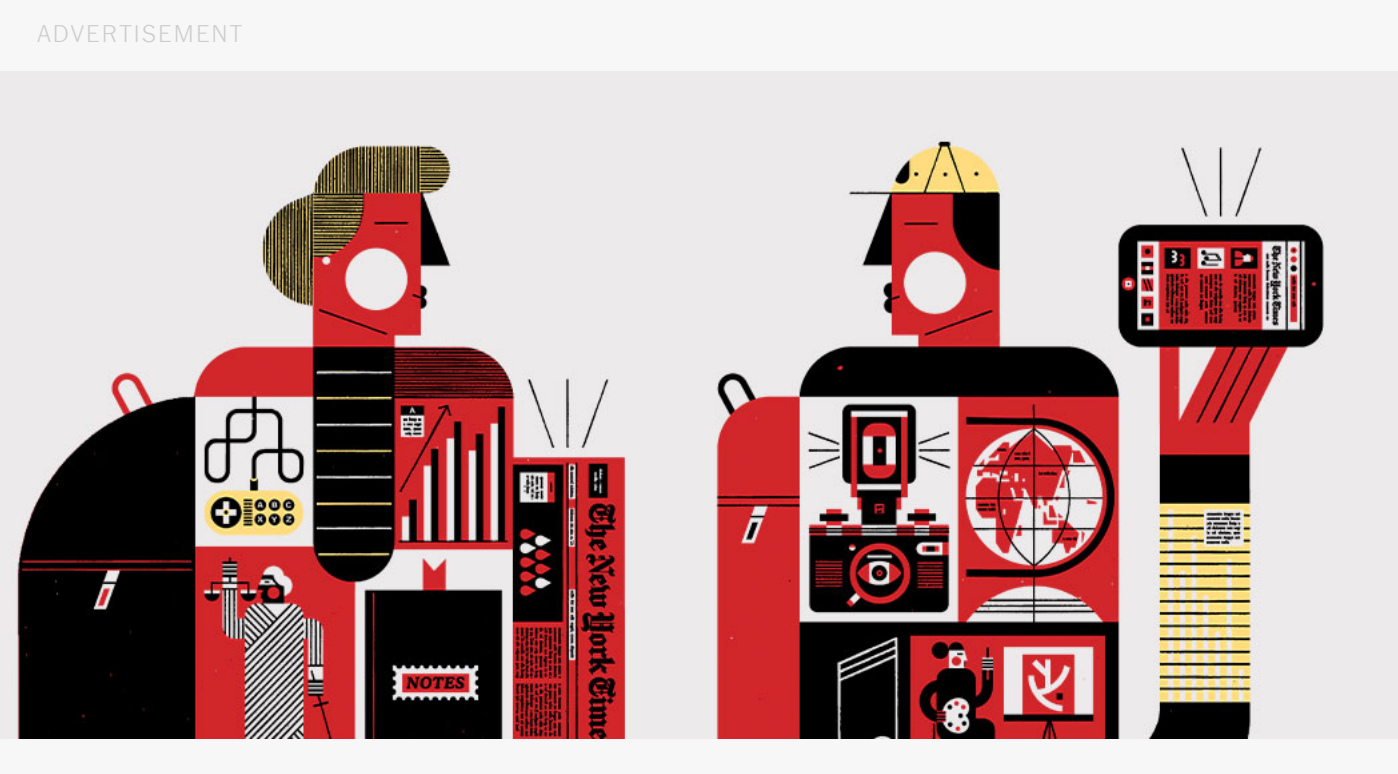


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Will the Coronavirus Forever Alter
the College Experience?

The answer so far appears to be no. But some online education tools are likely to stick around.



Ori Toor

By Jon Marcus

April 23, 2020


[继续阅读中文版](#) [閱讀繁體中文版](#)

This article is part of our latest [Learning special report](#), which focuses on the challenges of online education during the coronavirus outbreak.

A professor at Loyola University New Orleans taught his first virtual class from his courtyard, wearing a bathrobe and sipping from a glass of wine. Faculty at Lafayette College, in Easton, Penn., trained in making document cameras at home using cardboard and rubber bands.

Hamilton College, in Clinton, N.Y., set up drive-up Wi-Fi stations for faculty members whose connections weren't reliable enough to let them upload material to the internet. And students in a musicology course at Virginia Tech were assigned to create TikTok videos.

The disruption caused by the [coronavirus pandemic](#) has prompted cobbled-together responses ranging from the absurd to the ingenious at colleges and universities struggling to continue teaching even as their students have receded into diminutive images, in dire need of haircuts, on videoconference checkerboards.

But while all of this is widely being referred to as online higher education, that's not really what most of it is, at least so far. As for predictions that it will trigger a permanent exodus from brick-and-mortar campuses to virtual classrooms, all indications are that it probably won't.

“What we are talking about when we talk about online education is using digital technologies to transform the learning experience,” said Vijay Govindarajan, a professor at Dartmouth's Tuck School of Business. “That is not what is happening right now. What is happening now is we had eight days to put everything we do in class onto Zoom.”

There will be some important lasting impacts, though, experts say: Faculty may incorporate online tools, to which many are being exposed for the first time, into their conventional classes. And students are experiencing a flexible type of learning they may not like as undergraduates, but could return to when it's time to get a graduate degree.

These trends may not transform higher education, but they are likely to accelerate the integration of technology into it.

This semester “has the potential to raise expectations of using these online resources to complement what we were doing before, in an evolutionary way, not a revolutionary way,” said Eric Fredericksen, associate vice president for online learning at the University of Rochester. “That's the more permanent impact.”

Real online education lets students move at their own pace and includes such features as continual assessments so they can jump ahead as soon as they've mastered a skill, Dr. Fredericksen and others said.

Conceiving, planning, designing and developing a genuine online course or program can consume as much as a year of faculty training and collaboration with instructional designers, and often requires student orientation and support and a complex technological infrastructure.

“Not surprisingly, when we really do this, it does take more than seven or eight days,” Dr. Fredericksen said wryly.

If anything, what people are mistaking now for online education — long class meetings in videoconference rooms, professors in their bathrobes, do-it-yourself tools made of rubber bands and cardboard — appears to be making them less, not more, open to it.

Learning: A Special Report

[More on the challenges of online education.](#)

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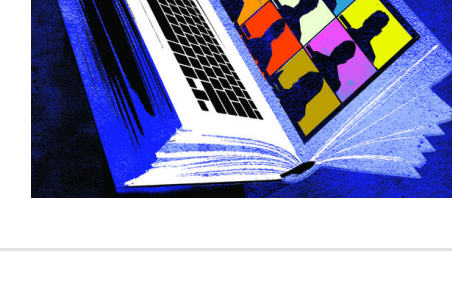
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“The pessimistic view is that [students] are going to hate it and never want to do this again, because all they're doing is using Zoom to reproduce everything that's wrong with traditional passive, teacher-centered modes of teaching,” said Bill Cope, a professor of education policy, organization and leadership at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

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Undergraduates already seemed lukewarm toward virtual higher education; only about 20 percent took even one online course in the fall of 2018, the consulting firm [Eduventures](#) estimates.

If they didn't like that, they definitely don't like what they're getting this semester.

More than 75 percent said [they don't think they're receiving a quality learning experience](#), according to a survey of nearly 1,300 students by the online exam-prep provider [OneClass](#). In a separate poll of 14,000 college and graduate students in early April by the website [niche.com](#), which rates schools and colleges, [67 percent said they didn't find online classes as effective as in-person ones](#).

Among college-bound high school seniors, [fewer than a quarter said in December that they were open to taking even some of their college courses online](#), [Eduventures](#) reported; by the end of March, after some had experienced virtual instruction from their shutdown high schools, [fewer than one in 10 polled by niche.com said they would consider online college classes](#).

Sentiments like these suggest there's little likelihood that students will desert their real-world campuses for cyberspace en masse. In fact, if there's a silver lining in this situation for residential colleges and universities, it's that students no longer take for granted the everyday realities of campus life: low-tech face-to-face classes, cultural diversions, libraries, athletics, extracurricular activities, in-person office hours and social interaction with their classmates.

“The beauty of a residential education has never been more apparent to people,” said Michael Roth, the president of Wesleyan University.

But advocates for true online instruction say that students' experience of taking courses on their own schedules over mobile platforms may come back to them later, when they're ready to move on to graduate or professional educations.

Online higher education “is a thin diet for the typical 18-year-old,” said Richard Garrett, the chief research officer at [Eduventures](#). “But today's 18-year-olds are tomorrow's 28-year-olds with families and jobs, who then realize that online can be useful.”

Already, more than half of American adults who expect to need more education or training after this pandemic say [they would do it online](#), according to a survey of 1,000 people by the Strada Education Network, which advocates connections between education and work.

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Universities should consider this semester an experiment to see which classes were most effectively delivered online, he said — big introductory courses better taught through video-recorded lectures by faculty stars and with online textbooks, for example, which could be shared among institutions to lower the cost.

Students who want classes best provided face to face, such as those in the performing arts or that require lab work, would continue to take them that way.

“Let's take advantage of this moment to start a larger conversation” about the whole design of higher education, Dr. Govindarajan said.

“We had better not lose this opportunity.”

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