his habit, he opened his black journal, where he considered the day ahead. Top of mind was the coronavirus.

“Under/over reaction,” he wrote, sitting in the kitchen. His top priority was minimizing community harm, but he wasn’t convinced dispersing students was the right decision. Claremont McKenna had no cases on campus. He felt there was time.

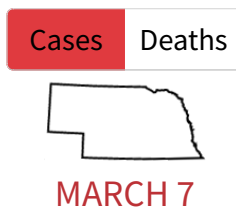
*Why are we going to turn left or right, he thought, before we’re at the intersection?*

Meanwhile, Covid-19 was affecting his decision-making closer to home. Chodosh’s in-laws live with him and his wife on campus, and a few weeks prior, his father-in-law had been hospitalized. The coronavirus had made Chodosh conscious of the germs he encountered in travel and on campus. The germs he may be bringing to the hospital.

The next day, Saturday, he visited the 86-year-old. He carried with him a small bottle

of Purell, and when he entered his father-in-law's room, he kept his distance.

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**0 Covid-19 cases** had been reported in the U.S. **0 of these** were in Nebraska.

**O**n Saturday, after a leadership meeting, Nelson and Jody Horner, Midland's president, went to the public-school superintendent's office. Their university colleagues had decided that morning to quarantine the 60-plus volunteers. Most were football players. They planned now to check in with the school system and the local YMCA.

After they arrived, Nebraska's governor began to address the state in a live-streamed news conference. They watched together. In the [first minute](#), Gov. Pete Ricketts said the new case had been at the Fremont YMCA.

To Nelson, hearing the city mentioned underscored the severity of the situation. Fremont wasn't the kind of place that Nebraska officials typically named at press conferences, not like Omaha or Lincoln. Population 26,000. Low crime. Midland is a 1,400-student campus where administrators take pride in knowing individual students. But now national news was taking place in their backyard.

The group in the superintendent's office considered putting out a unified message: Each agency could close in-person operations.

The YMCA would undergo a deep cleaning and reopen early in the week. The public schools would call off a few school days. At Midland, Horner's team had started to consider online learning, as each student and professor had an iPad through a partnership with Apple. The university could go virtual the following week with less than 48-hours notice.

Horner and Nelson went back to campus. Horner felt some adrenaline. She knew of

the University of Washington's decision the day prior, a big move at a major campus. Horner wouldn't call Midland a major campus.

Yet her students were about to be quarantined. It was happening — even in Fremont.

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| Cases | Deaths |
|-------|--------|
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MARCH 7

**0 Covid-19 cases** had been reported in the U.S. **0 of these** were in Texas.

**R**uth Simmons was a college freshman when John F. Kennedy was assassinated. It was world-changing. The civil-rights era seemed jeopardized, the future uncertain. Throngs of students gathered at Dillard University's chapel, she recalled, trying to sort out if the world was coming to an end.

Nearly 40 years later, after September 11, 2001, Simmons comforted reeling students at the chapel steps at Brown University. Her presidency there had just begun. The campus discussed canceling classes. But she didn't want students to be forced into their private spaces. To have to mourn alone.

Now, Prairie View A&M, where she'd started as president in 2017, was considering a move to virtual classes and what that would take. Her team started asking professors to get ready. Dozens of faculty members, a sizable percentage, weren't using the eCourses platform that semester. The university outside Houston also enrolls many underserved students. Some complained of unreliable internet.

An administrator pulled together a coronavirus-response team. Things already seemed eerie. An associate provost visited the Houston Galleria, the largest mall in Texas, one evening that week. "It was completely empty," he had emailed Simmons on Friday. "The salesperson who helped me with my purchase informed me I was the first customer he helped all day."

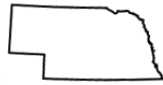
That weekend it was becoming clear that disaster brewed again. There were cases in



at least 30 states, including more than a dozen cases in Texas. And officials encouraged the very thing Simmons had warned against at Brown — social distancing. Receding to one's private space.

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Cases Deaths



MARCH 7

**0 Covid-19 cases** had been reported in the U.S. **0 of these** were in Nebraska.

Nelson poked his head into a large lecture hall in one of Midland's main academic buildings on Saturday afternoon. The student-health director, wearing a face mask, addressed about 45 football players scattered around the room. Horner stood behind her.

The campus leaders approached the students' questions with empathy. One student had seen his girlfriend since the tournament. Would she need to quarantine? What basketball court was the woman playing at? Can we stop at the grocery store?

The rest of the afternoon sped by. Administrators emailed the Midland community. They held a press conference, announcing they would be going online until March 15. The next day, March 8, would be spent answering faculty questions and publishing Canvas tutorials.

Late in the afternoon, the leadership team met again to wrap up. Things felt different. They sat far apart from each other.

Before Horner left campus, she cleaned the tables with disinfectant wipes.

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Cases Deaths



MARCH 8

0 Covid-19 cases had been reported in the U.S. 0 of these were in California.

The next day, Chodosh sat in the attic of the Claremont McKenna president's house. News of event cancellations and campus closures had made waves over the last 48 hours. He began to feel something was imminent. But that was hard to square with the lack of new science.

*How much of this imminence, he wondered, is based in fact?*

He read slides from a University of California at Berkeley epidemiologist. He called his board chair. He talked to his wife. Questions flooded his mind. Would students be safer on campus than at home? Would they be less of a public-health risk to others if they stayed?

Days prior, he'd written in his journal "under/over reaction." He returned to that idea. Would an overreaction jeopardize students' visa statuses, their employment, their prospects for success? Would an underreaction jeopardize their health? That of the faculty and staff?

The idea of requiring students to leave troubled him. He didn't believe it was his role to order students around. But he was coming to feel that the college had to disperse the high concentration of people in the area. Requiring most students to vacate might be the only way to do that. Otherwise, many students would remain in their dorms.

The next few days were filled with conversations. Chodosh addressed the faculty, outlining that virtual classes were likely. He took questions from the student-body president: How would administrators decide who could stay? Would mental-health resources and tutors be available online? Would staff keep getting paid? As campuses announced their own plans, Chodosh put out a statement on Tuesday, saying the college would release more information the next day.

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Cases Deaths



MARCH 11

**0 Covid-19 cases** had been reported in the U.S. **0 of these** were in California.

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He considered this a moment where the community had to make a sacrifice. If they dispersed, they may save lives. Reflecting on the decision days later, he took a long pause before calling it an imperative. By midday Wednesday, the announcement was out. Claremont would extend spring break by a week. Faculty members would virtualize courses for afterward.

And most students would be required — the team had settled on required — to leave.

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Cases Deaths



MARCH 11

**0 Covid-19 cases** had been reported in the U.S. **0 of these** were in New York.

**H**arris was working late Wednesday in the office of the Union president's house. It was built in 1861; history was ever-present. Now, historic developments were unfolding, one news alert at a time.

President Trump banned travel from much of Europe for 30 days. Tom Hanks announced he tested positive for Covid-19. And the National Basketball Association suspended its season.

Union's leaders had grappled with what to do. Cases in New York, once lagging behind Washington, were rising fast. Two of those were in nearby Saratoga County, where many faculty and staff live.

At last, they had come to a decision the day prior, on Tuesday. Winter term, which was winding down, would finish face to face. Students would take finals in person, too. But at the beginning of spring term, on March 30, there would be two weeks of online classes. The announcement would go public on Thursday.

As the national climate escalated around him on Wednesday night, Harris felt greater confidence in Union's decision. He also thought more seriously about what might come after those two weeks — and whether students might need to stay off campus even longer.

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| Cases | Deaths |
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MARCH 12

**0 Covid-19 cases** had been reported in the U.S. **0 of these** were in New York.

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The next morning, on Thursday, Harris popped into the Covid-19 task-force meeting on the way to his office. He thanked the group for its work. The announcement was imminent. They expected pushback from faculty members, who value face-to-face instruction, and from students, who don't want to take classes in their parents' house.

"We're about to take a lot of heat from a lot of people," he recalled saying. "The heat is on me."

Settling into a meeting, Harris turned his attention to the college's capital campaign.

Then his chief of staff knocked on his door, looking serious. Harris walked with her down the hall to her office. She shared the news: A Union staff member tested positive for Covid-19. The plan needed an overhaul.

Harris scattered his meeting. The college called the local health department, and Harris gathered senior staff. Just after noon, Union alerted the students, suspending classes for the rest of the day and the following one while health officials notified those who may have been in contact with the individual.

They continued to strategize. For lunch, Harris considered and then decided against ordering pizza. One positive case on campus meant there could be countless more; the president didn't want to put a delivery person at risk. He grabbed leftover granola bars and chips from the board meeting several weeks prior.

Three hours later, the college published the new plan. Classes were off for the remainder of the week. Finals would move online. After spring break, instruction would be remote until April 10. Students should try to leave by Sunday.

And they should pack as if they wouldn't return.

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| Cases | Deaths |
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MARCH 12

**0 Covid-19 cases** had been reported in the U.S. **0 of these** were in Texas.

Simmons saw other colleges announce virtual operations and dormitory closures. In nearby counties, Covid-19 tests were returning positive. But Prairie View A&M hadn't pulled the trigger on a switch to online learning. It was a complex decision.

Beyond faculty preparedness, financial considerations were at play. Students lived in housing established through a public-private partnership. American Campus Communities, the company with which Prairie View had contracted, had indicated it would not refund room and board. Reimbursing all that for students, Simmons said, would be a heavy load for the institution.

There were deeper reasons, too. Simmons knew for many students, the historically black university offered community and stability. Students are surrounded by peers and mentors. The campus is safe. There is food.

That week, the university had taken one step — a modest one, Simmons believed. Spring break would be extended. During that time, [the provost wrote](#), faculty would be trained in the learning-management system.

It didn't answer the harder questions of what came next. And students filled Twitter with concerns. "I came for a family I didn't have at home," one wrote. "Can't get that online." "When can we expect an answer?" wrote another. By March 17, the situation

had escalated. Trump discouraged gatherings of groups of bigger than 10 people. Restaurants and bars limited service.



**0 Covid-19 cases** had been reported in the U.S. **0 of these** were in Texas.

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For a while, Simmons said, she had listened without speaking much as her colleagues discussed the fast-changing developments. But that morning, Simmons urged action.

“We’ve been temporizing for a time,” she said in an interview. “We’ve reached the point where that is no longer suitable.”

That she spoke more forcefully was surprising. She sensed some relief. On her colleagues’ minds, she felt, was a fear that they had not done enough, and she had signaled that she agreed. They had no choice but to move to virtual.

**T**he swift reorientation of American higher education helped create a different world. It was an early ripple of a wave of decisions — by school boards, businesses, civic institutions — that altered our expectations for, and our experiences of, life amid the outbreak. In the days following their decisions to move online, campus leaders soothed, strategized, and reflected. They tried, like the rest of us, to make sense of it all.

Midland had been delivering meals for the quarantined students all week, bolstered by donations. A sophomore told the [Fremont Tribune](#) that he craved pistachio-almond Blue Bunny Ice Cream. Horner, the president, saw the story. She tossed a 48-ounce tub from a Walmart freezer into her shopping cart on a Friday night.

At Union, Harris watched an endless line of cars, packed to capacity, drive away from campus. Later, he walked his two dogs, Hershey and Teddy, around the quiet grounds.

“This is a story that’s not going to be told in days,” he said in a [video](#), “but in weeks, and months.”

At Prairie View A&M, staff sent a flurry of letters. Dubbing some campus services essential. Clarifying that students could stay on campus, but explaining they would be [required](#) to maintain social distance, and could otherwise face eviction. And, at last, [answering](#) a big question on students’ minds: If they left campus, they could get prorated refunds or credits for a future semester.

Chodosh held a virtual town hall for employees at Claremont McKenna. Someone asked how to best help students. He urged faculty and staff members to check in often, to ask how they are doing, how their families are doing.

His father-in-law moved from the hospital to a skilled-nursing facility. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention restricted visitors to such centers. So the family drives to the dialysis center when they believe he is scheduled for treatments. It can be unpredictable. But if they time it right, Chodosh and his wife will arrive in the parking lot just before his father-in-law is transported from a van into the facility. There, for mere moments and at a safe distance, they can say a few words.

*Earlier: [Before the coronavirus shuttered universities nationwide, it turned Seattle’s college leaders into early responders.](#)*

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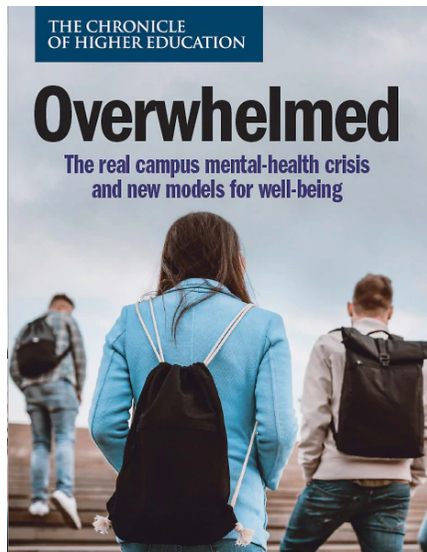
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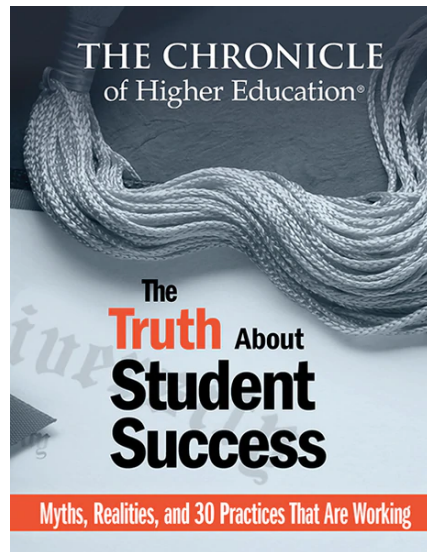
Lindsay Ellis

Lindsay Ellis, a reporter at *The Wall Street Journal*, previously covered research universities, workplace issues, and other topics for *The Chronicle*.

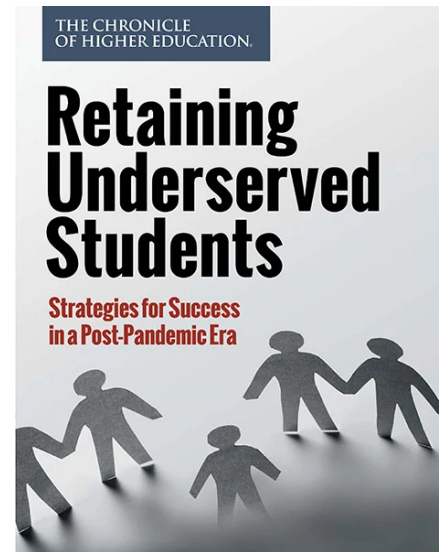
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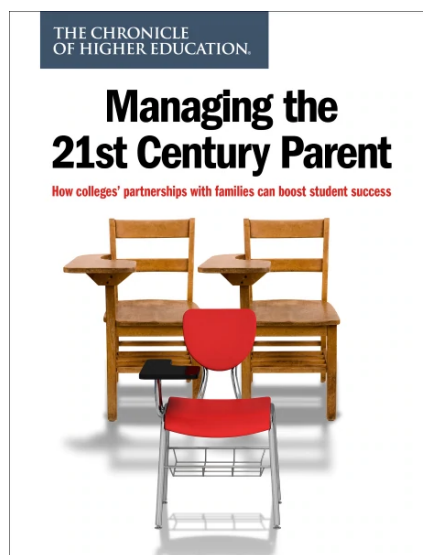
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