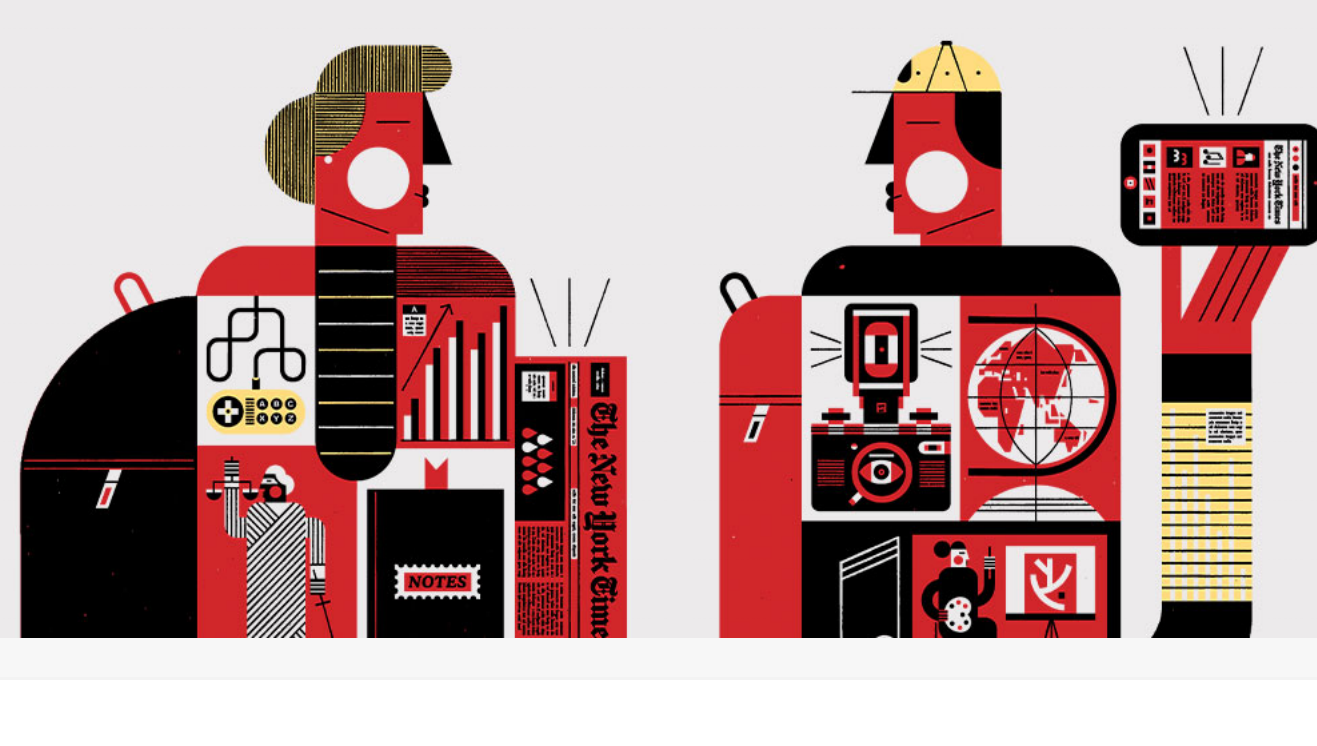


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Opinion

The Future of College Is Online, and It's Cheaper

The coronavirus forced a shift to virtual classes, but their continuation could be beneficial even after the pandemic ends.

By Hans Tataria

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Chance Bonar, a Ph.D. candidate at Harvard, teaching an online class from his dorm in Cambridge, Mass., in April. Blake Nissen for The Boston Globe, via Getty Images

Forty years ago, going to college in America was a reliable pathway for upward mobility. Today, it has become yet another 21st-century symbol of privilege for the wealthy. Through this period, [tuition rates soared 260 percent](#), double the rate of inflation. In 2019, the average [cost of attending](#) a four-year private college was over \$200,000. For a four-year public college, it was over \$100,000. To sustain these prices, [more students are now admitted](#) from the top 1 percent of the income scale than the entire bottom 40 percent at the top 80 colleges. Universities have [also opened the floodgates](#) to wealthy international students, willing to pay full tuition for the American brand.

Covid-19 is about to ravage that business model. Mass unemployment is looming large and is likely to put college out of reach for many. With America now the epicenter of the pandemic and bungling its response, many students are looking to [defer](#) enrollment. Foreign students are questioning whether to register at all, with greater uncertainty around visas and work prospects. The “Trump Effect” had already begun to cause [declining foreign student](#) enrollment over the past three years.

The mightiest of institutions are bracing for the worst. Harvard, home to the country's largest endowment, recently [announced](#) drastic steps to manage the fallout, including salary cuts for its leadership, hiring freezes and cuts in discretionary spending. Most other universities have been forced to make similar decisions, and are nervous that if they continue with online teaching this fall, students will demand at least a partial remission of tuition.

Up until now, online education has been relegated to the equivalent of a hobby at most universities. With the pandemic, it has become a backup plan. But if universities embrace this moment strategically, online education could expand access exponentially and drop its cost by magnitudes — all while shoring up revenues for universities in a way that is more recession-proof, policy-proof and pandemic-proof.

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To be clear, the scramble to move online over just a few days this March did not go well. Faculty members were forced to revamp lesson plans overnight. “Zoom-bombers” took advantage of lax privacy protocols. Students fled home, with many in faraway time zones prolonging jet lag just to continue synchronous learning. Not surprisingly, the experience for both students and faculty has left much to be desired. According to one [survey](#), more than 75 percent of students do not feel they received a quality learning experience after classrooms closed.

But what surveys miss are the numerous spirited efforts to break new ground, as only a crisis can be the impetus for.

One professor at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts [taught](#) a drama course that allows students to “act” with each other in virtual reality using Oculus Quest headsets. A music professor at Stanford [trained](#) his students on software that allows musicians in different locations to perform together using internet streaming. Professors are pioneering new methods and ed-tech companies are developing platforms at a pace not seen before, providing a glimpse into the untapped potential of online education. Not to be forgotten, of course, is the fact that just a few years ago, a transition to online learning at the current scale would have been unimaginable.

Before the pandemic, most universities never truly embraced online education, at least not strategically. For years, universities have allowed professors to offer some courses online, making them accessible through aggregators such as edX or Coursera. But rarely do universities offer their most popular and prestigious degrees remotely. It is still not possible to get an M.B.A. at Stanford, a biology degree at M.I.T. or a computer science degree at Brown online.

On one hand, universities don't want to be seen as limiting access to education, so they have dabbled in the space. But to fully embrace it might render much of the faculty redundant, reduce the exclusivity of those degrees, and threaten the very existence of the physical campus, for which vast resources have been allocated over centuries.

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For good reason, many educators have been skeptical of online learning. They have questioned how discussion-based courses, which require more intimate settings, would be coordinated. They wonder how lab work might be administered. Of course, no one doubts that the student experience would not be as holistic. But universities don't need to abandon in-person teaching for students who see the value in it.

They simply need to create “parallel” online degrees for all their core degree programs. By doing so, universities could expand their reach by thousands, creating the economies of scale to drop their costs by tens of thousands.

There are a few, but instructive, examples of prestigious universities that have already shown the way. Georgia Tech, a top engineering school, launched an online [masters in computer science](#) in 2014. The degree costs just \$7,000 (one-sixth the cost of its in-person program), and the school now has nearly [10,000 students enrolled](#), making it the [largest](#) computer science program in the country. Notably, the online degree has not cannibalized its on-campus revenue stream. Instead, it has opened up a prestigious degree program to a different population, mostly midcareer applicants looking for a meaningful skills upgrade.

Similarly, in 2015, the University of Illinois launched an [online M.B.A.](#) for \$22,000, a fraction of the cost of most business schools. In order to provide a forum for networking and experiential learning, critical to the business school experience, the university created micro-immersions, where students can connect with other students and work on live projects at companies at a regional level.

To do this would require a major reorientation of university resources and activities. Classrooms would need to be fitted with new technology so that lectures could be simultaneously delivered to students on campus as well as across the world. Professors would need to undergo training on how to effectively teach to a blended classroom. Universities would also be well served to build competencies in content production. Today, almost all theory-based content, whether in chemistry, computer science or finance, can be produced in advance and effectively delivered asynchronously. By tapping their best-rated professors to be the stars of those productions, universities could actually raise the pedagogical standard.

There are already strong examples of this. Most biology professors, for instance, would find themselves hard pressed to match the pedagogical quality, production values and inspirational nature of Eric Lander's [online Introduction to Biology course](#) at M.I.T. That free course currently has over 134,000 students enrolled this semester.

Once universities have developed a library of content, they can choose to draw from it for asynchronous delivery for years, both for their on-campus and online programs. Students may not mind. It would, after all, open up professor capacity for a larger number of live interactions. Three-hour lectures, which were never good for anyone, would become a thing of the past. Instead, a typical day might be broken up into one-hour sessions with a focus on problem-solving, Q. and A. or discussion.

Many universities are sounding bold about reopening in-person instruction this fall. The current business model requires them to, or face financial ruin. But a hasty decision driven by the financial imperative could prove lethal, and do little to help them weather a storm. The pandemic provides universities an opportunity to reimagine education around the pillars of access and affordability with the myriad tools and techniques now at their disposal. It could make them true pathways of upward mobility again.

Hans Tataria is a clinical associate professor at the New York University Stern School of Business.

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