

Ashka Patel- Scholarship Application

Educational Need:

Next year, I will be attending Northeastern University, and I will be majoring in Bioengineering and Biochemistry on a pre-medical track while in the honors program. While I do not know exactly where the future will take me, I aspire to integrate my interest in the life sciences, technology, and advocacy to make an impact in the field of medicine. While I aim to do this through my academic classes and co-ops, in college, I also plan on taking advantage of opportunities to study abroad and get involved in organization at my college. After obtaining my undergraduate degree in bioengineering, I hope to attend medical school so that I equip myself to practice orthopedic medicine.

Essay Question 2: COVID-19: What has Switzerland done better that the US can learn from and/or vice versa?

Thirteen million, eight hundred eighty-eight thousand, eight hundred seventy-four. Anyone who has turned on the news or performed a basic google search within the last few weeks immediately has an inkling regarding what this number represents. Over the last six months, the world has seen this illustrious number grow exponentially. As of July 17th, 2020, 13,888,874 people across the world have contracted the novel coronavirus, and 592,573 individuals were unable to survive the virus. Given that there are 195 countries globally, it is alarming that 3.53 million, more than a quarter of the total cases, belong to a country that merely possesses 4.23% of the world population. Ironically, this same country is in possession of the world's largest GDP, produces more billionaires than any other nation, and prides itself on being a country that fosters and prioritizes education and advancement. It is no surprise to anyone that the nation in question is the United States of America.

In contrast, Switzerland has had a total of 32,000 coronavirus cases, a statistic that is less than one-hundredth of the corresponding American number ("Coronavirus"). Certainly, the difference in population between Switzerland and the US must be accounted for, however, taking population into account does little to dispute the sentiment that the United States had significantly greater coronavirus cases than Switzerland. In Switzerland, only .38% of the 8.2 million individuals have tested positive for the coronavirus; however, in the United States, 1.1% of the nation's 328 million residents have tested positive.

Given the significantly higher rate of infection in the United States, it becomes necessary to consider how the United States can emulate the policies used in Switzerland to begin to

address the increasing cases. At the start of the pandemic, the Swiss Federal Council took immediate action by forbidding gatherings of more than 1,000 people on February 28th, 2020. Following that decision, on March 13th, a second order was declared in response to the “extraordinary situation”(The Petrie-Flom Center Staff). While this order has been modified a number of times, originally, Order 2, “applied uniform measures across the country such as banning gatherings of more than 100 persons, closing all schools, shops, restaurants, and other non-essential businesses, and included a number of other restrictions on individuals, institutions, and public and private enterprises. It also deployed the Swiss army to assist with health, logistic and security aspects of the response” (The Petrie-Flom Center Staff). This order did not call for a mandatory nationwide quarantine, as was seen in neighboring countries. Instead, The Federal Office of Public Health issued recommendations urging individuals to take responsibility for themselves by self-isolating and self-quarantining as needed, practicing social distancing, and encouraging the elderly and immunocompromised to stay at home. These suggestions were effective in Switzerland because individual responsibility and civic-mindedness are ubiquitously present in the political ideology of the Swiss public (The Petrie-Flom Center Staff).

Similarly, in the United States, no nationwide lockdown was enforced. Instead, the federal government aimed to control the spread of coronavirus by releasing a set of guidelines that they encouraged the public to follow. These guidelines emphasized the need for Americans to social distance and remain at home whenever possible. This order came in conjunction with the closing of schools, restaurants, bars, gyms, and other non-essential public locations. Also, President Trump released a statement that individuals should meet in groups of more than ten people (Rogers and Cochrane). While a similar system was effective in Switzerland, America

failed to see the same success because it lacks the culture of personal responsibility and altruism that is present amongst the Swiss.

Moreover, Switzerland was able to get the situation under control through a system of widespread testing and contact tracing (Science X Staff). From the start of the pandemic, in America, testing capacity has left a lot to be desired, with shortages in testing limiting availability to the public throughout March and April (Goodman and Schulkin). As a result, Americans were unable to gain a definite response as to whether they had the virus which may have enabled them to unknowingly spread it to others. It is important to note that the size difference of the two nations places a greater stress on the American government than the Swiss government, however, at a basic level, the Trump administration has shown a lack of regard for the importance of widespread testing through comments such as, “When you do testing to that extent, you’re going to find more people. You’re going to find more cases. So I said to my people, ‘Slow the testing down, please’” (Goodman and Schulkin). If America wishes to reduce the number of coronavirus cases that are present in the country, an essential step would be match the testing frequency of Switzerland.

As we look at the reopening process that both nations went through, a number of differences stand out, and Switzerland’s success highlights opportunities for American improvement. Firstly, it is important to note that on April 27th, the day that Switzerland began to take steps towards reopening the nation, the nation only had 153 new coronavirus cases (“Coronavirus”). In contrast, on May 18th, when the stay at home order in Massachusetts expired, just this one state had over one thousand cases (Lee et al.). The reopening of the United States at a time when cases were still high enabled the virus to spread significantly more than it

would have if the case count had been lower. Currently, in America, records for the number of new cases in a day are being set daily, and most states remain open. To achieve what was achieved by Switzerland, the United States would have to take steps to shut down further in the hope for long term improvement, and plan to reopen when cases are much lower.

One way in which the United States could currently mimic a successful Swiss initiative is by increasing both testing and contact tracing capacities. In America, the current contact tracing efforts are being hindered by a lack of contact tracers and by a lack of efficient and reliable infrastructure for contact tracing. For example, an article written at the end of June highlights that experts predicted that 100,000 contact tracers would be needed to effectively contact trace but at the beginning of June, CDC Director Dr. Robert Redfield testified that about 27,000 or 28,000 people across the country were doing contact tracing work (Landman). It is also pertinent that the total number of cases in America have increased significantly since the end of June, and as a result, the demand for contact tracers has also increased (Landman). Furthermore, many states are attempting to rework their contact tracing systems by leaving behind existing infrastructure and creating new systems that transfer power from the local public health departments to public officials and governors. As a result, these states do not have concrete contract tracing structures and are unable to keep up with the demand. On the other hand, states such as Washington, California, and Massachusetts have maintained robust contract tracing systems as a result of resource sharing between the state and local levels (Landman).

While significant efforts are being made in some states, America would benefit by looking to the Swiss contract tracing app, SwissCovid, as an example of how contract tracing can be made more seamless, accessible, and centralized. This app uses Bluetooth wireless technology

to “register other phones that come within two metres for around 15 minutes”, and no personal data or location information is used (Science X Staff). If an individual using the app tests positive for coronavirus, those who had prolonged contact with the infected individual are notified and prompted to get tested themselves and self isolate. Currently in Switzerland, the use of this app is optional, but SwissCovid has been downloaded about 1.6 million times with 960,000 devices actively running the app. This quantity represents about one eighth of the 8.5 Swiss residents which, while still a minority, is a significant portion of the population. A similar system could be implemented in the United States; however, it is likely that some Americans will have concerns regarding the privacy of their location while using the app. While there are bound to be individuals that feel like this idea infringes on their personal freedoms, if the app is heavily promoted but remains optional, a number of Americans are bound to download it and decrease the stress on the current contact tracing systems.

From a broader perspective, America would benefit greatly from depoliticizing issues of public health, as is currently the case in Switzerland, to ensure that science and public safety are placed above petty politics. Currently in America, some notable leaders have not upheld the standard of social distancing and mask-wearing that is required to gain control over the coronavirus pandemic, and as a result, many American citizens are following suit. Recently, the head of the CDC, Robert Redfield, said that “If we could get everybody to wear a mask right now, I really do think over the next four, six, eight weeks, we could bring this epidemic under control” (Gregorian). Despite this clear solution to a crippling nationwide issue, President Trump had failed occasion after occasion to promote the simple step that would improve the pandemic. Recently in an interview with Redfield, when asked whether he would consider a national

mandate requiring individuals to wear masks, Trump said, “No. I want people to have a certain freedom, and I don’t believe in that, no,” Trump answered. “And I don’t agree with the statement that if everybody would wear a mask, everything disappears” (Gregorian).

In contrast, face masks are mandatory on Swiss public transport, numerous cantons require customers to wear face masks in shops, and the University of Fribourg will require masks anywhere that the minimum 1.5-metre distance cannot be maintained (“Coronavirus”). It is clear that the Swiss government is taking clear steps to promote mask usage to reduce the spread of the virus even though the presence of the virus is relatively low. Meanwhile in the United States, the governor of Georgia is suing the mayor of Atlanta for issuing a mandate requiring residents of the city to wear a mask (Stracqualursi and LeBlanc). It is overwhelmingly apparent that political games, misinformation, and pure stubbornness amongst some American leaders are taking a toll on the overall health of the nation. America can attempt to counter this by looking at the way that Switzerland left politics out of decision making and by involving public health experts to a greater extent than politicians.

As we take a look at the rising numbers of cases in America, it is evident that the nation would benefit from adopting both policies and a mindset similar to that of Switzerland. This can be done through the development and implementation of a contact tracing app, by encouraging individuals to wear masks, and ideally, by encouraging increased social distancing until the number of cases is significantly reduced. The numbers say it all. America is floundering in a sea of daily record highs, while Switzerland has managed to establish a level of control. America must look towards nations like Switzerland if we would like to quell the pandemic and regain the “freedoms” that so many of us hold so dearly.

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