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[OPINION](#)

In the wake of COVID, signs of hope across higher education

Christopher Callahan

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COVID-19 is delivering an endless barrage of body blows to higher education. The pandemic has adversely affected all institutions, crippled some and will be the death knell for others. Some experts are forecasting the demise of the American university as we know it.

Without question, coronavirus presents the greatest threat in the 384-year history of U.S. higher education — existential health, safety, cultural and financial challenges that were simply unimaginable less than a year ago.

But a closer look at the response by remarkably adaptable, creative and resilient students, faculty and staff across American colleges and universities provides more than just faint signs of hope for the future of higher education. It provides inspiration.

Gen Z students, often derided as overly sensitive, fragile “snowflakes” in need of constant coddling and attention, are facing obstacles no college students have ever encountered.

Their classrooms are confined to a computer screen, and much of their experiences in labs, studios and concert halls also are restricted to the solitude of remote learning.

Their living environments transformed overnight from a world of constant socialization, with instant access to scores of classmates, roommates, teammates and friends, to near-complete isolation, often sending students back to their childhood

bedrooms to battle over bandwidth with parents and siblings living and working in their own Zoom worlds.

Their country is frighteningly polarized along ideological and racial divides, triggering unprecedented political turmoil and a historic awakening on social justice issues.

Many are fighting through severe financial hardships, mental health challenges and family health crises, which affect students from poor families and underrepresented groups particularly severely.

Yet across America, millions of college students are successfully taking on these challenges with courage, determination and grit, refusing to allow even a global pandemic to get in the way of their education.

Scenes that play out each day remotely on personal computer screens at my university are replicated at hundreds of universities and colleges across the country.

Music students learn how to perform complex compositions, recording from their homes and outdoors, then meticulously synchronizing and assembling the work using digital production technologies. Future engineers deploy 3-D modeling software and an online communications platform used in the gaming industry to build a Formula One race car in a student's garage. Hundreds of others engage in remote internships with organizations around the globe.

Meanwhile, professors, who sometimes are unfairly portrayed as change-averse traditionalists, immediately leapt into action, transforming their classrooms into remote learning environments — creating new teaching techniques and learning new technologies on the fly. Creative ideas such as teaching assistants strapping on GoPro cameras so students can watch chemistry lab experiments are now commonplace.

University staff who support students and faculty on everything from financial aid and career counseling to technology and health services work tirelessly, often from their kitchen tables, while juggling day care and instruction for their children, who no longer have their own schools to attend.

Perhaps one of the most remarkable — and unseen — facets of higher education's response to COVID-19 has been experiential learning programs, which have the dual

benefit of applying classroom lessons to deepen learning while providing critical support to communities. University of the Pacific illustrates the essential role of service-based learning during the pandemic.

In San Francisco, the Dugoni School of Dentistry has served more than 44,000 dental patients since March, and the downtown school is now developing plans to serve as a mass vaccination site.

Clinics operated by students and professors at the McGeorge School of Law in Sacramento have provided legal counsel to more than 360 Californians on everything from immigration and elder abuse cases to federal crimes and prison-based civil rights disputes.

Across San Joaquin and Sacramento counties, future pharmacists have immunized more than 200 residents at drive-through flu clinics while other students mix COVID-19 vaccines and administer shots to frontline health care workers and nursing home residents.

Skeptics are dismissive of the non-traditional learning environments dictated by COVID. Outcomes, however, have been positive. A new Gallup poll conducted for the Lumina Foundation found 76% of U.S. students in bachelor's degree programs described the quality of their mostly remote education this fall as "very good" or "excellent," with only 1% reporting a "poor" experience.

Lessons from COVID-19 will last long after the pandemic, including leveraging the efficiencies of videoconferencing for gatherings, conferences and guest speakers, attaining a deeper understanding of the power and limitations of online learning and embracing the need to dramatically accelerate change.

But perhaps the pandemic's most important lessons will be that — despite unimaginable obstacles — passionate and talented professors will create powerful learning environments for their students. And students will remain undeterred in pursuit of their hopes and dreams through what remains America's single greatest determinant of socioeconomic advancement — a college education.

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