



Rodney's Take

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Fewer Freshman Going to College... Then What?

Count me among the angry/frustrated parents. My youngest is a rising senior in college. She attends a state school in another state, so we're paying a premium. I'm alright with that, because the university has a great program for her chosen field.

But now all the classes and labs are online. The professors are emailing students telling them how great it's going to be and saying that there won't be any reduction in the quality of the classes. Right. If online learning was so great, why did universities spend the last 20 years talking smack about the University of Phoenix and other institutions that featured online courses? Why did their marketing materials stress the importance of life on campus, with clubs, interactions with peers in class and in study groups, and the general notion that you had to "be there" to get the full benefit? No one believes that online is just as good, especially the students, professors, and parents. But administrators and professors must toe this party line, because they can't risk a mass exodus of students or a general revolt against pricing.

Here's a post... It's already happening.

Harvard reported that 340 of its 1,650 incoming freshmen have deferred their own admissions, and 40% of the students expected to live on campus have chosen not to. This will reduce tuition, fee, and services revenue. Few people will shed a tear for Harvard, which has a \$40 billion endowment, but the same can't be said of the other universities facing the same rate of student attrition.

While the incoming freshman are looking for something more interesting to do than sit on glorified Zoom calls with professors, the schools are holding their present students captive. Students like my daughter, in the middle of pursuing their degrees, could take a year off, but that would interrupt the flow of classes; also, things for the school year like apartment leases, etc., have already been set. The universities know this, and most aren't offering any breaks on tuition and fees.

This is pretty rich coming from institutions that offer online degree programs at substantial discounts to their regular tuition. My daughter's university offers such a program at more than 30% off the cost of being on campus.

I recognize that schools are having to develop new offerings almost overnight, and the efforts are expensive. But that doesn't change the fact that the product being offered doesn't match the descriptions the schools provided or the expectations of the customers, the students and parents.

I reached out to the registrar to ask (1) if tuition would be set to match the online offerings, and/or (2) would out-of-state students be charged the same as in-state students, since going online erases geographical boundaries.

I received the response you would imagine, a politely-worded, unsigned "go away" letter from "The Office of Financial Aid," which I guess is where someone routed my inquiry.

That's fine; I didn't expect much. But I do wonder what will come next.

When students take a gap year, not all return to pursue education. This could leave the high school class of 2020 short when they become the college class of 2024 (or 2025, or... well, you get the idea). And how would they rejoin, anyway? If the 20% drop experienced by Harvard is the norm, how will the education system handle it if that big bump in freshmen enters next year, presumably when the pandemic is over and the high school class of 2021 matriculates as expected?

And what happens if this year is the final straw for a number of struggling institutions that were already at their financial breaking point?

I think the answer lies in this year's fix... online learning.

We're being forced into the system this year, at a cost that is not in line with the move to virtual. Eventually, this will morph into a normalized offering at a greatly reduced cost that is scalable. In effect, the pandemic is proving what the University of Phoenix was claiming all along.

It's possible we'll end up with a hybrid system, where students "attend" a university online for their freshman year or even their first two years at a lower price point, and then move onto campus for their upper classman years. In this scenario, college actually could become more affordable, a word that hasn't been used in higher education for many years.

This would be more efficient, but it also would allow the strongest schools to accept more students. They effectively would be able to admit another full class without changing their physical footprint. This doesn't bode well for small universities that were already struggling.

As for us, we'll pay the price, but we'll remember it when we get those lovely letters that welcome us to the ranks of "parents of graduates" and ask us to contribute to the cause. I think we've done our bit, and then some.

College has been ripe for change for two decades. Parents couldn't do it, students couldn't do it, but perhaps COVID-19 can.

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Got a question or comment? You can reach us at info@hsdent.com.