

## C. Essays

### **School's Out: How College Succumbed to COVID-19**

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While the full content of the postwar American notion of “college” is difficult to recapture, we can date the demise of the institution to the coronavirus pandemic of 2020. Originating in China, the disease, also called Covid-19, caused by the virus SARS CoV-2, had spread to the US shortly after the new year. There was no vaccine, and even reliable testing was in short supply. Moreover, the virus could be spread by contact, or by asymptomatic persons. Health officials, with increasing stridency, had nothing better to offer than physical separation from other persons who just might be carriers. “Six feet” (two meters) of separation was said to be sufficient. People were urged to practice “social distance” and “self-quarantine.”

The college experience – in classrooms, dormitories, eating halls, sports facilities and so forth – involved close proximity, and colleges were famous as “petri dishes” (a vessel used for the cultivation of microorganisms). By March of 2020, colleges and universities across the country closed their doors, and sent students home, or at least elsewhere.

Like educational institutions today, a key function of college was the accreditation of students, for the job market or further training. Students needed to finish their semesters. Conversely, few colleges were in a position, and none were inclined, to return tuition fees to students. It bears remembering that colleges, even second-rate institutions, were generally very expensive. An elaborate system of long-term

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debt financing meant that even Americans of modest means could borrow enormous sums to pay for the college years. So, colleges were forced to attempt to keep operating, even without students.

The obvious “solution,” of course, was to digitize education in general. As difficult as it is to believe today, the vast majority of professors had never taught digitally, at a distance, or asynchronously. The causes were institutional and ideological rather than technical: the personal computer was about two human generations old; mobile phones (which, despite the name, had substantial digital capacity) were almost a generation old. Digital instruction was not entirely new, but in colleges instruction was overwhelmingly delivered live, in person. By contemporary standards, the enterprise was shockingly labor intensive. The professoriate had never been so large, and of course has not since. Students were actually compelled to be physically on site at specified times. It was a very different world. Perhaps the closest analogue in current practice would be the tutorial instruction we and our peer institutions offer to members of privileged families and a smattering of prodigies.

In 2020, digital instruction was greeted by professors with enthusiasm that, in hindsight, seems remarkable. At least that spring, there was the incontrovertible fact of the pandemic. It would be stretching the point to recall the excitement that greeted the outbreak of the Civil War, but there was a somewhat similar and pervasive sense of crisis, and many people had an overwhelming desire to do something, perhaps in part due to the fact of being physically displaced from their places of work and in some cases residence. Be that as it may, the academic world, instructors and students, rather cheerfully converted teaching to digital formats in a matter of weeks.

As should have been obvious at the time, there was no going back. Too many forces were aligned, although the relations were complex. Many in the university were technology enthusiasts. The turn to technology offered the opportunity for sales, as always, and those who demurred could be mocked as Luddites. What were then called IT (information technology) professionals, for a brief while, gained long sought-after status. More deeply, administrators were happy to cut costs. (As amply recounted elsewhere, over the preceding generation, professional administrators had replaced teaching

faculty as the dominant figures in education.). Surely a professor did not need to offer the same course, for pay, over and over?

The institutional consequences of digitizing instruction were predictable enough. As in other digital industries, scalability, first mover advantages, network effects, and above all brand competition quickly led to the consolidation of what was then called, without irony, “higher” education. Thousands of educational institutions were closed outright. The surviving institutions may be grouped into several broad classes, comprising essentially the contemporary educational landscape.

Most importantly, with the founding of Assess/Success and its few competitors, “ordinary” education became digital and distanced. As you have no doubt read, the vast majority of American young people had, then as now, trivial means yet needed some form of “degree” to have any hope of getting a job. Such students no longer “went” to college; they logged on. Entertaining professors lectured; there were occasional teleconferences; quizzes were given and exercises done, until sufficient points were amassed to survive review by an HR department somewhere. This, at least, was the rather modest intention. Modest or not, however, the failure rate was and is appalling, as you may know.

Colleges survived as physical institutions, with buildings and students in them, in two basic ways, both quite limited and with which you are familiar. First, as already suggested, elite institutions quickly realized that they were about “selectivity,” i.e., exclusion, not scalability. The point, then, was to provide an “experience” as different from the digital as possible. The mode of instruction shifted from classroom teaching or seminar participation to a combination of tutorial cajoling and social suasion reminiscent of Oxbridge in the glory years. What had been privileged comfort became unabashed luxury as living quarters were upgraded, top flight chefs hired, dedicated transport and vacation properties were acquired, and the like.

Children of the dwindling upper middle class were often sent to the remaining universities, generally sponsored by state governments, with marquee sports programs. The point of being physically at such an institution was frankly social, to build networks useful later in life, and perhaps to find a mate. In a sense, all degrees became what was once derided, in sexist fashion, as MRS degrees. Instruction generally was outsourced

to commercial vendors. Some of the largest institutions retained in-house capacity to provide digital instruction, with a small stable of star professors backed by an army of contract employees, for student hand-holding and perhaps a little tutoring. And that is pretty much the situation today.

Almost immediately, critics noticed that student success at digital learning, whether on their own or under the aegis of Sports U., replicated the patterns of privilege and ethnicity familiar from standardized testing. Defenders of the new status quo were quick to urge the objectivity of the digital formats, and that, say what you will, the price of education had fallen drastically. There were mutterings and occasional litigation about racism and other forms of bias, as remains the case today. *Plus ça change . . .*

The institution of college liberal arts education would not have succumbed so quickly to coronavirus if it did not have a preexisting condition. As noted, the takeover of the institution by administrative professionals had been completed prior to the pandemic. In consequence, education was redefined as a process of transfer from the institution to its clientele, a transfer which had to be quantifiably accounted for, financially but also via “learning outcomes” and the like. Prior to that, education had been understood, somewhat romantically perhaps, as a process of emulation (*Bildung*) of the figure of the professor. (This may sound risible when stated baldly, but what, then, are you tutors?) In contrast to education as emulation, education as transfer is easily digitizable, and pretty much accounts for itself. Quantitative and absolutely “fair” assessment of explicit objectives can be functionally entailed rather than demanded of a recalcitrant and unskilled faculty.

For over a generation, administrators thought one way, essentially in terms of accounting, and faculty thought another way, at least the better ones did. For a long time, there was something of a stalemate. Administrators demanded accounting, and faculty complied, in fine Soviet fashion, superficially. Actual instruction in classes and seminars, however, remained much as it always had. COVID-19 broke the stalemate and gave the victory to the administrators. Faculty voluntarily digitized their courses, shaping content, projection, student participation, everything accordingly. Thus, the move to digitization for a short while – no more than ten years, in most cases far less – perfected the goals of university administrations.

The administration's victory, however, was pyrrhic. As already suggested, the problem was scalability. When colleges closed, administrators, too, were out of jobs.

A few brave souls maintained that something was lost, that digital education failed to do something important that college, at its best, had done. But it was hard to articulate what this important thing was, precisely, and somebody from industry, backed by administrators and technicians, was always around to explain how this or that product did, or would soon do, that important thing just fine, and at low cost. And besides, colleges had been places of privilege, and that was looked down upon at the time, again in ways that are hard to recapture. In short, the voices of dissent were shouted down as Luddites and immoral ones at that. All this, even though college at the turn of the 21st century might have been the closest to middle class democracy this country has ever seen, or, from this vantage, is likely to. So, just as the end of World War II and the GI Bill gave birth to the college era, the coronavirus pandemic can be said to be the founding moment for our own educational regime, such as it is. Enjoy your dessert, and your place in life, and thank you.

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