Some Pandemic-Era Challenges to (Private) Higher Education

—Suggested Readings Packet—

1. “As pandemic wears on, colleges and universities grapple with how to survive,” PBS NewsHour (January 5, 2021).


4. “Progress in getting underrepresented people into college and skilled jobs may be stalling because of the pandemic,” Hechinger Report (November 16, 2020).

5. “A Message from Your University’s Vice President for Magical Thinking,” McSweeney’s (June 26, 2020).


7. “Online Learning Student Experience is the New Climbing Wall,” eLiterate (September 2, 2020).
As pandemic wears on, colleges and universities grapple with how to survive

Jan 5, 2021 6:25 PM EST

More than 397,000 people at American colleges and universities have contracted the coronavirus since March. As campuses nationwide look to start the third pandemic semester in coming weeks, the grim toll on higher education is mounting with the basic survival of entire institutions also on the line. Hari Sreenivasan reports as part of our series, “Rethinking College.”

Read the Full Transcript

Judy Woodruff:

Nearly 400,000 people at American colleges and universities have contracted the coronavirus since March. That’s enough to fill four Rose Bowls.

As campuses prepare to start a new semester, the toll is mounting. In some cases, the survival of entire institutions could be on the line. The COVID relief package included $23 billion for colleges and universities, but schools say it doesn’t come close to what they need.

Hari Sreenivasan has our story.

It’s part of our ongoing series Rethinking College.

Rock Jones:

When you get into the classrooms, when you walk into the dining hall, when you go into a science lab, you realize that this is not a normal year.

Hari Sreenivasan:

Squint hard, and this almost looks like fall semester at Ohio Wesleyan University, a liberal arts school of 1,500 students just outside Columbus.

Rock Jones:

We have been doing surveillance testing of about 15 percent of the student body each week. Yesterday, we tested 72. Zero positives.
As pandemic wears on, colleges and universities grapple with how to sur...

Hari Sreenivasan:

So, this is just part of campus life.

Rock Jones:

Just a part of campus life.

Hari Sreenivasan:

But beyond the testing, the masks, the grab-and-go meals, and solo study, there's something even more unsettling afoot here.

Rock Jones:

Normally, this place would be packed.

Hari Sreenivasan:

Ohio Wesleyan President Rock Jones recently announced that his school would be eliminating 18 majors, nearly a fifth of its offerings, and they're cutting 20 percent of the university's faculty and staff.

It's a move expected to save nearly $12 million. Nearly every college and university surviving the pandemic has a cash flow crisis.

Rock Jones We refunded the room and board fees that students had paid for the second half of the spring semester. We canceled our planned 3 percent increase in tuition, room, and board for this year. That's been a significant loss of revenue.

We increased our financial aid budget, because we knew families were having financial struggles with the recession and unemployment numbers increasing. And then we have had added expenses for testing.

Hari Sreenivasan:

You have increased your cost, decreased your revenues. To a lot of colleges, that's not good math.

Rock Jones:

Well, it's not good math. And, again, we found ways to reduce expenses.

Hari Sreenivasan:
As pandemic wears on, colleges and universities grapple with how to sur...

And it’s on top of math that’s been bad for a decade. Since 2010, enrollment at two-and four-year colleges nationwide has dropped by about 2.5 million, driven in part by a smaller population of high school students moving directly to college and concerns over the skyrocketing cost of college education.

A team at Ohio Wesleyan had already begun looking for cuts before the pandemic.

Rock Jones:

I believe that COVID has not created challenges, but has accelerated challenges. It’s forced us all to think differently and quickly.

Hari Sreenivasan:

Last spring, that meant transitioning to online-only education within days. And this academic year, for schools like Ohio Wesleyan, it also meant finding a way to bring students back for a very different version of the college experience.

Jack Foley:

It feels almost kind of like a zombie town, like a zombie apocalypse. Right? Everyone is walking around. They’re all basically faceless because you can’t really see them.

Hari Sreenivasan:

Jack Foley, a junior, self-quarantined for 22 days last semester after repeated exposures to the virus. But he says being on campus was worth the challenges.

Jack Foley:

I needed the social life, even if it was going to be restricted due to COVID. Really, all my friends are here. So, it’s where I took that risk.

Hari Sreenivasan:

Not so for everyone. More than 560,000 undergraduates in the U.S. decided not to return to school this fall, either in person or online. That’s a 3.6 percent drop compared to 2019.

Freshman attendance saw an unprecedented 13.1 percent drop, according the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. The pandemic has cost U.S. schools, by one estimate, $120 billion and counting.

It’s devastating for small liberal arts schools, to be sure, but also bigger public schools that have seen state support plummet in recent years.
As pandemic wears on, colleges and universities grapple with how to sur... https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/pandemics-toll-on-higher-education...

Dan Hurley:

The state universities of Michigan, all 15 of them, are facing the most dire set of circumstances many of them ever have since their founding.

Hari Sreenivasan:

Dan Hurley is the chief executive officer of the Michigan Association of State Universities.

Dan Hurley:

As an example, Michigan state University, one of the largest universities in the country, right now, they have 15,000 to 17,000 beds on campus that are completely empty because of the pandemic.

Hari Sreenivasan:

Michigan State went almost entirely virtual this fall, leaving its 5,300-acre campus in East Lansing desolate.

Dan Hurley:

Dining centers, huge conference services programs, summer youth programs, all that auxiliary enterprise were — went away, and, with it, tens of tens of millions of dollars.

And then you look at the athletic enterprises, U-of-M and Michigan State among them, I think that's going to be an impact in the tens and tens of millions of dollars. And those dollars don't just benefit the athletic enterprise. They help subsidize other aspects of the University of Michigan.

Hari Sreenivasan:

In Ann Arbor, the University of Michigan tried to offer students some semblance of normalcy with mask mandates and routine testing. But, within weeks, COVID cases surged.

It didn't surprise nursing student Christian Magno.

Christian Magno:

We are very tempted to go and hang out with a lot of people, because it's the culture that this campus is.
In October, undergraduate students were ordered to stay in their dorms until early November to help bring down the infection rate, and they have been asked not to come back to campus after winter break unless necessary.

Most housing contracts for winter and spring have been canceled.

Christian Magno:

I know that there’s a lot of controversy around it, but if you take in consideration human lives, it reduces the amount of interaction that people have with each other.

Hari Sreenivasan:

But these moves come at a cost, Hurley says.

Dan Hurley:

There's going to continue to be a lot of belt-tightening.

Hari Sreenivasan:

U.S. colleges and universities have shed nearly a tenth of their employees in recent months, tied to both the pandemic and longer-term challenges, including 2,900 adjunct professors at City University of New York, campus-wide furloughs at University of Arizona.

More than 230 college athletic teams nationwide have been cut or slated for elimination. In Ohio, Urbana University, founded in 1850, closed shop completely this year due to the pandemic and years of low enrollment. Analysts say hundreds of others are at risk of following suit in the next few years.

Hannah Carpenter is a senior at Ohio Wesleyan.

How are the changes the university is making when it comes to the bottom line going to affect you?

Hannah Carpenter:

It’s hard to see programs lose funding, because that part of the liberal arts university experience is having all of those different fields available to you to explore.

So, it definitely is not the best feeling to know that your university is struggling financially, and that universities everywhere are struggling. But I know, at the other end of this, there will be opportunities for growth in the end, and things will eventually be on the up and up again.

Hari Sreenivasan:
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https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/pandemics-toll-on-higher-education...
Before Covid-19, scores of the nation’s private colleges were already facing a financial health pandemic. Things are worse but don’t expect a rash of school closures.

“You don’t think Harvard is running a deficit? Or Stanford? Everybody is running a deficit!” Those emphatic words are from Fred Prager, of Prager & Co., dean among Wall Street financiers specializing in higher education. He is speaking about the effects of the pandemic on colleges and universities.

“Top colleges [like Harvard] can hold their breath. . . . If you can hold your breath for 10 or 20 years, you’re going to make it through this. But there are institutions that can’t hold their breath for a year.”

Prager is talking about an ugly reality facing many dozens of colleges now effectively on ventilators, gasping for air. With enrollment down for the 2020-21 academic year, and room, board and other revenues greatly reduced, Covid-19 delivered a gut punch to college finances and in many cases accelerated the financial effects of negative trends—including declining enrollment tied to demographics—already in place. Tiny Pine Manor College in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, may have been the first pandemic casualty. Last May, the 109-year-old former women’s college, with a meager $9.6 million endowment and 416 students, threw in the towel and announced that it would merge with well-endowed Boston College.
More mergers are coming, but don’t expect private colleges to start closing en masse. According to Richard Ekman, president of the Council of Independent Colleges, whose 700 members range from Middlebury College in Vermont to Gonzaga University in Washington, most colleges—even those seemingly on life support—will survive the Covid-19 pandemic.

“There is this myth that all private colleges are going over the cliff. It’s just plain wrong. The data shows that every year for the past 25 years, some small number of colleges have closed. And it’s a number between zero and 10, and it bounces up and down from year to year and bears no relation to other events like the 2008 recession.”

Ekman is correct, in part because many academic institutions seem to operate oblivious to financial reality and muddle through year after year on the edge of insolvency. Fiscal responsibility is anathema to many in higher education. Greensboro, North Carolina’s Guilford College, a 184-year-old Quaker school with an undergraduate enrollment of 1,500, had been operating with multimillion-dollar budget deficits for years. After the pandemic hit, its interim president prudently decided to cut costs, announcing she would terminate nearly a third of its faculty members and cut half of its majors. But no sooner was the plan announced than an alumni outcry and pledges of donations successfully reversed most of the cuts. So Guilford lives on in misery for another few years.

School closures may not be imminent, but change is coming. “Colleges are not going to come out of this period and return to ‘business as usual,’ as too much has changed in the way we do business and the priorities of students,” predicts economist Lucie Lapovsky, former president of Mercy College. “Those schools, which have trimmed down and positioned themselves to be able to grow in new ways once the pandemic is over, will survive and thrive.”

If there is any good news, it is that enrollment at elite colleges is likely to rebound sharply for the 2021-22 academic year, as applications are way up, driven by an expectation that normal campus life will resume in the fall. Still, Ekman doesn’t expect a full resumption for revenue-generating services, including dining halls and fully occupied dorm rooms, until 2022.

In an effort to determine the financial health of private colleges as they emerge from the pandemic, Forbes crunched the numbers for its annual college financial grades, which measures the balance sheet health and operating strength of 921 private, not-for-profit colleges with full-time enrollments greater than 500 students. Most of our financial calculations are derived from the government’s National Center for Education Statistics, whose most recent data happens to be from 2018 and 2019. Thus, our grades give a prepandemic snapshot of private college financial health. Virtually all schools have experienced deteriorating financial results in the last 12 months.

For our 2021 ranking, 83 colleges scored a grade of A or better, but nearly half of the private colleges on our list recorded a grade of C or worse. These schools are typically in precarious financial positions, with tight budgets. They tend to have relatively small endowments and
depend on tuition revenue to survive each year. They also offer steep discounts in the form of merit aid or scholarships in an effort to fill up their classrooms.
College Made Them Feel Equal. The Virus Exposed How Unequal Their Lives Are.

The political science class was called “Forced Migration and Refugees.” Students read accounts of migrants fleeing broken economies and seeking better futures, of life plans drastically altered and the political forces that made it all seem necessary.

Then suddenly, the subject matter became personal: Haverford College shut down and evicted most students from the dormitories as the coronavirus spread through Pennsylvania.

Like many college courses around the country, the class soldiered on. The syllabus was revised. The students reconvened on a videoconferencing app.

But as each logged in, not everyone’s new reality looked the same.

One student sat at a vacation home on the coast of Maine. Another struggled to keep her mother’s Puerto Rican food truck running while meat vanished from Florida grocery shelves. As one young woman’s father, a private equity executive, urged the family to decamp to a country where infections were falling, another student’s mother in Russia couldn’t afford the plane ticket to bring her daughter home.

“One Russia is about to close its borders,” Sophie Chochaeva told her classmates, in the days before the country did. She was one of 135 students still on campus, in a dorm room she called “the cozy foxhole,” as the world outside became a ghost town. “This crisis is exposing that a lot of people don’t have anywhere to go.”

The outbreak of the coronavirus — and the accompanying economic devastation that has left 10 million people almost instantly unemployed — has put America’s class divide on full display. Gig employees were the first to suffer, with many of their jobs vanishing without unemployment benefits. Office employees retreated to work-from-home arrangements while janitors cleaned the buildings they fled and delivery workers brought packages to their doorsteps.

But college was meant to be different. For decades, small liberal arts schools like Haverford, a short ride from Philadelphia, prided themselves on being the “great equalizer,” offering pedigrees not just to the scions of East Coast elites but also to the children of first-generation immigrants. Scholarships filled in for family money. Students ate the same cafeteria food in the morning and bunked in the same creaky beds at night.

No longer — at least not while the virus spreads through the country.
“It’s as though you had a front-row view on American inequality and the ways in which it was disguised and papered over,” said Anita Isaacs, the course’s professor who has taught political science at Haverford since 1988. The first gulf war, the Sept. 11 attacks, the Great Recession — she had seen them all through the eyes of her students.

“There’s been nothing like this before,” she said.

Several nights before the class was to reconvene online in late March, Professor Isaacs received an email from one of her teaching assistants, Tatiana Lathion, a college senior whose parents own the food truck. Their source of income was on the verge of liquidation as stay-at-home orders loomed in Jacksonville, Fla., where they lived.

“I’m not sure my savings will allow them both to survive this quarantine and still keep the business,” she wrote. She said she was thinking of getting a part-time job at a grocery store.

Wasn’t college supposed to get her away from all that?

“I have this panic moment that it’s literally for nothing now,” Ms. Lathion wrote to her professor.

Ms. Lathion had not thought she would attend college.

Her mother had grown up in Puerto Rico before moving to Indiana and then Florida, and while she had sought out good public schools for her children, she didn’t push for education beyond that. But Ms. Lathion had high grades and a college counselor suggested that she apply to QuestBridge, a nonprofit that matches low-income students with colleges offering full-tuition scholarships.

As some high school seniors traveled the East Coast touring potential schools, Ms. Lathion asked her guidance counselor to pick out colleges that she thought would be a good fit.

“I didn’t think I was going to get that scholarship,” she said, so it was a surprise to her when Haverford came back with a full ride. She had to learn where it was.

“I was Googling Haverford, and was like, ‘Oh, I’m going to Pennsylvania, Mom,’” she said.

If Ms. Lathion found Haverford by chance, the school’s recruitment of underprivileged students like her was more by design.

The college was founded by Quakers in the 1830s and has a history of preaching equality and social justice. While tuition hovers around $73,000 a year, families earning less than $60,000 are exempted from taking out loans. By some metrics Haverford did better than most Ivy League schools in bringing in low- and middle-income students, despite having a far smaller endowment.
Sensing the doors wide open, Ms. Lathion plunged into playing on the lacrosse team. The sport was dominated by white, upper-class players who often learned at Northeast prep schools, but the Haverford team quickly made a place on the field for Ms. Lathion, who had learned to play in Florida.

The players wore the same uniforms, and even chose to live together on an apartment floor.

But while her teammates vacationed or completed internships, Ms. Lathion spent her summers helping her parents make empanadas at their Florida food truck. In a text message chat last winter break, her teammates discussed Christmas plans with their families. Ms. Lathion revealed she was in Puerto Rico, staying with hers after a powerful earthquake.

“She would send texts to the team group chat and say ‘Fifth day without power, hope you’re enjoying break!’” said Isabel Canning, a junior who played on the team. “I would Snapchat her back and ask if everything was OK.”

Ms. Canning had Latin roots, too. Her mother emigrated from Portugal in the 1970s, then married into an established Maine family that ran a distribution business. Ms. Canning’s father ran the company before starting a consulting outfit of his own. Each summer the family headed to the seaside town of Boothbay, where Ms. Canning’s father had taught her to play lacrosse.

By late January, as the coronavirus was moving beyond China, Ms. Canning saw a message from Ms. Lathion saying she planned to be a teaching assistant that coming semester. The two teammates discovered they had both been recruited by Ms. Isaacs to assist with her seminar on forced migration from Latin America.

They were joined in class by Ms. Chochaeva, who as a child bounced between the homes of her separated parents, several subway stops from Moscow’s Red Square. She had taken English classes until her family could no longer afford them, and then taught herself. Before Haverford, she had never visited the United States.

“I felt like some kind of uncertainty ended, and a new kind of uncertainty began,” she said.

Chace Pulley was one of the first in the class to realize the virus was having a big impact. Her father, an investor, had a trip planned to Japan, where he did business. Schools were closing. As Asian markets began to crash, Ms. Pulley’s parents assured her they had plenty of cash on hand, a decision they made after the Great Recession.
Ms. Chochaeva had flashes of 2008, too. She was 9 when her mother lost her job in Russia and was forced into a pension; Ms. Chochaeva’s older brother, who suffered from a learning disability, developed diabetes, which required costly treatment. She remembered how food had disappeared from shelves, and called her mother to make sure she was fine.

On March 4, Ms. Isaacs had her students stand at a chalkboard to create an enormous diagram of all the concepts they had studied in class. Students packed in and stretched over one another to draw connections like “fear and insecurity” and “familial connections.” It would be the last time the class would gather like that.

During spring break in mid-March, Ms. Lathion and Ms. Canning were headed to a lacrosse game in Virginia that was suddenly canceled out of safety concerns. They had already been told Haverford was delaying the start of classes because of the virus; now came a message to students not to return that semester at all.

Ms. Canning’s family quickly brought her to their summer home after she car-pooled to Maine with another student, leaving a family Land Rover on campus. Ms. Canning is on immunosuppressant drugs for a condition she developed on an educational trip to Kenya. An uncle who worked at the family distribution business gave her masks and gloves.

Ms. Lathion returned home to find Latin Soul Grille, her family’s food truck and their only livelihood, was starting to fail. It was up to her to help keep it going. As the lacrosse players gathered up for a video conference Ms. Lathion arrived late; she’d spent the day on what she called a “scavenger hunt” to find what remaining meat was still available for the truck at grocery stores.

By then, Ms. Pulley had made it to her family’s home in Hillsborough, Calif., a wealthy community with sweeping views of the San Francisco Bay. Her father had wanted the family to come with him to Japan, where he had traveled for business in the past and where infections seemed to be subsiding, but they ultimately decided to stay in California.

Andreanna Papatheodorou, another student in the seminar, tried to move back in with her mother, who had once been an undocumented immigrant from Argentina. But the pandemic made her mother anxious, and it became too much for Ms. Papatheodorou, who decided to return to Haverford.

“I said one less person in and out is better for you guys,” she said, before returning to Pennsylvania. “If I get sick, you can’t take care of me.”

When the class meets on Wednesdays at 1:30 on the Zoom app, the students discuss the virus and the ways it will affect the migrants they were learning about before the outbreak. But the conversation increasingly works its way to their own fate.
“Both my parents are priests,” began Hannah Stanley, who had retreated to Baltimore. “They had to close the church. Now they’re wondering, after months of quarantine how long it will take for people to come back.”

Sofia Bomse, in New Mexico, was disheartened.

“I would like to think there will be a call for radical social change now, but I don’t think that’s going to happen,” she said. “The gap between the super rich and everyone else will widen.”

After class, Professor Isaacs thought back to the email that she had gotten from Ms. Lathion. She said after she read it, she called to make sure her student was all right.

“I watched her as she cried through this screen and I kept thinking if it weren’t for coronavirus, we would be sitting together and I’d be able to physically reach out,” she said. “And I couldn’t do any of that and it was devastating.”

She added: “It’s possible to believe that we can bridge inequalities by coming together on the Haverford campus, or that we can at least soften the edges — and then there is this incredible rupture. I’m very worried about what comes next for them.”
Progress in getting underrepresented people into college and skilled jobs may be stalling because of the pandemic

Largely low-income, Hispanic and with parents whose own educations didn’t get past high school, the young people in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas started over the last decade doing something few of their predecessors had done: going to college.

As the community near the Mexican border came together to make education a priority, scores in math and reading on state standardized tests rose. So did high school graduation rates and the proportion of students filling out the federal application for college financial aid. The number who went on to higher education inched up, to 57 percent from 56 percent.

“We got a lot of people talking about how important going to college is,” said Katherine Díaz, who, as deputy director for the nonprofit RGV FOCUS — it stands for Rio Grande Valley — helps coordinate this work.

“More students started seeing, ‘Wow, I can do this.’ And they thought, ‘I’m doing this because I want to show my cousins that they can do this too.’ ”

Then the pandemic descended.

Unemployment in what Texans call “the Valley” peaked at more than 17 percent in the spring. The rate of infections and deaths from Covid-19 was nearly twice what it was in the rest of Texas. Even since tighter restrictions were imposed, the area continues to account for 7 percent of all of the state’s confirmed cases.

Now there’s fear that all the Valley’s hard-won educational progress will reverse.

Black enrollment at community colleges has dropped 12 percent this fall and Hispanic enrollment more than 8 percent.

Overwhelmed school and university administrators and others “just can’t do another thing right now,” said Díaz. “There isn’t a lot of capacity for really coming to the table and saying, ‘Okay we have this challenge. How can we work together to fix it?’ ”

Community and business groups around the country share the same fear. For the last few years, they have been pushing schools and colleges to improve high school graduation and college enrollment and completion rates — especially for low-income, Black and Hispanic students —increasing the supply of skilled workers to compete in the global economy. Many were making measurable progress.
With the pandemic disrupting in-person education and straining budgets, there is growing fear that this momentum is reversing.

“That challenge just got harder,” said Sandy Baruah, president and CEO of the chamber of commerce in Detroit, which has been working to raise the low proportion of students in that city who go on to college within a year of graduating high school.

With schools mostly online, nearly one in four public school students in Detroit aren’t logging in or showing up, the superintendent says — many because they don’t have laptops or Wi-Fi. That’s significantly more than in a typical year.

Absenteeism in the spring and fall has been similarly high in Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Dayton, Hartford, Los Angeles and other cities, according to data compiled by the Brookings Institution. Experts say that this means dropout rates, which had been declining for more than a decade, will likely start to rise again.

In Texas, after schools went online in the spring, Black and Hispanic students failed to submit assignments or respond to outreach from their teachers at more than double the rate of their white classmates, the Texas Education Agency reports.

And students like these, who aren’t showing up or logging in, “that’s the future of our workforce,” said Laura Ward, senior vice president for talent development at the Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce, which also has been working to improve the college readiness of local high school graduates.

Her coalition of advocates in Nashville now meets remotely, every Friday morning. Among other things, its members talk about the obstacles confronting students.

“I have literally hung up the phone and had to cry, because the problems are so deep,” Ward said. “There are transportation barriers and food insecurity and housing issues, and it’s getting cold. When you don’t have basic needs met, you can’t learn.”

“| I have literally hung up the phone and had to cry, because the problems are so deep. |
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<td>Laura Ward, senior vice president for talent development, Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce</td>
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Heather Hunter, a psychology major at Wichita State University who has a part-time job in a foster-care agency, said only four high school students in foster care showed up for a workshop to help them fill out that federal form required to qualify for financial aid. Last year, 50 did.

“It’s so sad. They’re like, ‘Why should I go to college? No one knows what’s going to happen,’ ” Hunter said.
Students themselves — especially those who are the first in their families to go to college — say they’re facing isolation, flagging motivation, money woes and lack of support, on top of the usual challenges of navigating higher education.

“We were already fighting twice as hard to get where everybody else was,” said Yessica Flores, a 21-year-old psychology and sociology major at Virginia Commonwealth University. “We have to fight three times as hard now.”

College enrollments have fallen. And a third of this year’s high school seniors say they’re less likely to go to college when they graduate, according to a survey by the think tanks New America and Third Way.

Having to shift to online learning because of the pandemic “has definitely affected our motivation,” said Emmanuella Agyemang, a 16-year-old junior at University Heights High School in the Bronx who plans to go to college and wants to be a journalist. And when she and her classmates have questions about the college selection and application process, she said, “We don’t feel like we have anyone to turn to.”

First-generation freshmen are finding college particularly frustrating. “I’ve made about two or three friends I’ve met in person,” said Angela López, 19, a first-year student at the University of Texas at Austin who plans to major in electrical computer engineering. “I didn’t even know how to contact my advisor to declare a major. Then when you do find them, the offices are closed.”

Even upperclassmen, who are further along, have suffered setbacks. Gregory VanDyke Jr., a 19-year-old sophomore criminal justice major at Wichita State, had to drop a course when he was unable to manage a last-minute assignment on top of his other classwork and the 25- to 40-hour-a-week job as a server in a restaurant that pays his rent. “I started bawling my eyes out, like, ‘How am I going to do this?’”

Oriana Barros, 21, a sophomore at the University of Massachusetts Boston and the mother of a six-month-old daughter, struggles through long days of sitting through online courses and said she worries about her first-generation classmates.

“I do think some students will — I don’t want to say fail, because that’s a hard word — but some students won’t have the same ambition,” Barros said.

Rosa Vasquez has seen students quit already. “Some have gone to trade school, some have just gone off to get a job,” said the 20-year-old junior, who is majoring in exercise science at Virginia Commonwealth and is a mentor to fellow first-generation undergraduates.

Hunter, at Wichita State, said some of her classmates also seem to have fallen between the cracks.
“From a first-generation perspective, they just feel like they’re kind of forgotten,” said Hunter, who is 37 and hopes to become a clinical mental health counselor.

One student who lost her home when COVID hit, for instance, faded away; Hunter, who is president of her campus’s first-generation student association, tried to reach out to her, but her campus email address stopped working. “That usually means she’s not enrolled any more.”

Compounding advocates’ frustration is that these setbacks follow years of hard-won progress.

Like the Rio Grande Valley, for example, Nashville had been seeing gains in high school graduation and college-going rates.

“We had some momentum,” Ward said. “Then Covid hit and everyone went into disaster mode. We’re just triaging. How far we’ve come is wonderful, so having to take some steps back is definitely frustrating.”

While there’s still a significant racial gap in educational achievement, the proportion of Black students nationwide who graduated from high school on time rose from 66 percent in 2009-10 to 79 percent in 2017-18, the last period for which the figures are available from the National Center for Education Statistics. For Hispanic students, the percentage rose from 71 to 81.

The proportion of Black and Hispanic 18- to 24-year-olds enrolled in college rose from 31 to 37 percent and from 22 to 36 percent, respectively, between 2000 and 2018, federal figures show. The rate at which these students earned degrees was rising, too.

“‘We had some momentum. Then Covid hit and everyone went into disaster mode. We’re just triaging. How far we’ve come is wonderful, so having to take some steps back is definitely frustrating.’

Laura Ward, senior vice president for talent development, Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce

But Black and Hispanic college enrollment has already started to decline since the onset of Covid-19. At community colleges, Black college enrollment dropped 12 percent this fall, according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, and Hispanic college enrollment by more than 8 percent. In the summer, Black enrollment overall dropped by more than 6 percent, compared to 2019, more sharply than that of any other racial group.

“We’re going backward,” said Tania Tetlow, president of Loyola University New Orleans.

Among those who enroll and remain in college, students from lower-income families are four times more likely than those from higher-income backgrounds to say that they are struggling to learn remotely in this pandemic year, a survey by the education technology company
Instructure found. Seventy percent said they were falling behind.

Financial challenges are also mounting. Nearly 70 percent of financial aid officers at colleges and universities say students have been asking for more money because of financial hardship than they did in previous years, a survey by the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators found.

Vasquez’s car broke down, costing her the income she was making working for DoorDash and running a massage business on the side. “Sometimes I have to choose between a good grade and rent,” she said.

Lower-income students are significantly more likely than their classmates to have had a loss or reduction of income, according to a separate survey by the Student Experience in the Research University Consortium at the University of California, Berkeley.

A significant proportion say they will need more time to finish. Of those, more than a third think it will take them an additional semester to graduate, and half that it will take them an extra year, the survey by New America and Third Way found. That means additional expenses and forgone income.

The same thing happened during the last recession, when the college graduation rate declined.

“The students who we’re losing — the ones who aren’t showing up or logging in — that’s the future of our workforce.”

Laura Ward, senior vice president for talent development, Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce

Business leaders around the country are concerned about this for a practical reason, said Baruah, who previously served as administrator of the U.S. Small Business Administration and as U.S. assistant secretary of commerce: They “really understand acutely that they’re in a global war for talent. Access to talent is their number-one competitive priority.”

In Nashville, a quarter of a million workers are nearing retirement age and will need to be replaced, and 20 percent of new jobs may require a bachelor’s degree, the chamber of commerce there predicts.

The Rio Grande Valley needs skilled workers for new manufacturing businesses, tourism, healthcare and the SpaceX rocket launch base, which is projected to attract more tech jobs.

The Detroit region added 173,000 new jobs after the last recession, mostly in industries requiring college credentials, such as information technology, insurance, financial services and health care. Yet only 13 percent of city residents have bachelor’s degrees or higher. Calling this “alarming” and warning that it “has become more acute with ongoing concerns of
education loss due to Covid-19,” the Detroit chamber of commerce has launched a 10-year plan to increase the proportion of residents with degrees or credentials to 60 percent by 2030.

It’s a goal that will require getting more than 265,000 people to and through some level of college, the chamber calculates.

That will be much harder now.

The problems caused by the pandemic have “rededicated many of us to the work,” Ward, in Nashville, said. “Because closing equity gaps is still crucial to building a future workforce. Creating access where it doesn’t exist today and hasn’t existed for many people ever is going to be crucial in the recovery.”
Dear University Community,

Since we first announced our plans to reopen this fall (a far too early decision given the lack of reliable data about the likely prevalence of COVID-19 in the fall, but done out of necessity to beat the June 1st National College Decision Day deadline), many students, parents, faculty, and staff have asked us how we plan to ensure that we reopen safely. Our strategy is outlined below, but the short answer is this: Our university will proceed as if everything will be okay because we really, really want it to be.

**Classroom safety**

After measuring classrooms and examining our antiquated ventilation systems, our staff (those who haven’t been furloughed) reports that there’s absolutely no way our already scheduled and enrolled classes can safely fit in those spaces. But our university has always valued creative problem-solving, so we have posted NO COVID-19 ALLOWED PAST THIS POINT signs on the doors of every campus building. Plus, to show how seriously we take the situation, the signs have been laminated.

**Campus housing**

All dormitories have been thoroughly cleaned and disinfected, and all residents will be given a single room. We ask that after students move in, they make frequent use of our hand sanitizer stations, get in and out of bed on the same side every day, and flick their light switches on and off exactly seven times when they enter or exit a room.

When they arrive on campus, all students will receive a welcome package containing a face mask branded with our university logo, a rabbit’s foot, a horseshoe, an evil-eye charm, a Maneki-neko, a crucifix, and a bulb of garlic. We know some of that stuff is for vampires, but you can never be too careful.

**Dining**
We admit this one’s a toughie. How can we feed thousands of students while limiting the number of surfaces they touch and maintaining social distancing, all while they remove their face masks in order to, you know, eat?

As our currently laid-off professor of Italian might say, *mangia al fresco!* We’re thrilled to announce that all meals will be served outdoors as pre-packaged picnics. Yes, there is scientific disagreement on whether the virus is less likely to spread in warmer weather, and whether the benefits of open air are canceled out by large crowds. But our university has boldly decided to believe only the theories that we like: that is, being outside is fine, warm weather kills the virus, and if before each meal we hum David Bowie’s “Heroes” while hopping on our left feet, we can never get sick.

**Mental health**

Many students suffer from anxiety and depression, and the numbers of students struggling with these and other issues are expected to increase dramatically in the wake of the pandemic. Before coronavirus, we primarily dealt with student mental health challenges by nodding sympathetically and directing students to our overbooked and understaffed Wellness Center, where they were unable to schedule an appointment with one of our few counselors. Starting next semester, we will enhance that policy with the addition of a magic wand made from the exhumed bones of our university’s founder. A receptionist (currently furloughed) will wave the wand over the student’s head while chanting, “The Founder cures thee, get over it, get over it.”

**Academic calendar**

Just as we lovingly worship the virus-killing Good Fairy of Summer, so too we fear the virus-nurturing Bad Fairy of Winter. Accordingly, we will be ending our fall semester early, just before Thanksgiving, and beginning our spring semester in mid-March. Why these dates? Are they random? Are we trying to avoid holidays in which students might travel and possibly carry back contagion, or working to appease a variety of pagan gods? Probably yes to all of these.

What are our administrators doing to help? Rest assured, they’re determined to make any sacrifice (short of salary reductions that would go to benefit faculty and staff whose positions have been cut) until we make it through this crisis. Our Provost shreds every new issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and uses the scraps to construct remarkably accurate effigies of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which she then smashes and burns while sobbing. Our Dean of Libraries has been using her formidable research skills to locate monkeys’ paws, magical fish, and other wish-granting entities. And our President has chained his first-born child on the shores of our nearby lake as an offering to the great and terrible Kraken.

We can’t wait to welcome our new and returning students to campus this fall. In the meantime, please don’t consider the reality that while we say our campus will be open and in-person, it’s likely that many classes will still be conducted partly or wholly online. And for the
love of Ishtar, please don’t consider that under these pedagogically questionable and potentially dangerous circumstances, your student might be better off taking a gap year. Don’t let the bad thoughts in; the future of our university literally depends on thinking only good thoughts!

Oh, and when you arrive on campus, be sure to visit our new four-leaf clover garden, located where the Performing Arts Center used to be!

Sincerely,
The Vice President for Magical Thinking
American colleges botched the pandemic from the very start. Caught off guard in the spring, most of them sent everyone home in a panic, in some cases evicting students who had nowhere else to go. School leaders hemmed and hawed all summer about what to do next and how to do it. In the end, most schools reopened their campuses for the fall, and when students returned, they brought the coronavirus along with them. Come Labor Day, 19 of the nation’s 25 worst outbreaks were in college towns, including the University of Mississippi in Oxford, Iowa State in Ames, and the University of Georgia in Athens. By early October, the White House Coronavirus Task Force estimated that as many as 20 percent of all Georgia college students might have become infected.

Who’s to blame for the turmoil? College leaders desperate to enroll students or risk financial collapse; students, feeling young and invincible, who were bound to be dumb and throw parties; red-state governments and boards that pressured universities to reopen.

But ordinary Americans also bear responsibility. They didn’t just want classes to resume in person—they wanted campuses to return to normal. By one measure, more than two-thirds of students wanted to head back to their colleges. Even parents deeply worried about the safety of their kids still packed bags and road-tripped across the country to drop them off at school. When some colleges moved to Zoom, students and parents revolted. More than 100 colleges, both private (Brown, Duke) and public (Rutgers, North Carolina), have been sued for tuition refunds. You can understand why. It costs almost $60,000 per year to attend Brown, and that’s before room, board, books, and fees.

But what did families think they were paying for? Classes are still happening, and degrees will still be conferred. Parents and students are miffed because they don’t really buy teaching when they pay tuition. Instead, they get something more abstract: the college experience. Some of that experience involves education—the seminar discussion in a facsimile of a medieval monastery, the cram session under the vaulted ceiling of a library, the brisk,
class chat with a professor across a grassy quad. But most of it doesn’t, especially the stuff that can’t be done from a distance, such as moving away from home for the first time, swilling booze at a house party, touring houses during sorority rush, applying face paint for a football game, decorating the cold, cinder-block walls of a new dorm room.

The pandemic is changing lots of things, some forever. Office work seems to be on the decline, as companies abandon pricey real estate and the nuisance of commutes. Online grocery shopping, once a luxury, may finally be deposing the supermarket’s century-long reign. The pandemic has upended air travel, dining out, working out, and weddings. But even though the coronavirus has massively disrupted American higher education, many colleges are already settling back into their usual routines: move-in day, rush, homecoming, and all the rest.

That shocking stability is exposing a long-standing disconnect: Without the college experience, a college education alone seems insufficient. Quietly, higher education was always an excuse to justify the college lifestyle. But the pandemic has revealed that university life is far more embedded in the American idea than anyone thought. America is deeply committed to the dream of attending college. It’s far less interested in the education for which students supposedly attend.

Students do go to school for the schooling, of course. Colleges hold classes, host majors, and award degrees. Getting a college degree is now one of the only paths to a middle-class life, training graduates for a particular career and, on average, doubling their median income. But that’s just a small part of colleges’ purpose. In the United States, higher education offers a fantasy for how kids should grow up: by competing for admission to a rarefied place, which erects a safe cocoon that facilitates debauchery and self-discovery, out of which an adult emerges. The process—not just the result, a degree—offers access to opportunity, camaraderie, and even matrimony. Partying, drinking, sex, clubs, fraternities: These rites of passage became an American birthright.

Not everyone gets or even wants a college experience. At least 35 percent of American students attend two-year institutions such as junior and community colleges that don’t promise a coming-of-age experience. Likewise, some state schools cater to commuter students, working students, and students outside traditional college age, for whom a college experience is either a luxury or a memory. That’s what made it easy for the California State University system—all 23 campuses, serving almost half a million students total—to move fall classes online way back in May.

By the time the pandemic arrived, residential colleges had been selling the college experience, along with a side of education, for decades. They had been promulgating it as a cultural aspiration for much longer. An education is useful and even beneficial. But it’s not what American colleges are built for, and it never has been.
When Western universities got their start in medieval Europe, they were integrated into major cities, such as Paris, Prague, and Milan. England was an exception. Its oldest colleges, Oxford and Cambridge, were nestled into the bucolic countryside. When Harvard became the first college in the future United States, it adopted the English notion of a campus as a place apart—and became the prototype for every U.S. undergraduate college that succeeded it. The school was designed around a quadrangle (an Oxford-Cambridge invention) that literally contains collegiate life, separated from the outside but connected within.

The massive size of the United States set the stage for hundreds, then thousands, of schools all across the country: sectarian schools connected to every church, state universities to keep future leaders closer to home, small-town colleges to draw settlers, land-grant institutions to spur economies. Colleges helped even the smallest, most isolated communities cosplay classical city-states—thus all the college towns named Athens, Rome, and Oxford.

A common thread unites these residential colleges: Their campuses live in tension with their communities because American colleges and universities have always sought isolation rather than integration. College is a place like Las Vegas is a place: a host for the lifestyle it provides. Even schools in the middle of big cities, such as Rice University in Houston or the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, almost always offer deliberate separation from their urban environments. These places see and sell themselves as hamlets decoupled from the rest of the world. They need to maintain that myth in order to provide the college experience in undiluted form—even while they also host massive flows of people, ideas, and capital in and out of their gates.

Even for people who might never attend college, a proliferation of isolated American campuses helped make college an ambition. Relatively small populations went to college before the 1950s, but the popular fascination with collegiate life was widespread. “It was showcased, kind of like looking at an aquarium,” says John Thelin, a University of Kentucky historian who studies higher education. The college way became a lifestyle. “Every magazine would have a back-to-college issue” covering style, fashion, and slang. Joe College and Betty Co-ed became archetypes, young and carefree models of American spirit and potential. Going to college, Thelin writes in his book *A History of American Higher Education*, “was a rite of passage into the prestige of the American upper-middle class.”

Sports helped establish the traditions of that rite of passage, such as fight songs and homecoming. Adults can’t attend school forever, but they can root for their alma mater in perpetuity. Land-grant-college football teams, including the Texas A&M Aggies and the LSU Tigers, also helped fill a gap in pro sports; until 1960, there were no NFL teams south of St. Louis. For many, sports make college understandable and appealing in the first place.

As more people enrolled in college during the mid-20th century, becoming a student escalated from an upper-middle-class to a middle-class aspiration. State schools had made higher ed accessible. The G.I. Bill and Pell grants made it affordable. The college experience
became permanent through alumni, as children and grandchildren were encouraged to
dream of their parents’ alma mater, major, or Greek house. And schools encouraged this,
eager for the attention, the donations, and the built-in marketing of their legacy.

The entire structure of American family life became oriented toward college—school districts
drove home-buying decisions; teen schedules swelled with SAT prep and extracurriculars.
Adult life became anchored to college, too, by its tendency to matchmake marriages, through
jobs secured from one’s course of study, via local or regional settlement after graduation, by
the legacy of collegiate-sports fandom, and from the lifelong shadow of the alma mater as a
crucible of adulthood. Americans perceive college as a shared cultural experience because it
is one. You might graduate after four years, but in a way you never leave—even if you didn’t
attend in the first place.

But overnight, the pandemic threatened what it means to attend college. Colleges and
universities knew that bringing students across the country to campus during a deadly
pandemic was a terribly risky prospect. But most of them did it anyway, largely in the interest
of providing the cherished college experience, even if most or all classes took place online.
Schools tried to place restrictions on what students could do: spreading them out in dorms,
installing useless plexiglass barriers on lecterns, prohibiting parties, and canceling campus
events. (But not football. All ten Division 1 conferences are playing this fall.)

And so move-in day took place, the masks came off, the football games proceeded, and
college kids started partying right away. Some schools kept the virus in check, but at others, it
spread fast. Almost a third of COVID-19 tests at the University of North Carolina at Chapel
Hill came back positive soon after the semester began. An outbreak at Notre Dame, one of
the first campuses to commit to a return to campus, temporarily pushed instruction online
almost immediately after classes had started. The spread also justified an extreme
curtailment of campus life. Schools implicitly promised the college experience to get students
back, but when students arrived they ruined things by being there and partaking of it.
Students were confined to their dorms, save for eating and going to classes or work. Faced
with college as a prison, some students have rebelled, and some schools have retaliated. In
September, Northeastern University expelled 11 students for hosting a party in violation of
COVID-safety policies, because it put even a modified college experience at risk.

From off-campus, some outsiders objected on the grounds that not partying is also a threat to
that experience. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis threatened to introduce a college-student
bill of rights that would protect students against draconian responses like Northeastern’s.
“That’s what college kids do,” he said of partying students, casting the pandemic as a battle
for their fate. He wasn’t alone. The Trump administration leaned on state governments to
reopen colleges. Georgia Governor Brian Kemp dangled the University of Georgia’s football
season as a carrot for public-health compliance. Connecticut Governor Ned Lamont even
wanted Yale to reopen.
It might seem ludicrous to sacrifice public health to preserve indiscretion as an ideal of college life, but that life has never aspired toward well-being in the first place. It’s a deliberate feature of college, not a side effect. “Youthful indiscretions were tolerated and even encouraged as part of the process of upward social mobility that the college facilitated,” Thelin writes.

The pandemic made some parts of the traditional college experience, such as parties and close-quarters socialization, dangerous. But campus life thrives on dangerous behavior in the first place. College creates a bubble that upends responsibility to the outside world. Students acted recklessly toward the virus not because they are necessarily careless or juvenile, but because college promises them a place apart, where ordinary rules don’t apply. For example, after public-health officials in Boulder, Colorado banned gatherings of 18-to-22-year-olds in an effort to control the spread outside the college community, students only felt more entitled to gather in groups. The pandemic’s restrictions were almost guaranteed to inspire college kids to organize parties that reject the structures of adult authority.

As the leaves turn and fall arrives in earnest, colleges and universities are starting to understand what measures are needed to prevent outbreaks on their campuses and in their communities. The answer isn’t surprising: frequent, widespread testing for people with and without symptoms, backed by contact tracing of infected students. As of mid-October, the University of Georgia, for example, had reported more than 3,800 cases since March. But by comparison, at Georgia Tech, where I teach, researchers created a high-volume surveillance testing program, and the institute has reported about 65 percent fewer cases per capita. Other schools, such as Cornell, have also used surveillance testing to great effect. But there are over 5,000 colleges and universities in America, and not all of them can respond like an elite school can. The drive to open campuses at all costs during a pandemic shows how deeply higher education has sunk its claws into the American imagination. We’ve built a large part of our society around the experience of college, but precious little around the education it provides.

That’s why college won’t go the way of white-collar offices or gyms or grocery shopping, no matter what some prognosticators have predicted amid the catastrophe. The NYU business professor Scott Galloway has contended that most colleges will die out, and the survivors will partner with big tech companies such as Apple and Google to take over the sector. John Warner, a higher-ed critic, hopes for an opposite future of sustainable, state-funded education. In a new book, he argues that colleges are under threat because “they are not oriented around the mission of teaching and learning, but instead exist to recruit students, enroll students, collect tuition, and hold class.”

Both diagnoses mistake college’s secondary purpose, education, for its primary one, collegiate life. The internet’s overthrow of college has been foretold for more than a decade now, long before the pandemic moved classes to Zoom. But instead, online learning has mostly become a way to spare commuter students the travel or to attract mid-career students to professional programs—neither of which ever tried to deliver the college experience of
American myth. Appealing to educational renewal, meanwhile, overlooks the hard truth that the collegiate way never lost its way; teaching and learning’s central role was always somewhat mythical, no matter how much critics such as Warner might wish things used to be otherwise.

The pandemic has made college frail, but it has strengthened Americans’ awareness of their attachment to the college experience. It has shown the whole nation, all at once, how invested they are in going away to school or dreaming about doing so. Facing that revelation might be the most important outcome of the pandemic for higher ed: An education may take place at college, but that’s not what colleges principally provide. Higher education survived a civil war, two world wars, the Great Depression, and the 1918 Spanish flu, the worst pandemic the U.S. has ever faced. American colleges will outlast this crisis, too, whether or not they are safe, whether or not they are affordable, and whether or not you or your children actually attend them. The pandemic offered an invitation to construe college as an education alone, because it was too dangerous to embrace it as an experience. Nobody was interested. They probably never will be.

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Online Learning Student Experience is the New Climbing Wall

By Michael Feldstein

In my last post, I argued there are three factors that will permanently drive residential colleges toward more online and hybrid programs:

1. **Value questions:** COVID-19 may finally bring about the long-predicted “unbundling” and “rebundling” of the university. As many colleges and universities with annual price tags of $40K, $50K, or even $60K go online, students and parents alike are having their attention called to exactly what the residential experience adds and how much they are willing to pay for it. While I’m not predicting the death of the residential college, I do think we are entering a new era in terms of how students think about what they want from their college education and how much they are willing to pay for it.

2. **Missing the window for the traditional educational experience:** While we don’t have good data yet on deferral rates, the *Boston Globe* reported four weeks ago that Harvard University is reporting a 20% deferral rate this year, and other numbers I’ve heard anecdotally tend to range between 10% and 20% deferrals. Not all of those students will come back, either to the university they applied to or to full-time college in general. Some will need to get jobs. Some will start their own companies. Life will move on. Their ability to invest four full-time years of their lives and $100K or more on an undergraduate education will diminish. Some will miss their window. This change, in turn, will force many colleges and universities to make permanent changes that were inevitable—though they may have felt somewhat distant—due to demographic changes, changes in the economy, and other sustainability challenges.

3. **Deteriorating university finances and the drive for post-traditional students:** Even as fewer students may attend full-time college straight out of high school, more will need continuing education throughout their careers to stay employable or advance in their careers. This COVID-accelerated trend coincides with the COVID-accelerated trend of deteriorating university finances. Institutions will increasingly need to meet working students where they are.

These trends will likely hold true for most colleges and universities. But they will be particularly acute for many institutions that emphasize residential education. And it raises an existential question for them: Without their climbing walls and dining halls, without students being able to run into faculty on campus and have a cup of coffee with them, how will these institutions differentiate online? How can they justify their price tags?

Remember, when MIT first began giving away its course materials in its much publicized OpenCourseWare effort in 2002, the university’s primary argument for preserving the value of an MIT education was that the real value of an MIT education was being on campus with
MIT professors and students. While MOOCs have brought about some evolution of that view, MIT’s edX MOOCs are largely for people who are not MIT students.

So what will distinguish an online MIT education from OpenCourseWare or an MIT MOOC micro-master’s degree in a way that will justify a substantial price premium?

Not Zoom lectures and commodity textbooks

If we compare a well-designed MOOC to a thoughtful, if hastily executed direct-translation remote learning course today, the MOOC is the superior product. Is a live faculty lecture on Zoom better than a recorded lecture in the MOOC? Eh, maybe yes or maybe no, depending on how interactive the Zoom lecture is and how well produced the MOOC lecture is. What about the asynchronous portions? The readings, formative assessments, online discussions, and just plain course organization? A well-designed MOOC offers a more seamless experience where students are guided by the interface from one experience to the next, the materials are designed to work together, and they have the distinctive flavor of a unified class prepared by the professor who designed it. In contrast, a remote learning course that was cobbled together with the tools at-hand has students hopping between the online syllabus, their commodity courseware, their LMS discussion forum (where they will have to navigate to the appropriate discussion thread), and so on.

Another way of putting this is that, if instructors had the time to more carefully design their current remote learning strategies and wire together the navigation among the various technology platforms they use, the best they could aspire to achieve is something approximating a relatively generic MOOC.

Other popular models are also either inappropriate or incomplete. The access-oriented universities have gotten very good at teaching asynchronous classes. They’ve been refining their techniques for decades. But those approaches are optimized for access and affordability, where “affordability” means “much lower tuition.” I don’t see Swarthmore or Brandeis adopting this approach unchanged as part of their core undergraduate experience. Likewise, the high-end, all-synchronous methods employed by some of the MOOC providers won’t always fit either. Sure, they work for the kind of audience that might show up for executive education. But will they work for working 20-year-olds, particularly in survey-level undergraduate courses? Maybe not. And so far we’re only talking about the in-class experience, which is a small fraction of what “residential education” is supposed to be all about.

Increasingly, colleges and universities are going to have to develop their own, distinctive approaches to online and blended learning. They will have to differentiate in different ways. And without the same kinds of person-to-person serendipitous contact that happens when everybody is physically co-located full-time, they will have to create distinctive and valuable experiences that are just as meaningful and just as easy as bumping into your professor at the coffee shop or meeting your classmates for pizza at the dining hall.
This changes everything

Such a transformation won’t happen by accident, and it certainly won’t happen by cutting 30% of staff and hoping for the best. Colleges and universities will need to re-imagine themselves. What makes them distinctive once they remove the physical campus and everything that happens because of that campus? What is special that can translate to the virtual or the blended?

The implications for governance are deep and far-reaching. A lot of the magic of the residential campus arises out of creative chaos. It’s exactly the unplanned nature of residential college—the serendipity that results from taking a life-changing course you weren’t thinking about because your friend is in it or having a deeply meaningful and entirely unplanned conversation—where the magic arises. Translating some of that into online modalities while maintaining some sort of cohesive experience will not be accidental. It must be planned. The whole university community will have to be in on it.

Nor can that cohesive experience be outsourced piecemeal to a collection of disparate vendors without much thought about the learner journey. It will longer be adequate to have a generic LMS, generic courseware, and generic web conferencing linked in bespoke configurations by individual faculty, often leaving it to the students to navigate a disjointed set of experiences that in no way resembles the easy rhythm of going to class twice a week and meeting with a study group at the library in between.

This new vision and its implementation will need to be intentional, institution-wide, and enabled through active support from everyone involved. A vague sense of appreciation among faculty and staff for the character of the institution will no longer pass for a “shared vision.” The feeling at institutions that are successful in the cultural transformation will be more like an employee-owned company than “shared governance,” where latter of often means “mutual agreement to leave everyone alone and everything as it is.”

This work is going to require new levels of collegiality and shared imagination. It will also require enormous attention to detail. When serendipity works in residential education, one reason it does so is because the student is physically surrounded by people who can help. Students are less likely to fall through the cracks when their dorm mate or classmate or advisor or professor or random student on the quad can show them how to leap over a particular crack. Online, the opposite is often true. Randomness is an enemy more often than a friend because the cues for where to go and what to do have to be consciously created, as must be the environment that encourages the formation of social support networks. There will be no more closing the door to one’s office or classroom and ignoring the parts of the university that aren’t your direct responsibility. Everyone will be in the same boat, sink or float. At the moment, everybody is just bailing out the water. But pretty soon, they will need to start rowing in the same direction with a level of shared intention that they have never practiced before.
For academics, the future of work is here. Somebody needs to tell them that.