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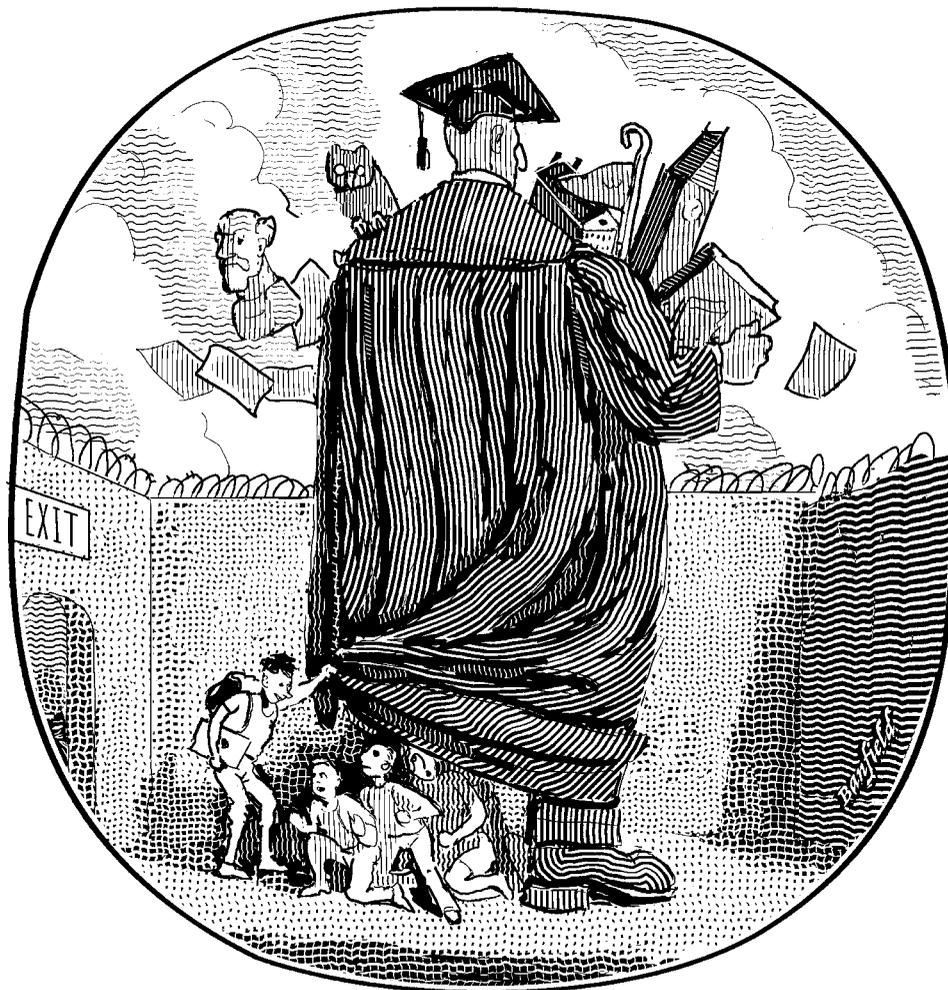
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Essay by John M. Ellis

# COLLEGE AFTER COVID

*Higher education's online future.*



IT'S NOW SOMETHING OF A CLICHÉ THAT the novel coronavirus has shaken up our normal patterns of behavior, and that we'll not return to them unchanged. Given widespread unhappiness with the state of higher education, could some change for the better result?

What most needs to change won't: the one-party politicized professoriate will still be there, egged on instead of restrained by diversity-obsessed administrative bureaucracies. But useful change may still come if students and parents begin to see higher education in a different way. How will the disruption affect them? To answer that, we need first to understand how uncertain public attitudes already were before the virus arrived. Pulling in one direction are the famous names of academia's

great institutions, its impressive buildings and diplomas, and a long-standing habit of seeing college as the pathway to a better life for one's children. Pulling in the other direction are persistent stories of higher education heavily corrupted by radical indoctrination, together with sharply increased costs and crippling student indebtedness.

## Dropping Enrollment

THIS IS AN UNSTABLE SITUATION. DISTINCT movement in one direction was already visible. In 2018, Gallup found that "no other institution has shown a larger drop in confidence over the past three years than higher education." But even more important than the drop in public confidence is

a sharp decline in enrollments during the last decade.

In 2011, the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center recorded a total enrollment in all sectors of higher education of slightly over 20.5 million students. Eight years later, in 2019, total enrollment was slightly over 17.5 million students. But in those eight years the U.S. population had grown from 311.6 million to 328.2 million. Had the percentage of total population in higher education remained constant, that 5.3% population increase would have grown the 2011 figure to 21.65 million students by 2019. Which means that there are roughly four million students missing in the 2019 figures, a decline of about 19%. The decline has been steady over those eight years but



the 2019 shortfall is on the high end of the annual declines.

This serious decline has attracted remarkably little commentary in the national press, and what little there has been avoids the issue of public reaction against politicized classrooms. The explanation of choice is demographic change, particularly an aging population, though we are not aging nearly fast enough to drop the college-age population by a fifth in eight years. And other demographic factors mitigate that one: some ethnic groups are attending college in greater numbers than before.

The general picture that emerges from the overall enrollment numbers is that public opinion is uncertain, with most families continuing to come down on the side of their old habit of sending their children to college, but with a sizable minority refusing to continue to pay up and hope for the best. If we look at the two major factors that are pulling the public in opposite directions, however, it's clear that one is older and steadily weakening, while the other is newer and strengthening. With the great days of elite institutions receding into the past, radical left-wing ranting is becoming more visible as older professors retire and are replaced by younger, more politicized ones.

How then could the coronavirus affect this precarious balance of opposing forces? There are two ways in which parents' attitudes might well change. First, online learning at home means that parents will be much closer to what is happening in their children's education. Up to now, they've had only second-hand accounts. Many have probably thought that what they've heard must be exaggerated or atypical. After all, even well-documented accounts of what happens now in college classrooms can be hard to believe. But now parents will be able to look over their children's shoulders and see for themselves. They won't respond at all well to American history lectures based on Howard Zinn or the 1619 Project. The second factor is money: like anything else in short supply, its uses will be given greater scrutiny. Higher education is not well-placed currently to withstand that kind of scrutiny.

Who knows what a nudge from these two factors will do to an unstable situation? A 19% higher education total enrollment drop hasn't caused panic yet because it hasn't been widely reported. That's partly because the drop is less visible in the most well-known institutions, which simply dig deeper into their applicant pool. Freshman applications to the University of California declined by 5.4% from 2018 to 2020, but undergraduate enrollment grew

anyway. But what will happen if the decline reaches 25% or 30%?

### Online Advantages

**S**TUDENTS' ATTITUDES HAVE AN EVEN greater potential for eventual change, if a significant number of those students begin to grasp the new opportunities online learning makes available to them. It now appears likely that for many students online learning will continue for some time. The California State University system (23 campuses with about half a million students) has decided to continue online learning for the entire 2020-21 academic year. With so many learning this way for so long, at least some of them are going to look at how the courses fed to them by their campuses compare to related courses that are at their fingertips—that is, easily available online. (For the sake of convenience, I'll use "online" as a shorthand both for streamed lectures and for courses found online, though possibly delivered on discs.)

### Parents won't respond at all well to American history lectures based on Howard Zinn or the 1619 Project.

Academia is astonishingly uniform because academics are so prone to intellectual fads and fashions: whatever the latest politically correct folly, we can expect it to spread quickly from one campus to another. That is part of how radical activism achieved control on almost every campus. What we need is competition between campuses dominated by political activism and others devoted to free inquiry, but we don't have that to any meaningful extent. Campus radicals have created the one-party campus for a reason: they know that their ideas don't do well in open debate. Online learning could recreate the missing competition. Zinn-inspired American history can win by default on a campus, but when juxtaposed to U.S. history by a genuine historian of great distinction it will lose, at the very least some of the time and probably most of the time. The same would be true of most courses in the humanities and social sciences.

If students do indeed start to notice the breadth and quality of what is available online, they will discover other huge advantages

of online learning. For example, in the world of college campus learning, students must compete to get into high-prestige institutions. Very few will get into Harvard, Yale, or Princeton. Most will have to settle for less. But in the world of online courses, it's as if everyone can get to a distinguished campus (and as they used to be, not as they now are!), and nobody has to settle for Podunk U. Everyone can get access to the very best professors in the country. Online course companies diligently scout for the very best academic teachers. The firm that recruits the most outstanding professors will prosper.

This would mean that a smaller number of outstanding professors will teach many more students. But that will solve another problem: the proportion of the population that wants a college education has grown since World War II, but college teaching is intellectually highly demanding. It's not clear that there ever were enough people of the right caliber to fill all those additional classrooms. Online learning will direct students away from sub-standard teachers and toward first-rate ones.

Yet another problem of the one-party campus is remedied by online learning: a return to core courses offering what every well-educated American ought to know. Online you can easily find Hillsdale College's excellent course on the U.S. Constitution, and you can choose from a number of good Western Civilization courses. Those courses have largely disappeared on most campuses because they interfere with the politicized professoriate's agenda.

In the traditional classroom, an academic teacher faces a problem to which there is no real answer: does he teach at the pace of the better students, or the weaker ones, or the average student? The first brings out the best in the brightest students but loses the rest, the second has the brightest bored stiff, the third has a bit of both. There's no solution to this in the traditional classroom, but online learning solves it completely: every student sets the pace for himself.

Then there is the more general problem of the inefficiency of the traditional classroom: sickness means missing classes, but that's not a problem with online learning. Wandering attention happens to everyone: who can concentrate for a whole hour without his mind straying to extraneous matters and shutting the lecture out for ten minutes—perhaps a crucial ten minutes on which the whole class builds? Even if his attention hasn't wandered, a student might not have completely understood an early discussion that is basic to the



entire lecture and so badly needs to go over those crucial minutes again. A serious problem for the lecture hall, but no problem at all for online learning: just rewind. Reviewing material for end of class exams? Easy with online learning but not with the traditional classroom.

Students left too long with online learning might discover all of these extraordinary advantages: a complete solution to the tedium and foolishness of heavily politicized teachers, access to the most brilliant instructors regardless of whether you can gain entry to the institutions where they teach, instruction at the pace set by the student himself, and an easy way to deal with the inefficiencies of the traditional classroom. But added to all of this is another huge advantage: cost. A student can get a better learning experience and yet pay a tiny fraction of what he'd pay on campus—and without the added costs of a dorm room and meal plan. Massive student debts would be a thing of the past.

#### Making Some Adjustments

**T**HERE ARE TWO IMPORTANT FACTORS that for the moment will stand in the way of any substantial movement in this direction. First, though the student gets a much better education he doesn't get a credential. College attendance provides employers with proof that work has been completed, and that a certain overall educational level has been achieved. At present, online learning doesn't. It's very much in our interest to make sure that this problem is taken care of, and it can be. Creating proof of work done online course by course could be simple enough: regional centers could provide written examinations. Online learning companies would find it in their interest to collaborate with each other to make available written tests of mastery of basic subject areas. The greater the number of students doing online learning, the easier this will be to implement.

With proof of coursework established, a form of credentialing based on accumulated coursework could follow, perhaps one based on the extent of coursework typically required for a traditional bachelor's degree. On the other hand, freedom from campus-based learning might also mean freedom from its arbitrary measures of accomplishment. In that case employers could simply read a record of completed courses and make their own judgment as to what it implies.

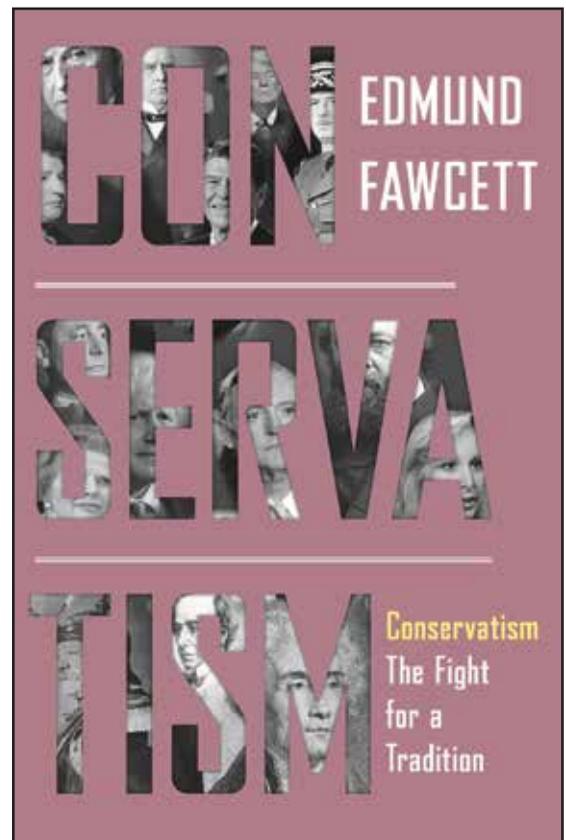
The second serious obstacle to students adapting to the benefits of online learning is isolation from their fellow students.

The social dimension of attending college is a powerful attraction for young adults: there they find romantic partners, eventual spouses, and important life-long friendships. Even on purely educational grounds, discussion groups are necessary. Sociologist Frank Furedi puts the point well: "[i]t is through articulating an opinion and being prepared to engage in a discussion around it that students develop their ideas and acquire a measure of intellectual independence." Once more, it would be much in the interest of online learning companies to organize discussion groups at regional centers. Those centers would surely be equipped with coffee shops and lounges where students can meet and socialize. Discussion groups in these conditions would be far more lively than they are on the one-party campus, where students are often afraid to say something that might be politically incorrect.

All of this could happen if any appreciable number of students were to notice the enormous advantages that online learning offers them. They'll see that they can escape both from political zealots and from crushing debt, though perhaps at this stage most of them won't understand that a superior education is more important for their careers than a diploma. Some shrewd thinking by online learning companies will be needed to fix both the problem of credentialing and of the social dimension of campus learning.

The wider world should have been thinking along these lines years ago, but entrenched habits and the magic of prestigious names and magnificent old buildings stood in the way. The foolishness and political malevolence of the one-party campus now compels us to do some fresh thinking. The stranglehold that radical activists now have on higher education is a cancer at the nation's heart, one that is corrupting all of its professions and souring its political life. Although online learning can't be anything like the whole solution (state legislatures still need to withdraw funding appropriated for higher education but diverted to political activism), it can certainly begin the process of rooting out the cancer and building a permanent bulwark against future attempts to regain that stranglehold.

*John M. Ellis is professor emeritus of German literature at the University of California, Santa Cruz, chairman of the California Association of Scholars, and the author of The Breakdown of Higher Education: How It Happened, the Damage It Does, and What Can Be Done (Encounter Books).*



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