

Beyond the Degree: The Future of the Undergraduate Experience



Even before the pandemic, the last few years have been challenging for higher education administrators.

Tuition has increased at double the rate of inflation. Last year, the average cost of attending a four-year private college was over \$200,000 (public institutions came in at over \$100,000), and student debt is now considered a national crisis. To offset tuition increases, universities have increasingly relied on a large influx of international students who often support schools by paying full tuition. As shifting immigration policy pulls job prospects and visas into uncertainty, many students are beginning to question the value of a university degree. To make the situation even more complex, there has been a steadily decreasing number of college-aged students. Despite all these compounding challenges, colleges and universities have remain relatively resilient.

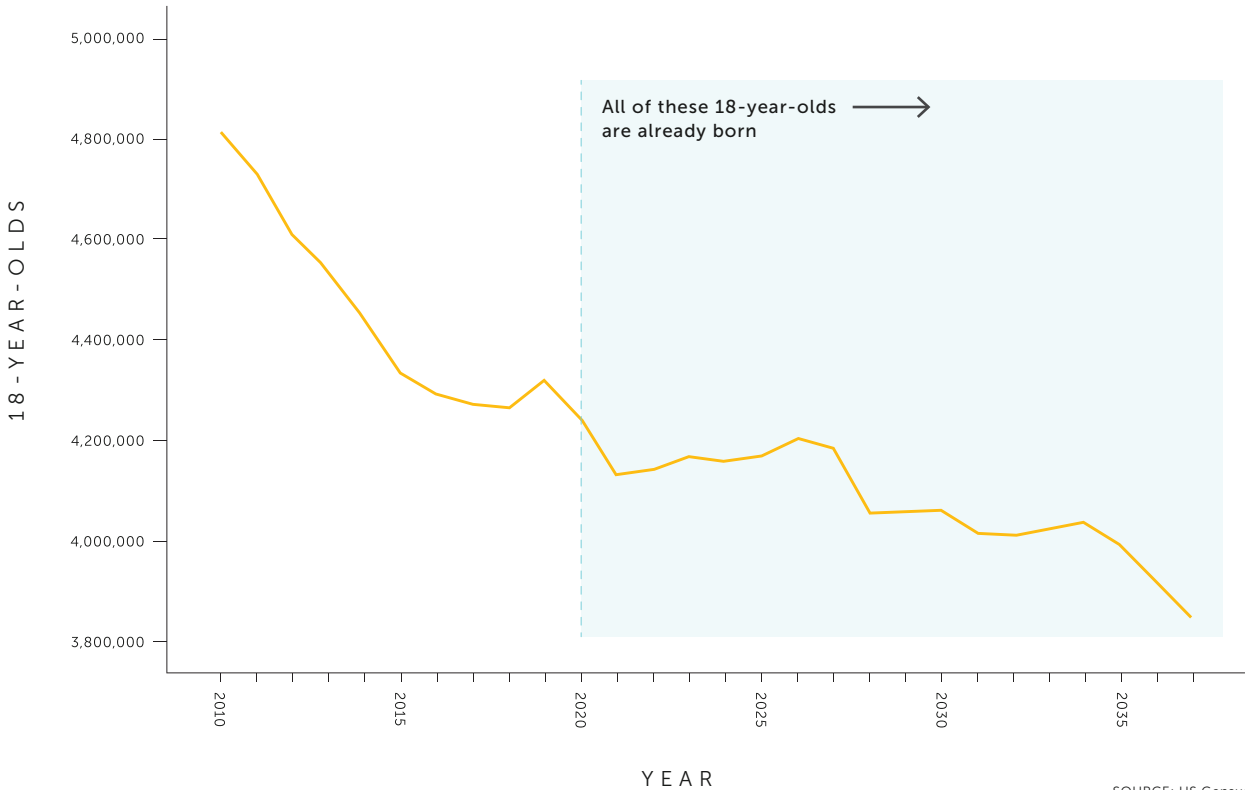
INCREASING TUITION COSTS

INCREASING STUDENT DEBT

DECREASING # OF 18-YEAR-OLDS

SHIFTING IMMIGRATION POLICY

COLLEGE AGE STUDENTS BY YEAR



SOURCE: US Census Bureau

ENTER COVID-19

The coronavirus pandemic compounded even more challenges

As the coronavirus descended on the United States this spring, colleges scrambled. Initially hoping students could return after spring break, they quickly saw that they had to shut down their campuses and move their classes online. Students struggled to stay focused and retain information while spending hours a day on Zoom. The workload for professors doubled overnight as they frantically learned to manage student interaction and transitioned their lessons completely online. Parents, questioning the value of this remote learning, complained, and some even moved to sue.

The spring also exposed the socio-economic inequalities between students that campuses can often obscure. As unemployment continues to climb week-over-week, college is becoming even further out of reach for some. Many who are already in school have started to question the ROI of higher ed. With the fall semester weeks away, time is short for school leaders to rethink their overall experience and offerings in the short-term—let alone for what comes after—but the urgent necessity to do so is there.



WHAT'S NEXT FOR UNDERGRADUATE COLLEGES?

The need to socially distance during the pandemic has amplified a growing call to move parts or all of education online. Many advocates of online education have taken this moment to sing its praises, and online education does have its merits. Online education excels at delivering degrees in a way that is often much more affordable, accessible, flexible, and for some, even more efficient. If these factors were all there was to college, the future would be online. But online advocates are missing the reason students are eager to go to college and parents are willing to pay the hefty price: The college experience. There is a profound difference between

the value of the college degree and the value of the college experience. The schools that understand this in a nuanced way, and design for it are those that will prosper.

College is expensive, but valuable. Whether the educational outcome is a good starting salary, a solid career path, or a more meaningful life, the degree students get from attending college is really the bottom line. College is ultimately worth it as an upfront investment that pays dividends for the rest of a student's life. However, the college degree is only one layer of the pyramid.

DEGREE VS. EXPERIENCE

The Value of the “College Experience”

College is special because it provides the protected space and time for the developmental activities that are necessary to create productive, thoughtful, engaged citizens—essentially taking teens and turning them into adults. The college experience can be broken down into the following areas:

LEARNING INDEPENDENCE

College is about growth through independent experiences—trying new things, succeeding, and failing—all within the protective guardrails of the campus environment.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

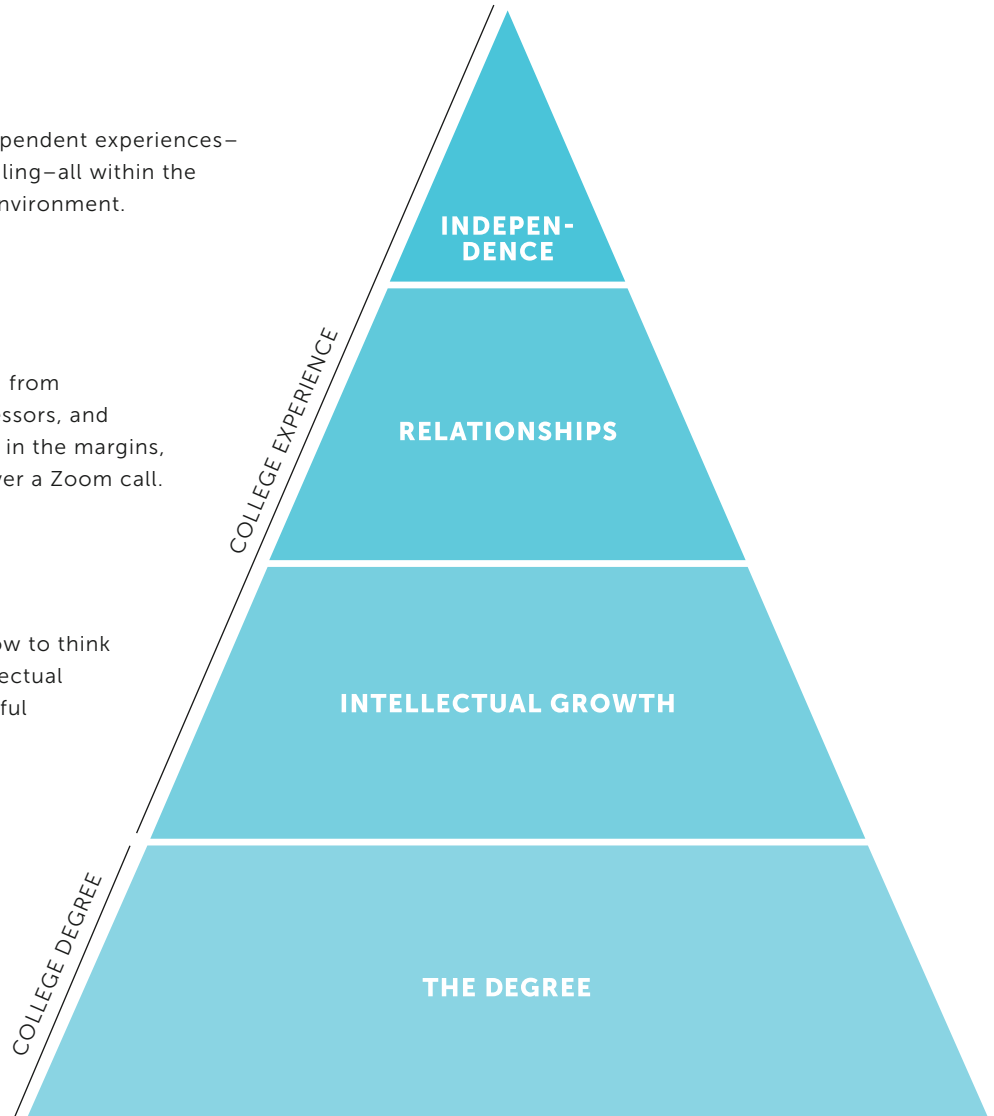
College is about forming and learning from relationships—with friends, with professors, and even romantic partners. This happens in the margins, after a lecture or in the dorm... not over a Zoom call.

INTELLECTUAL GROWTH

College is about teaching students how to think and how to learn. It delivers the intellectual skills that will help them be a thoughtful employee, leader, citizen, or parent.

THE DEGREE

It’s expensive, but there is a real return on the investment. College is ultimately worth it as an upfront investment that pays financial dividends for the rest of your life.



While many degrees are effectively delivered online, especially in graduate education, delivering the college experience this way is a more difficult, and still unsolved, problem. Administrators and faculty have made the distinction that this spring was remote teaching as crisis response, not true online education. As colleges work to more deliberately adapt classes for this fall, can administrators also use this moment to reimagine the overall college experience and address the numerous existential threats that exist?

REIMAGINING THE COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

While many institutions are treating the pandemic as no more than an uncomfortable disruption before returning to “normal,” Fall 2020 can be an opportunity to find the right balance of offline and online experiences that continue to deliver on college’s core value while addressing the problems it faces. There will be those who pass and those who fail this fall, and the most prescient colleges will use this semester to prototype and learn from their experiences.

INVEST IN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT—NOT JUST TOOLS

Colleges must heighten professional development for faculty, in addition to investing in robust digital toolsets. Do so, and faculty will waste less energy wrestling with their tools and more time translating curriculum to a digital world.

ESTABLISH CONDITIONS FOR INDEPENDENCE

Schools need to help students create boundaries between college and living at home, and support conditions for them to have the kind of experiences that build independence, both online and remotely.

SPEND ON INFRASTRUCTURE THOUGHTFULLY

Smart investments include the time and precious resources needed for high-quality production equipment and delivery to create a robust, thoughtfully designed learning experience that engages students and allows the institution to evolve.

NURTURE THE COMMUNITY

Without physical presence on campus, community between students (and faculty) suffered. Yet, the internet has always been fertile ground for digital communities. Schools must experiment with new pathways and spaces for students and professors to foster relationships (especially freshmen and transfer students).

RETHINK CURRICULUM FOR ONLINE DELIVERY

Instead of simply trying to replicate the in-person experience online, schools must reconceive the way they deliver education, leveraging the capabilities of remote work tools to creatively deliver the same core experiential elements that students value.

FOSTER TIGHTER COLLABORATION AND ALIGNMENT

Colleges working in tight collaboration and alignment between faculty, administrators, students, and their parents will have fewer blind spots and address the needs of their campus swiftly and accurately.

REVISIT STUDENT ENGAGEMENT MODELS

College must rethink the role they play in connecting with students on emotional levels that develop empathy and executive function, particularly given national discussions concerning equity and racial justice.

How colleges respond to the pandemic this fall is tactical. However, their response to the long-term challenges they face require a deeper strategy. There’s a long journey ahead. It’s critical to examine lessons learned and formulate a thoughtful strategy for evolving the residential college experience.

EPAM CONTINUUM'S TRACK RECORD

EPAM Continuum understands education and educators. Our portfolio of work is deep and diverse. We have:

HELPED BOSTON COLLEGE REDESIGN THEIR LONG-STANDING CURRICULUM.

EPAM Continuum joined the effort as a thoughtful and objective partner who could align divergent perspectives. With the input of BC stakeholders, we designed a core curriculum that educates the whole person.

HELPED ARTCENTER SCHOOL OF DESIGN UNDERSTAND ITS DIVERSE GEOGRAPHY, PHYSICAL SPACE, AND COMMUNITY.

The school asked EPAM Continuum to help them understand how the ArtCenter population navigates the physical and digital environments on campus in terms of work, information flow, and community building.

TACKLED ISSUES OF DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION ON-CAMPUS AT FAIRFIELD UNIVERSITY.

Working with Fairfield's Diversity Committee and senior leadership, we mapped a path to a campus culture grounded in curiosity and mutual kindness across difference. We focused on articulating a common code of respect and transparency, and provided a framework for all community members to actively engage in the diversity vision at Fairfield.

DEVELOPED A DISTINCTIVE STUDENT-CENTERED MODEL FOR UNIVERSIDAD CONTINENTAL.

This project made significant changes to student touchpoints throughout their experience including a new faculty profile, reinvented curriculum, innovation and entrepreneurship outreach, and a new campus space design.

CREATED A FUTURE VISION BENEFITTING BOSTON PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS.

The High School Redesign work yielded a number of frameworks that gave individual Boston schools the tools they need to envision, evaluate, and prototype new ideas and programs within their schools.

REIMAGINED STUDENT SERVICES AT JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY.

The effort went beyond addressing technical concerns by prioritizing the experience of users – students first and foremost, but also faculty and staff whose efforts support student experience and outcomes. EPAM Continuum was charged with crafting a vision for what an ideal student experience should be.

No two institutions are the same. We spend time immersing ourselves in context to deeply understand challenges and crafting solutions that can be made real.

Our ability to hear all members of an educational ecosystem, and translate that understanding into actionable solutions, is what makes us a valuable partner. Now more than ever, it's clear that schools can no longer rely on established approaches. Our aim is clear: to help higher education design a sustainable future.

EPAM Continuum integrates business, experience, and technology consulting focused on accelerating breakthrough ideas into meaningful impact.

The Future. Made Real.™

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**Interested in talking about the future of the undergraduate experience?
Get in touch with us if you'd like to discuss how to apply this thinking to
your business or learn more about our innovation design work.**

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Join the conversation:

www.epam-continuum.com