Opinion **Education**

# Universities must offer more than ‘Zoom from your room’

Otherwise the pandemic will be inconvenient for the privileged and a disaster for the rest

**ANDREW DELBANCO**

America’s prestigious colleges are unable to deliver on their promise to students, like personal contact with peers and professors © Reuters

**Andrew Delbanco** JULY 12, 2020

---

*The writer is a professor of American Studies at Columbia, president of the Teagle Foundation and author of ‘College: What it Was, Is, and Should Be’*

Four months ago, I thought “zoom” meant the sound of a motorcycle. Then coronavirus struck, students were sent home, and we faculty were given a few days to learn how to teach by Zoom for the rest of the semester.

Having scattered around the world, my students were grateful to reconnect, even if they felt that “virtual” classes were weak simulations of the real thing. The unscheduled features of college life — serendipitous hallway encounters, Frisbee on the lawn, parties, protests, love affairs — had vanished in a flash.

Those who return to our New York campus in the autumn (about 60 per cent are expected) will find it an eerie place. Last week, college authorities decreed that "physical distancing will be enforced" — so students will presumably stay chaste. They will space themselves in queues for the loo. Dining halls will accommodate sparse groups. Gyms, libraries and lounges will be strictly limited or closed.

At Harvard — where all courses will be online and mainly first years, as well as some in dire circumstances at home, will live on campus — one new student put it this way: "The only common space that they said will be open was the laundry room . . . The only place where we can talk to people is while doing laundry."

For the moment, America's prestigious colleges are unable to deliver on their promise to students: personal contact with peers and professors who will enlarge their minds and propel their careers. The most candid thing to say to prospective students would be: "Come to college and Zoom from your room!"

Of course, no college is saying that. Williams College (one of the richest) is offering a 15 per cent discount; Princeton University (yet richer) has taken 10 per cent off tuition. But most others have no plans to charge less for the depleted experience. Demand might drop off, but I doubt it. Given the market value of a top degree, families will pay full fare in order to avoid forfeiting their child's place. And whenever the virus abates, elite colleges will be more valued than ever because of the hiatus.

All this grabs attention. But the real calamity engulfing American higher education has little to do with the elite universities. The virus poses a serious problem for the Ivy League but not a mortal threat.

Where it has struck with deadly force is at residential colleges that cannot count on prestige to guarantee full enrolment. These schools — many of them fine institutions with small endowments — depend almost wholly on tuition to cover operating expenses. It is not clear that families will, or can, pay anything like full price as students are deflected into online learning. With millions of parents thrown out of work, demand is spiking for financial aid, and a George Washington University parent has already filed a lawsuit over the spring shift to online learning.

At public universities, attended by roughly three-quarters of America's nearly 20m undergraduates, things are arguably worse. Already in fragile financial condition, they are being hit by reduced government support as their home states struggle with plummeting tax revenue. Last week, the Trump administration also took aim at an important revenue source for US universities, saying that visas would be revoked for international students at any college that goes fully online. Higher education is in crisis.

It is often said that every crisis brings an opportunity. Richard Arum, dean of the School of Education at the University of California, Irvine, has suggested that elite institutions, forced to resort to online technologies, should now help develop "online learning options complementary in practice and commensurate in quality to face-to-face instruction". This would benefit their own students and those whose "life circumstances make them unable to leave their family homes and forgo paid work to attend college" on a residential campus.

What exactly this will mean no one can say. But, just as the virus has accelerated innovation in telemedicine and remote collaboration in business and the arts, every college is now scrambling to make students' online experience as personal as possible.

I resolutely believe in the residential college. It is an incomparable place for grasping the difference between opinion and argument, for questioning received beliefs, for practising how to speak with civility and listen with respect — in short, for learning to live responsibly in a democracy. But for most US students, such a college is out of reach. More than one-third of undergraduates commute to underfunded two-year community colleges. Until the vast disparities of wealth and status among educational institutions are addressed, we need better online learning for everyone.

The involuntary experiment at elite schools could help to achieve that. Harvard expects its innovations to have "cascading effects on higher education". If so, the disruption will have yielded some lasting benefit. Otherwise, the pandemic will have been an inconvenience for the privileged and a disaster for everyone else.