

To: Third Way
From: Global Strategy Group (GSG)
Re: Higher Education – Online Discussion Board
Date: May 20, 2020

As the coronavirus pandemic reshapes American society and our way of life, its impact on higher education remains unclear. College students who are accustomed to in-person instruction were abruptly moved to online learning, while others were seasoned veterans of digital education. GSG conducted a 4-day online discussion board among these two audiences, in order to understand how they are now thinking about what a degree is worth, and whether the federal government has a new role to play in this environment.

These college students suggest that the value proposition of college is under renewed threat. Higher education was expensive before coronavirus, and the pandemic is robbing in-person students of experiences they value – all for the same cost. **This shift online is also colored by the perception that online-only education is less rigorous or valuable than in-person instruction.** Current students appear unwilling to dramatically change their plans, but future students may think twice about enrolling in traditional institutions given the same cost combined with the perception of lower quality.

In response, **students want strings attached to the federal government's recent stimulus allocations to institutions.** Students are under financial pressure and pay high tuition, so they reason it is only fair to receive some relief as well. They also welcome greater privacy protections now that lessons are archived online, and they expect greater guardrails on online-only and for-profit programs.

EXPECTATIONS FOR QUALITY & VALUE

Before Coronavirus

- **Why college? Better life prospects.** While there are various motivations for attending college, the primary driver is that it is a path to a stable and well-paying career. Some have specific jobs in mind that require higher education (finance, healthcare, speech therapy). Others are attempting to “break the cycle” and “fulfill a promise” to non-college or immigrant parents who had fewer opportunities. Many college students decided to further their education while in high school; for others “it was never a choice,” “college was ingrained,” or they “always knew” they would attend college. A few never planned on more school but enrolled later in life to improve their family prospects, often after having children and working in different fields. One woman asserts, “I wanted to challenge myself and give my son a better shot at life.”
 - **Which college? Academics, location, cost.** Decisions about which school to attend hinge largely on academic offerings and sometimes program rankings, but also on location (especially proximity to home) and affordability. Campus environment, faculty reviews, small class sizes and campus resources are just as important as graduation rates. **Non-traditional students are most likely to look specifically at the availability of online classes.**
 - **The atmospherics of in-person education loom large in students' minds.** Prior to the coronavirus, the most valued elements of students' post-secondary education experience were “thought-provoking classes,” “interesting projects,” “high quality...passionate professors,” “supportive and easily accessible student services,” and a vibrant campus atmosphere with a “family of friends.” One student articulates, “I enjoy being on campus, I am a social person and like meeting new people. To be honest, I have always loved school and still love the smell of the school when classes started up in the fall. I get excited about returning to class every September and if I am not attending, I feel bereft.”

- **Support and student services play an outsized role in satisfaction.** Only a few students express negative feelings about their college experience. Various reasons are cited, but a clear theme is frustration about lack of support from faculty, administration, and/or student services. One remarks, “While I understand this is an associates-only school, I expect more from an accredited program. Everything seems slapped together...with cheap tape. (It's) affordable and I suppose you get what you pay for.” Another admits, “I feel bitter-sweet about my school...I feel security in attending a nationally ranked school...but oftentimes (feel) very stressed and anxious due to the high rigor of classes, competitive student body, poor campus services (food, dorms, buses), and little effort made toward improving mental health.” A third adds, “I feel my school doesn't really care about the students.”
 - **These resources were already under strain before the pandemic.** Prior to coronavirus, students worried most about their grades, juggling a heavy workload, and passing their classes. Older students with families and jobs were most concerned about finding time to study and get their assignments completed. Some students worried about access to core courses, financial pressures, and finding employment after graduation. To cope with their apprehensions, students emphasize organization tools and frequent interaction with faculty, staff, and tutoring resources. This suggests there is little leeway for institutions to deliver subpar service now that education is primarily online.

After Shift to Online Learning

- **Students who were on campus had their worlds upended with little notice.** While coronavirus did not significantly alter the educational experience for previously online college students, those who were on physical campuses were dramatically affected. Many describe their experience as “changed completely” and for the most part, it has been a difficult transition so far – though their reactions could apply generally to the pandemic. They describe “uncertainty,” “frustration,” “disconnection,” and a sensation of “days on repeat” with everything seeming “foreign and unfamiliar.”
 - **Students largely absolve their institutions for their current dissatisfaction.** Despite having to leave campus with little warning or being unable to return after spring break to collect their belongings, students seem aware coronavirus is a global problem – larger than their administration. As a result, most do not fault their institutions (“they did the best they could with unprecedented circumstances”) and describe feeling more “shocked” and “sad” than angry. Several wish they had had more time but are generally understanding.
 - **But they're still processing a tangible loss.** Students who had to leave their physical campus and in-person classes are essentially in mourning. The loss of social interaction, study groups, sports, clubs, student government, parties, events, labs, community service and study abroad travel has left many college students feeling “cheated,” “paralyzed,” “anxious,” “isolated,” “lonely,” and “disconnected.”
 - **This may be compounded by loss of student services.** As noted above, these resources were already under pressure before coronavirus. And while most students are still able to access student services since campuses and offices have closed, their capacity has declined. Academic advising, and especially tutoring services, have been most compromised in the digital-only environment; students feel they benefit most from in-person one-on-one sessions with advisors and tutors. A few students complain of losing access to health services when they were required to leave campus; one was unable to use telemedicine to access her psychiatrist and her prescription meds were disrupted.

- **Students may have a renewed or heightened appreciation for in-person education.** As is frequently the case, it is harder to endure the loss of something than it is to revel in its presence. The shift to online learning has suddenly ended many of the benefits colleges sold to students, like in-person interactions, tailored student services, and the campus experience. Over the past few decades, these became standard benefits to students who chose in-person education. Removing them, while asking for full tuition, is disorienting for students accustomed to the original value equation.
- **Conversely, life goes on for experienced online learners.** Students who were already learning online are generally pleased with their “pandemic proof” schools. Their struggles with the transition were minor or non-existent, their classes happened on schedule and their access to student services and school resources were largely unaffected. One remarked, “my education hasn’t changed … only the world has.” Several express appreciation for “more family time” and “more time for studies” now that they are staying at home, but others are facing added burdens like childcare, homeschooling, additional grocery shopping, and caregiving duties.

ATTITUDES TOWARD ONLINE LEARNING

- **Inexperienced online learners eye the format warily.** Those with limited online experience prior to coronavirus acknowledge online learning has many of the same benefits as in-person but express a vague sense of unease about it. One student explains, “I feel like an online only degree is worth less. I feel like people see them as less legitimate. I also think they cost too much.” Another muses, “I wonder about the quality of work from online-only institutions, such as receiving the same quality of work as students that attend on campus.” They also note the loss of intangible attributes of education, believe there is “less connection with peers and professors” or “melding of minds,” is detrimental to learning and bemoan the “lack of community” without social opportunities, study groups and peer support.
- **Experienced online learners feel the format has drawbacks but is not lower value.** Some students with significant online education experience also attended college in-person previously, and miss a having a high level of personal interaction with peers and professors, dislike waiting for responses to questions, must navigate technical issues, and feel less community support. But they also point to many advantages of this format, including convenience, lack of commute, and especially flexibility of time and scheduling that allows for better work-school-life balance and attention to family considerations. Many purposely chose online courses and programs for these benefits. Others found certain classes they needed were only available online or were more cost-effective.
- **A bad economy is compounding concerns about the value of online learning.** Adding fuel to the fire, students must also worry about a bad economy and their job prospects once they graduate. One remarks, “I feel like job prospects are way down, that makes school scarier and less fun…the fact that I can’t see any of my friends makes it even harder.” Another agrees, “(I have) anxiety over the future job market. All these people who are more qualified than me losing their jobs and may not get them back. Who wants to hire a newbie straight out of college with no experience? Really sad.” A third adds, “…jobs will be harder to find and get because of the virus. That is on my mind and I have had conversations where finding a job now might possibly be better…(maybe) just work(ing) my way up is a better solution than (to) finish schooling…not have a job that fits my degree.” Many are worried about finances generally, job security (for themselves and/or their parents), student loans, and upcoming tuition payments.

- **Teachers are struggling too – which raises questions for students.** Teachers are navigating the shift to online learning alongside their students, and with mixed results. Several remark, “I am teaching myself.” Success of classes early on was highly dependent on the online experience level of each professor. One remarks, “I’ve taken online classes for years, so it was not a new experience for me. I love the convenience of online coursework, but it really depends on the teacher. One of my teachers would not post the materials until last minute and kept removing random items we needed for study. It was frustrating and unnecessary.”
 - **Logistics are another pain point.** Another adds, “For teachers that are new to the online teaching they are more apprehensive about trying new things. They are not comfortable with the technology so education and learning take a back seat while they try to figure out everything. I think this makes me feel like I’m wasting my money on tuition.” Among other challenges, students have overcome tech issues (platform unfamiliarity, connectivity issues, audio cutting out, video freezing up), time zone differences for synchronous classes, and little accountability for asynchronous lectures and assignments. Some class lessons were lost to technology glitches, and some students even experienced cancellation of entire courses.
 - **As a result, education is becoming less standard and more uneven.** Many students felt their professors became more flexible and understanding, graded more leniently, gave “extra credit like candy,” cancelled assignments and “deadlines became suggestions” which made classes “easier” “less stressful” and “not as challenging.” However, some found their professors assigned more work, gave harder tests or expected more of students taking online “open book” or “open note” exams. This suggests that standards are becoming more uneven, which could cause employers to question the value of their degrees.
- **Some classes are suited for online, but intensive courses are less translatable.** English, computer science, and those classes mainly structured around reading, note taking, and individual study are considered most conducive to success in an online format. In contrast, classes that require “hands-on” learning, practical skills, labs, extensive discussions, group work or those in the creative arts are deemed least applicable to online learning. Some remain opposed to the format. One cautions, “...anything requiring hands-on instruction will suffer if they must continue to be online only.”
 - **One stop on the way to reopening: hybrid classes?** Students expect that the road back to normalcy will be a long one. Some suggest that “hybrid” classes (part online/part in-person, or certain courses could be online while others are in-person) could ease this transition. A student explains, “I think my fall semester will be a hybrid of in-person and remote classes or fully remote. I feel both stressed and relieved at this possibility. I would like my semester to be in-person but I don’t think it would be safe yet.”
 - **Will coronavirus create “pandemic degrees”?** There was some sense that traditional, in-person higher education will be viewed more closely to online-only courses as a result of the pandemic. Because certain subjects are less transferable, students feel they are working towards a “pandemic degree” which will be viewed skeptically. One explains, “I’m most worried about how my degree will be considered among other applicants that completed degrees before this time, without this corona disruption. Will it be viewed as lesser because I didn’t complete my courses in-class?”

- **A college degree is still valuable – for now.** College students wholeheartedly agree that the cost of post-secondary education is problematic. They believe the expense is a significant barrier for many students and describe it as “ridiculous,” “crazy,” “unbelievable,” “frustrating,” and “a scandal.” At the same time, most insist the degree is worth the investment. One remarks, “I do personally feel that a college degree is extremely valuable. I feel like a degree gives you a bit of a “head start” in life and opens up so many more doors for the future.” However, some feel the value has declined, or “depends on the degree.”
 - **But students “didn’t sign up for this,” putting pressure on institutions.** Refunds or tuition abatements/deferrals are expected by most students who have shifted online this semester. They complain they “didn’t sign up for this,” and do not believe they are receiving “full value” for what they paid. One remarks, “it’s like learning from YouTube ... you feel ripped off.” Personal interaction with both professors and peers, as well as campus benefits and resources like the library and rec center are extremely important to many students. Many students believe that “it costs less to run the university now,” so students should get money back, especially during such a difficult and stressful economic climate.
- **Sunk costs may discourage current students from changing their plans.** If distance learning continues into the fall or beyond, most students will be disappointed but will “deal with it” and “try to make the most of it.” Few believe it will affect their plans to earn a degree. Some will consider taking a gap semester/year. At least one has already started investigating cheaper online options to avoid paying out-of-state tuition for remote learning. Many resolve to do a better job with organization, time management, and deadlines while others plan to create a “designated workspace” to avoid distraction and “ask for help if needed” to improve their online experience. At this point, most students are still committed to their schools and majors because they have “already invested so much,” “are close to finishing,” and feel their degrees will be relevant in a post-coronavirus world.
 - **...But it could change behavior for incoming students.** One blind spot of this research is that it is focused solely on current college students. As mentioned above, these students feel as though they have already chosen a course of action and do not want to change it – aside from adopting coping strategies like better time management. But depending on how long the pandemic goes on, it could lead to lasting changes in the way prospective college students think about its value.

REGULATION AWARENESS

- **Low overall awareness of federal regulations.** Most students pay little attention to the role of the federal government in higher education, or federal oversight and regulation of colleges and universities. One admits, “I really don’t know anything about it, and I don’t think there’s anything wrong with what they’re doing if I haven’t heard anything about it.” Some believe the federal government directed campuses to shut down in the wake of coronavirus or that institutions are receiving federal funds from the CARES Act. A few mention Title IX.
- **Conflicting views on online-only institutions – many see them as fly-by-night schools.** Many think online-only programs should be more heavily regulated because they offer a “lower-quality product,” questionable standards and have greater potential to prey on vulnerable students. One explains, “I think online schools are regulated worse than in-person schools. Schools like University of Phoenix, Trump University, and Grand Canyon University are known for scamming their students out of money...”

- **Others believe they are better regulated.** Despite a general sense of unease about online-only institutions, some think they receive more oversight than in-person schools, perhaps conflating “regulation” and codes of conduct that do not have legal force. One claims, “they are more strictly regulated than other institutions and have better online security measures in place than a traditional university would have.” A second adds, “I would assume institutions that are normally online-only are regulated better than schools who were forced to transition to online-only. Schools that already do online-only already know all the ways people can cheat the system and already had things in place to stop it.”
- **General sense that federal regulation should be strengthened.** Despite not fully understanding what federal protections exist for students, the consensus is that higher education is subject to relatively little federal oversight and probably should get more attention to ensure students are receiving a consistent, quality education. One contends, “I believe federal oversight regarding accreditation is lax and while there are core guidelines an agency must follow, I don’t feel that they are doing a great job of it. My program is a prime example of the bare minimum being taught as accredited.” Another asserts, “I think federal oversight needs to be improved to support students and hold schools accountable. They play a part in their graduate rates and I think with more oversight there would be more people starting school and actually finishing it.”
- **Lack of pandemic coordination reinforces the sense that online is unregulated.** One student remarked, “I think education is a lot less regulated than we thought initially. That is evident by the way things have been done so piecemeal and non-uniform as far as closings and plans for the immediate future.” Another agrees, “I’m not sure my University has received any (federal) oversight about moving online. I haven’t heard about it at all (but) I’m not sure how more Federal oversight could help. It seems to me my University of doing the best they can. In general, I feel like the University does not receive much government oversight because it is a private University.”

REGULATION EXPECTATIONS

- **Growing appetite for strings attached to federal funds.** Many students are concerned about higher education institutions receiving billions of dollars from the federal government. Some view this as “unfair,” or “schools capitalizing on the epidemic.” Students believe that schools should have conditions imposed to qualify for federal funds. One writes, “schools should have to maintain admission rates, graduation rates, and retention rates. They also should have to have a good financial plan for the coming years, otherwise the money could be wasted.” Many contend that students should receive some – or even most – of that money as tuition refunds or future abatements. A student explains, “I feel frustrated that that money will not trickle down to the students. Especially if students aren’t given a refund on tuition, it feels like cheating the students. **Like the college gets paid twice.**”
- **A “right to refund”?** Based on these sentiments, it is possible student advocates will push for a so-called right to refund their tuition when unforeseen and unusual circumstances prevent students from receiving the education experience they paid for.

- **Institutions who provide online classes need guardrails.** Those who felt online-only institutions were unregulated generally want them to have more oversight. They feel online-only students should have the same amount or more legal protections as students overall, and those protections should include a guarantee of educational quality and legitimacy. This also applies to traditionally in-person programs who are now providing online education – guardrails to ensure a quality learning experience are called upon by students. Compared to traditional higher education institutions, they envision an expanded role for the federal government, focused on standards and accreditation and quality audits, in addition to funding, financial aid, and cost control. For instance, one student believes, “higher education institutions should be heavily regulated ... governments should be ensuring that students are still learning the same amount of material with everything being online.”
- **More important than ever to regulate for-profits.** After reading the Hechinger Report article, students worry that in the aftermath of coronavirus, for-profit enrollment will increase and without increased oversight, more vulnerable students will be swindled. One explains, “For profit schools should not receive the level of federal funding as a non-profit. If they fall under the business umbrella and apply for that type of aid if needed. Although, private/profit schools should adhere to standards of proper education and it should be ensured that they are not a scam and offer accredited courses.” Another adds, “For-profit schools should be scrutinized much more heavily...It should be extremely clear what schools are making money off the backs of hopeful students.” As we have seen previously, despite our desire to push for accountability across all higher education institutions, for-profits *may* continue to be a compelling proof point for why voters should support broader accountability amidst coronavirus bailouts. Certainly, the idea of institutions benefiting monetarily from taxpayer dollars can be applied to schools other than for profits.
- **Clearer privacy protections on digital content.** Data privacy has been a major consumer concern, and online education runs into similar expectations. According to one student, “the most important legal protections that should be in place include privacy protections in the online environment (for example, not sharing any excerpts, recordings, or grade-related information with other students online).”

METHODOLOGICAL STATEMENT

Global Strategy Group conducted an online discussion board among 30 current college students, from May 12th to 15th, 2020. Within this group, 9 had extensive online learning experience pre-coronavirus, while 21 had only limited online learning experience pre-coronavirus. Care was taken to make the groups as representative as possible of the US college population, with respect to age, gender, and race.