

As Colleges Move Classes Online, Families Rebel Against the Cost

Schools face rising demands for tuition rebates, increased aid and leaves of absence as students ask if college is becoming “glorified Skype.”



By [Shawn Hubler](#)

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After Southern California’s soaring coronavirus caseload forced Chapman University this month to abruptly abandon plans to reopen its campus and shift to an autumn of all-remote instruction, the school promised that students would still get a “robust Chapman experience.”

“What about a robust refund?” retorted Christopher Moore, a spring graduate, on Facebook.

A parent chimed in. “We are paying a lot of money for tuition, and our students are not getting what we paid for,” wrote Shannon Carducci, whose youngest child, Ally, is a sophomore at Chapman, in Orange County, where the cost of attendance averages \$65,000 a year. Back

when they believed Ally would be attending classes in person, her parents leased her a \$1,200-a-month apartment. Now, Ms. Carducci said, she plans to ask for a tuition discount.

A rebellion against the high cost of a bachelor's degree, already brewing around the nation before the coronavirus, has gathered fresh momentum as campuses have strained to operate in the pandemic. Incensed at paying face-to-face prices for education that is increasingly online, students and their parents are demanding tuition rebates, increased financial aid, reduced fees and leaves of absences to compensate for what they feel will be a diminished college experience.

At Rutgers University, more than 30,000 people have signed a petition started in July calling for an elimination of fees and a 20 percent tuition cut. More than 40,000 have signed a plea for the University of North Carolina system to refund housing charges to students in the event of another Covid-19-related campus shutdown. The California State University system's early decision to go online-only this fall has incited calls for price cuts at campuses from Fullerton to San Jose.

"I don't have an issue with moving classes to online. I do have an issue though that classes are charged the same price," Mr. Herff tweeted on an account that, until this month, he said in an interview, he had largely reserved for sports talk. "Why is this fair?"

Many colleges were facing financial dark clouds even before the coronavirus arrived. Population declines in some parts of the country have dampened enrollment, and soaring tuition has led many families to question the price of a college diploma. Moody's Investors Service, which in March downgraded the higher education sector to negative from stable, wrote that even before the pandemic, roughly 30 percent of universities "were already running operating deficits."

Since then, emptied dorms, canceled sports, shuttered bookstores and paused study-abroad programs have dried up key revenue streams just as student needs have exploded for everything from financial aid and food stamps to home office equipment and loaner laptops.

Public health requirements for masks, barriers, cleaning and other health protections also have added new costs, as have investments in training and technology to improve remote instruction and online courses.

“Starting up an online education program is incredibly expensive,” said Dominique Baker, an assistant professor of education policy at Southern Methodist University. “You have to have training, people with expertise, licensing for a lot of different kinds of software. All those pieces cost money, and then if you want the best quality, you have to have smaller classes.”

Chapman’s president, Daniele Struppa, said the university spent \$20 million on technology and public health retrofits for the fall semester, and he estimates that the switch to an online fall will cost the school \$110 million in revenue. He has cut spending “brutally” from the \$400 million annual budget, he said, freezing hires, slashing expenses, canceling construction of a new gym, ending the retirement match to employees and giving up 20 percent of his own \$720,000 base salary.

“This is a moment that is basically forcing students and parents to say, ‘What is the value? If I can’t set foot on campus, is that the same value?’”

Will Andersen, an 18-year-old incoming freshman at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, put it this way: “Who wants to pay \$25,000 a year for glorified Skype?”

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Updated Aug. 17, 2020

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“Education isn’t just information,” agreed Yolanda Brown-Spidell, a Detroit-area teacher and divorced mother of five whose lament last month about remote learning in a private Facebook group for Harvard parents burgeoned into a lobbying push to ease school policies on tuition and fall housing.

“Being able to meet up with friends, have those highly intellectual conversations, walking over to CVS and getting ice cream at 1 in the morning,” she said, ticking off the parts of education her daughter, a rising junior, has missed while working at home on her computer. “And let’s not forget just not being home with your mama, with her eyes on you.”

Some families have sued. Roy Willey, a class-action attorney in South Carolina, said his firm alone has filed at least 30 lawsuits — including against the University of California system, Columbia University and the University of Colorado — charging universities with breach of contract for switching in-person instruction to online classes, and is closely monitoring the fall semester.

Most suits are in their early stages, though several universities have moved for dismissal. “If you and I go down to the steakhouse and order a prime rib, and prepay for it and sit at our table, and a while later the server comes by and says, ‘Here’s two hamburgers, we’re out of prime rib’ — well, we may eat the hamburgers, but they’re not entitled to the money we would have paid for prime rib,” Mr. Willey said.

A handful of universities have announced substantial price cuts. Franciscan University of Steubenville, a private Catholic university in Ohio with about 3,000 students, announced in April that it will cover 100 percent of tuition costs, after financial aid and scholarships, for incoming undergraduates. Williams College in Massachusetts took 15 percent off in June when it announced it would combine online and in-person instruction this fall.