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DIGITAL DISRUPTION

The future of higher education promises to be more digital and decentralized, good news for the businesses depending on schools to provide the next generation of workers.

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PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY DAN PAWLIK / ABJ



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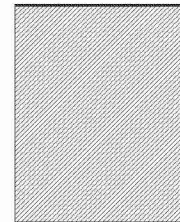
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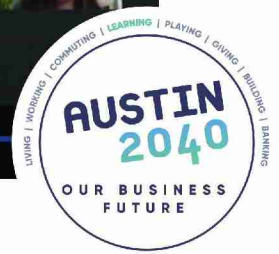
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◀ Nearly 9,500 undergrads and graduate students earned degrees from UT Austin the second-to-last week of May, including the first 49 grads of Dell Medical School, shown here taking the Hippocratic oath virtually during an online commencement ceremony.

SCREEN CAPTURE FROM DELL MEDICAL SCHOOL YOUTUBE CHANNEL



CLASSROOMS OF THE FUTURE ARRIVE EARLY

Going virtual during Covid-19 pandemic offers glimpse of higher ed's tomorrow

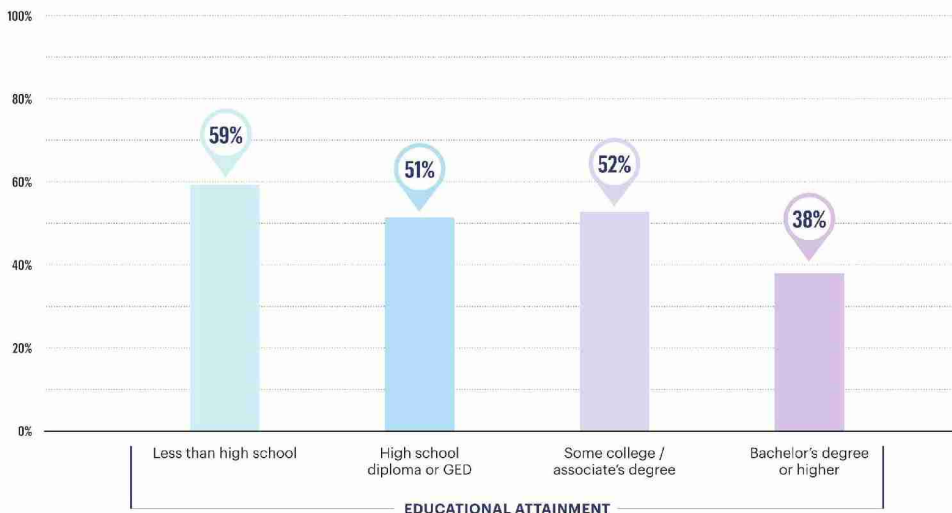
The coronavirus has changed nearly everything about higher education for the time being. Some of those changes are likely to persist, in some form, for decades to come.

Prabhudev Konana, associate dean for instructional innovation at the McCombs School of Business, has tried for years to get faculty at the school within the University of Texas to adopt some form of online instruction in their courses. Through early 2020, he had succeeded in getting just a few to buy in.

The Covid-19 pandemic boosted adoption to 100% virtually overnight,

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US HOUSEHOLDS REPORTING LOSS OF EMPLOYMENT INCOME, MARCH-MAY 2020



SOURCE: Georgetown University Center for Education and the Workforce, based on Census data

▲ Higher education can provide job security, especially during an economic disruption like the Covid-19 pandemic.

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after UT decided in March to move all classes online for the rest of the spring semester.

"After convincing three people in about two years, in two weeks we were able to change the minds of the approximately 250 faculty in our business school," Konana said.

In a recent survey of faculty members, only one of the roughly 170 who taught courses this semester said the virtual teaching experience was bad.

"We were shocked it was so low," said. "The general attitude was it was good. Some of them were really surprised with the experience. A majority of them, 70%, said it was good but they can make it even better."

Similar situations are playing out at colleges and schools across the Austin area, and the nation, as their leaders grapple with how to educate when proximity is a liability and unprecedented economic uncertainty pervades.

Austin 2040: Our Business Future is a series looking at how the Texas capital may change in the next 20 years, with the population expected to nearly double to about 3.6 million. This installment looks at education, and specifically higher education and workforce training – subjects of utmost importance to business leaders interested in sustaining the region's economic

boom and ensuring it is distributed equally.

All conversations about the future are right now colored by the coronavirus. But the current crisis actually allows for some big-picture thinking about higher education that might otherwise be dismissed as unrealistic, especially when it relates to decreasing inequities in the system around income and race.

You've got class

Online education has been growing in popularity and acceptance for decades but it had never before seen the kind of widespread adoption prompted by the coronavirus. Resistance from teachers and staff worried about the quality of instruction was a big barrier prior to the pandemic.

At Southern Careers Institute, an Austin-based trade school with eight campuses statewide, administrators "literally shifted 4,000 students to online classes or a hybrid program over one weekend," said Nikki England, the organization's president.

SCI still brought in small groups of students for some lessons but also leveraged technology to teach very hands-on topics – using software that can simulate welding, for example.

England said in the future she wants all of SCI's courses to be flexible enough for hybrid instruction, for instance allowing students to log into classroom sessions on Zoom. She said SCI has seen record attendance the last three months since switching to online and hybrid learning.

Don Christian, president and CEO of Concordia University Texas, said higher education has "transitioned into the future faster in the past three months than in the past five years."

He said he has been heartened by his institution's flexibility, as well as what he's seeing at other colleges and universities in the niches they fill. And he expects professors, by and large, to continue teaching online courses.

"I no longer have any faculty members who say, 'I'll never teach online,'" Christian said.

At Austin Community College, about 25% of all courses were already online in fall 2019, said Richard Rhodes, the community college district's president and CEO. Add in hybrid courses combining online learning and some element of in-person instruction and the number was around 30%. Yet, Rhodes acknowledged, the "almost overnight" jump from 30% online to 100% "was still a big change."

Students had a choice about whether they wanted to learn online before the pandemic, Rhodes said in mid-May.

"Now they don't have that choice," he said. "But at the same time, now they know they can be successful in it. They see the type of wraparound and support services offered in terms of online tutoring, online advising."

Online education is customizable. At Western Governors University, which has 125,000 students nationally and about 14,000 in Texas, students enroll in 16-week semesters just like they would at a



"I've gone in to evaluate faculty in these large classes. Most students are shopping, texting, Facebooking."

— PRABHUDEV KONANA, ASSOCIATE DEAN FOR INSTRUCTIONAL INNOVATION, MCCOMBS SCHOOL OF BUSINESS

physical university. But students can rush through the course work and complete it in a few weeks if they want to, while others need the whole time.

"Students bring different learning styles and experience to the table," said Steven Johnson, chancellor of WGU Texas.

The promise of online education boils down to numbers. To go back to population estimates, the Austin metro has a little more than 2 million people right now. The Texas Demographic Center estimates the metro population may reach 3.6 million in 2040, although it's important to note those estimates are based on historical trends, and migration may be impacted by Covid-19.

Will the Austin area have twice as many college professors by 2040? Will universities double enrollments?

UT-Austin had 51,832 students – 40,804 undergraduates and 11,028 graduate students – in fall 2018. It's highly unlikely it could grow to 100,000 students on campus by 2040, especially since its Central Austin real estate is largely hemmed in by urban development. But online, there are no such physical limitations.

Konana at McCombs imagines all introductory classes with hundreds of students will be conducted online in the future – with videos of the lectures archived and easily accessible for students who might need multiple listenings to fully understand.

"Large classes should never be

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an actual class, face to face, with 500 students," he said. "I've gone in to evaluate faculty in these large classes. Most students are shopping, texting, Facebooking."

He continued: "Now, if I can do that virtually, I can engage students with polls and quizzes during the lecture, I can easily keep track of who is there and who is answering."

Konana said classrooms should be reserved for "higher order problem solving," like collaborating on a project.

Many businesses are also operating completely virtually during the Covid-19 pandemic. That should help drive home how education and training for their employees can be done over the internet in the years and decades to come.

"Education and work are both becoming more placeless and more aligned," said Gilbert Zavala, vice president of education and talent development for the Austin Chamber of Commerce.

The never-ending education

Education can be transformational. Blake Garrett, CEO of Austin education technology startup Aceable, likes to tell an anecdote about a woman who used his company's platform to earn her real estate license.

A former Aceable student he identified only as Amy decided to become a Realtor after a difficult divorce from an abusive partner. She passed the course, earned her license and in her first year as an agent sold 22 homes, Garrett said.

"It's cool to work so hard on a product that will let thousands and eventually millions of people like Amy, who need a change in their life, to help them succeed in having the life they want," he said. "She could do it on her schedule. She didn't have to quit her full-time job, she could do it whenever it worked for her."

That kind of story is where higher ed experts see the field moving. The notion of going to college at 18, graduating at 22 and then never returning to campus is quickly becoming outdated. More and more schools are offering shortened degree programs as well as courses

es that allow students to earn credentials throughout their degree, which can help them get a job even without a degree.

ACC's Rhodes believes this kind of "short-term, intensive training with stackable credentials" will be more important than ever to supply the workers needed to meet employers' needs in 2040.

At WGU, the average student age is about 34 – a working adult who is usually looking to advance in their career or change fields. It recently launched at the national level what it calls a "micro-bachelor's" degree in information technology. It is designed to help those who already have jobs explore different areas of IT and any work in the course can be incorporated into the requirements for a full bachelor's degree from the school.

It is an attempt to more directly match the skills taught in classrooms with the skills sought by employers, WGU's Johnson said.

"What we are going to see [in the future] is students are going to go back and retrain often, coming back for a second or third credential," he said.

Higher ed administrators dream of a utopian future where coursework from different schools easily integrates, for example allowing a student to combine a course from ACC here, a couple of semesters at UT there and online classes from WGU into one degree.

"They're going to be taking courses, potentially from different institutions, potentially simultaneously, and pulling that coursework together into some type of a degree," Rhodes said.

Systemic shortcomings

The need for greater access to higher education across all groups is clear, especially in light of the current pandemic's economic turmoil. Prior to coronavirus job losses, about 11.6 million

jobs were created in the United States in the economic recovery after the Great Recession. Of those, 11.5 million went to people with some level of college education, according to data from Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce.

More than 2 million Texans filed for initial unemployment claims from March 15 through May 16, according to federal statistics. Jobless rates for those without any college education can be twice as high as the overall rate in some places, highlighting how educational levels can help protect jobs during a

downturn.

"If you don't have a postsecondary credential of some sort, you're not in a really good place," said Kwee Lan Teo, vice president of talent development with the Austin Chamber.

Of course, going to college online is only possible if a student has internet access. That can be an issue in low-income communities. This spring, Austin Independent School District parked 110 unused buses equipped with WiFi in parts of the city where reliable internet service is less prevalent, providing internet access for youngsters taking classes and tests online.

"This is really demonstrating there still is a digital divide that exists in the opportunity to learn online," Rhodes said. "I think we've got to, as a community, as a state, as a country work harder at making sure we eliminate that digital divide."

Workforce Solutions Capital Area and ACC in 2017 released a plan looking at the Austin region's future workforce needs. It identified four areas of focus: health care, advanced manufacturing, information technology and skilled trades. The plan was particularly focused on helping low-income residents enter those industries – a goal of moving 10,000 people into middle-wage jobs.

Tamara Atkinson, CEO of the workforce board, said they were on track to hit that 10,000 mark by 2021 until the coronavirus hit. Now the pandemic heightens the disparity around the jobs crucial to the future and those that might not return after coronavirus.

"These are no longer nice-to-debate questions," Atkinson said. "These are now must-ask questions and must-address issues, as we start to look at this chasm that has been created ... between those who have the skills and the jobs who can work remotely and those who do not, so are at risk of being left behind."

Price is a major limit on higher education participation. The cost of a four-year degree has risen much faster than inflation in the last 10 years, rising about 25% at private colleges and about 30% at public colleges from 2008-09 to



"They're going to be taking courses, potentially from different institutions, potentially simultaneously, and pulling that coursework together into some type of a degree."

— RICHARD RHODES, DISTRICT PRESIDENT AND CEO, AUSTIN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

2018-19, CNBC reported in December.

Aceable, the online education startup, charges about \$500 for the real estate agent course. Competent Realtors, in a hot market like Austin, can generate annual income in the six figures.

"The relationship between education and job attainment and success, we are going to understand that [in 2040] much better than we do today," Garrett said. "In doing so, it's going to create new business models for educators to help people succeed."

Many students drop out of college because they don't see a clear pathway from their studies to a lucrative career and those from poor backgrounds are least able to afford a delay in entering the

workforce.

"The current system we have has not really worked well for those at the lowest income levels," said Johnson of WGU, which pulls more than 70% of its students nationwide from populations underserved by higher ed, such as racial minorities or first-generation college students.

Starting higher ed earlier in life can help people from all sorts of backgrounds. Dual-credit courses allow Austin-area teenagers to take college courses while still in high school, earning credits for their diploma as well as credentials that can help them land a job after graduation. Rhodes said dual-credit courses are "one of the fastest-growing segments" of ACC enrollment.

There is no single panacea for all the inequities in higher education. But leaders in the field are hopeful lessons learned in the current crisis help lower costs and increase positive outcomes like graduation rates and job placement.

"There is opportunity that arises out of any challenge," SCI's England said. "There is real drama happening because of this but I think, as as society and as educators, absolutely we are going to see some positive things come from this." ❏

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