

Health and Profit in Student Housing during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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New information reveals the decision to reopen some U.S. universities during the current COVID-19 pandemic may be tied to private financial interests in student housing. A recently released Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) document indicates the decision to reopen public universities was directly related to the public-private partnership between the University System of Georgia (USG) and a private housing company.¹ Universities have an obligation to maintain health, safety, and access for all students, especially in the midst of a pandemic. Contractual obligations with for-profit companies should not interfere with this responsibility.

In these Public-Private Partnerships (P3), housing units are owned by private businesses and under contract with the state, specifically the USG. Private companies like Corvias receive tax-exemptions along with profits for providing housing units similar to traditional campus dormitories and shared living spaces.^{2,3} The rent for these student housing units is matched to reflect maximum student loan allocations for housing, meaning money typically used for room and board is siphoned into private coffers as well.⁴ According to Georgia State University in Atlanta, over 70 million dollars are at stake. The cost of housing refunds distributed to students last year due to the COVID-19 shutdown was absorbed by the USG, not by the Corvias Group. Corvias has contracts with many universities and also provides military housing at 15 installations across the country. Georgia has the highest number of contracts with the Corvias Group and represents a major contractual partner for the corporation to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars per year.⁵ The newly released FOIA document sheds light upon a disturbing situation, which is undoubtedly playing out across the country.

Are universities being pressured by private interests to open amid the COVID-19 pandemic? In the case of the USG, it certainly appears that way.⁶ The letter from the Corvias Group to the Board of Regents in Georgia implies that only shared common areas should be limited due to COVID-19, rather than total housing occupancy. Email correspondence from Corvias indicates their recognition of the increased risk of infection. However, they do not believe reducing occupancy should be the answer. Internal communication within USG suggests that the Board of Regents feared liability for breach of contract.⁷ The decision may have been made as early as May to push for face-to-face teaching in the fall term to fulfill a contractual obligation to this private company.

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Health and Safety vs. Private Profit

Risking the health and safety of faculty, staff, and students to ensure profits for private companies is antithetical to the mission of all public universities. Partnerships like the one between USG and Corvias highlight a troubling trend in higher education. Over the past several decades, elements of public education have been portioned off and placed in the hands of private interests. Such outsourcing is a

common tactic for universities looking to reduce their obligations to provide services and minimize liability.⁸

In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, we see yet another example of profit generation superseding the interests of vulnerable populations of students, including those with disabilities, pre-existing health concerns, and compromised immune systems. Categorizing for-profit motives as an “obligation to provide the campus experience”⁹ subtly manipulates one population to turn against the other (i.e., healthy students vs. those with disabilities and other health concerns). Such overtures are inexcusable in light of federal mandates to provide and ensure safe access to education for all students.¹

Ethical Responses and Transparency are Needed

Universities must act now to ensure the needs of all students will be met safely. The health risks of student housing at maximum occupancy outweigh the financial risks to private companies like Corvias. Contractual agreements such as the P3 must take a back seat to student welfare and safe access to higher education. Students, faculty, and staff should not be forced to bear the risks universities have created through their partnerships with private companies.¹⁰ All endeavors to reopen universities should follow guidelines based on science and the relevant federal laws regardless of the revenue loss.

The nature of for-profit enterprise entails the possibility of significant financial risk. Taxpayers and universities should not be responsible for the financial losses of for-profit companies. Bailing out private entities with public money or university resources should be discouraged. Universities must review the details of their partnerships with private companies to determine the depths of their contractual obligations. However, universities must give priority to federally mandated regulations to provide safe and accessible education opportunities to all students, including those with disabilities or health concerns. In light of these findings, students with disabilities should be wary of university intentions and seek appropriate legal recourse if necessary.

It is unlikely that the motives revealed in these documents are confined to the state of Georgia and its university system. Universities across the country have partnered with companies like Corvias and face similar obligations. Therefore, any decisions regarding student housing and other campus amenities should be scrutinized when the services are provided by for-profit companies. Universities must make their reopening decision-making processes transparent. Failing to do so increases the risk of litigation. By openly sharing the true state of affairs and clarifying the decision-making process, universities can become more accessible to the individuals they serve. With this transparency in place, parents, students, faculty, and staff can seek to meet the university halfway. No one wants to see public institutions like universities collapse due to the ongoing pandemic. However, overlooking the health risks to students for the sake of profits simply cannot be allowed.

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