



Innovation and Justice: Reinventing Selective Colleges

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Executive Summary

COVID-19 has been disastrous for colleges across the country. But it has also created extraordinary opportunities to reshape a higher education system that is wildly inequitable and in dire need of reform. Selective colleges—colleges that accept less than 50% of their applicants—have been part of this problem and can play an important role in the solution.

The reality is this: Selective colleges, a portal to leadership and power in a wide array of fields, can now educate far more—and far more diverse—students. In part because they have the resources to mount high-quality online courses, these colleges can create exciting, rigorous pathways to bachelor's degrees that are not simply online but that combine online learning with on-campus learning, exciting field experiences, internships, and new types of communities in all sorts of ways that are more accessible, appealing, and affordable for a broad array of students. In creating these pathways, they can maintain and even strengthen their commitment to the liberal arts and civic education. Rather than obtaining status partly from how few students they admit (which, distressingly, is the same as obtaining status from how many students they reject), these colleges could tout a far more just and democratic metric—how many qualified students they educate. And they could create these pathways without threatening their revenue. Selective colleges could reduce tuition for large numbers of students but recapture or even increase that revenue with expanded enrollment. Many selective colleges may have stumbled upon a rare moment when they can provide more exciting learning options, do what makes sense financially, and do what is democratic and right.

This white paper lays out the many benefits of these new pathways as well as the challenges they pose and how colleges might meet these challenges. We describe, for example, how colleges can avoid creating a two-tiered system in which affluent students mainly choose a

traditional residential experience that is viewed as superior to alternative pathways that are primarily comprised of economically disadvantaged students.

We also describe innovative, feasible, short- and long-term strategies for building these pathways. Selective colleges could, for example, become more affordable by co-designing and sharing the costs of pathways with employers and/or form consortiums with other colleges that include sharing online courses and service and internship opportunities. Selective colleges could reduce students' financial burden by allowing students to combine work, online courses, and campus experiences over five to six years. More radically, selective colleges could create an open funnel, enabling anyone to obtain a degree online who masters a set of skills and knowledge. These changes and many others are possible if selective colleges are willing to take a fresh look at themselves and commit to more meaningful equity.

Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis has rocked colleges across the country, including selective colleges. As the crisis abates, many selective colleges are likely to speed back to normal.

But that would be a terrible mistake. The status quo is troubling. Selective colleges in this country—what we define here as colleges that accept less than 50% of their applicants—have always been and continue to be highly inequitable and inaccessible to many students. At 38 [selective colleges](#) in America, there are more students from the top 1% of the income spectrum than the bottom 60%. Many selective colleges admit [wealthy students](#) with average academic records over low-income students with strong academic records—one of the many factors causing substantial numbers of low-income students to “[undermatch](#),” attending colleges that are not appropriately challenging for them given their abilities. Many selective colleges are simply unaffordable for staggering numbers of students, and shrinking public dollars are likely to increase already soaring tuition while reducing financial aid. Further, many selective colleges have been inaccessible to large and rising numbers of older adults seeking bachelor's degrees and to people with disabilities or who have family obligations that prevent them from leaving home.

But the upending of selective colleges by the pandemic also creates an extraordinary opportunity. Colleges pivoted quickly to meet the needs of their students during spring 2020. The crisis of inequality in our higher education system also begs for reimagination. Now is the time for selective colleges to reinvent themselves, to create more affordable and exciting forms of education that will enable them to admit far more—and far more diverse—students, and to solve longstanding problems that have plagued these colleges and afflicted young people and older adults across the country for decades.

Let us cut to the chase: For too long, selective colleges—and especially the 80 highly selective colleges that accept less than 25% of their applicants—have relied on a scarcity model to convey their value. These colleges partly obtain status from how few students they admit (which, distressingly, is also obtaining status from how many students they reject).

But these colleges have the capacity, during a time of vast inequities, to provide a high-quality education to far more—and far more diverse—students. What if, instead, selective colleges touted and measured themselves by how many qualified students they educated, preparing them for work and civic life? What if selective colleges created engaging, rigorous pathways to degrees that are more widely available, more attuned to a variety of learning styles, and both more affordable and attractive to a wide range of economically, racially, and culturally diverse students? What if selective colleges relied on a revenue model that assumed reduced tuition for large numbers of students but recaptured that revenue by expanding their enrollment? What if selective colleges seized this rare moment to provide more students with exciting learning options, maintain or increase their revenue and do what is democratic and right?

There are all sorts of ways that selective colleges could create new pathways. There is much discussion of online learning these days, and these colleges could create rigorous pathways to degrees that are fully online. *But the choice is not simply between an online or a residential education.* Selective colleges could combine—in myriad ways that are just as rigorous but more affordable and appealing for many students—traditional residential experiences, field experiences domestically and/or abroad, online learning, satellite campuses and the kinds of rich and varied internships that universities such as [Northeastern University](#) provide. Instead of a fully online degree, selective colleges could provide some courses online and carefully integrate those courses with on-campus institutes a few times a year—students might attend full-day workshops and classes over, say, four days at five different points in the year. Selective colleges could allow students to spend their junior and senior years of college working at a job that provided income and that enabled them to take courses online, including during the summer. Selective colleges could vibrantly integrate competency-based learning, knowledge-based study in the liberal arts, sciences and other fields, and field-based learning, while utilizing the most cutting-edge thinking about both personalized learning and new forms of community both in-person and online.

Imagine, for example, a public service pathway in which students spend their first and third years in residence on a traditional campus, and their second and fourth years with a community of diverse students engaged in service experiences either in the U.S. or abroad. Students might intern for a government agency or a nonprofit and receive some form of compensation. Students could simultaneously take online courses and attend on-campus institutes twice a year related to civic engagement, public service, sociology, history, health, or many other fields.

The idea that colleges should create new pathways is certainly not new. Various colleges across the country have already launched many types of alternative pathways to degrees, and large numbers of colleges have some type of online offering. Colleges such as Southern New Hampshire University, Arizona State University, Western Governors University, Purdue University, and Ohio State University offer fully online bachelor's degrees. While this paper focuses mainly on undergraduate degrees, some colleges have created fully online graduate degrees that provide important lessons for undergraduate programs. We take up lessons here from the Harvard Graduate School of Education's online master's degree program this year, which attracted a large, diverse, and highly qualified group of students. But we have

found few selective colleges that are experimenting with the types of blended pathways we are describing here, and we have not found a single undergraduate college accepting less than 50% of its applicants with a fully online undergraduate degree program.

Why focus just on selective colleges? To be sure, selective colleges are not higher education's answer to the deep, widespread problem of inequity. For one, only [3%](#) of students attend a college that accepts less than 25% of its applicants, and only 20% attend a college that accepts less than 50% of its applicants. What's more, almost [two-thirds](#) of Americans don't graduate from a four-year college. We urgently need less expensive pathways to careers for these young people, whether shorter-term skills bootcamps or pathways created by colleges, employers, or colleges and employers working in partnership. But selective colleges, especially because they launch so many young people into [key leadership](#) positions across a wide range of fields, are a key piece of the solution. Many selective colleges also have the resources to develop strong online courses. In fact, due to the pandemic, online courses have tended to proliferate at these colleges, and some colleges are now taking pride in and steadily improving their remote teaching.

And these colleges have been handed a remarkable laboratory moment, an opportunity to greatly expand the number of students they educate—to perhaps even double their undergraduate populations— and to pilot and evaluate many types of models and innovations. Below we take up this opportunity. What, more specifically, are the benefits of these different models and pathways? What are the challenges and how can they be met? How, for example, can these colleges address concerns about “brand dilution” if they become less exclusive? How can colleges create pathways that don't just maintain but increase their crucial commitment to the liberal arts, as well as better prepare students to be engaged, ethical citizens—a goal that seems urgent these days? How can selective colleges avoid creating a two-tier system, where affluent students continue to have a traditional residential experience that is perceived as superior to an alternative pathway that is largely comprised of less advantaged students? Finally, how do we get from here to there? What are examples of pathways and models that are likely to be especially promising and feasible in the near future? What are examples of more radical innovations and “moonshots” that might be possible in brighter economic times?

The Case for Innovative New Models

The benefits of innovative pathways are numerous, including the following:

- **Deeper learning experiences in fields such as public service that advance the public good.** Colleges tend to be far less intentional and active in cultivating [ethical character](#) and civic purpose in students than they have been in the past. The case for restoring this focus seems particularly compelling now, given our fragile democracy, bitter political divisions, and the trauma wrought by the pandemic in many communities. Innovative pathways can deepen students' engagement in our civic life and provide all sorts of service opportunities, whether voter registration, food delivery to vulnerable populations, contact tracing, tutoring and mentoring, assistance to

elderly populations, support for American soldiers abroad, or environmental protection efforts.

- **Greater attunement to the strengths and challenges of racially, economically, and culturally diverse students.** Not only do students of color and low-income students often [feel alienated](#) at selective colleges largely comprised of white, privileged students, but also the basic structure of these colleges is often misaligned with these students' wants and needs. Many students, for example, have compelling reasons to stay close to home, including family responsibilities such as supervising younger siblings, caring for sick relatives, and local jobs that provide needed family income. These new pathways would not only be more affordable for students but also could better align with the realities of their lives, allowing them to spend more time at home while taking online courses. Rather than expecting these students to move to an often distant place and to organize their lives to fit the structure of a selective college, these colleges could do far more to organize themselves around these students' needs. Pathways with more diverse students could also reduce the alienation students feel among predominantly white students on selective college campuses, especially if thoughtful attention is given at the outset to designing off-campus communities that powerfully represent and affirm diverse cultures.
- **More varied, engaging, and deeper learning experiences for diverse learners.** A four-year residential experience simply doesn't work for many students. For one, the traditional "[sage on a stage](#)" classroom is often not the [most effective](#) means of facilitating strong learning experiences; research points to the benefits of experiential and project/work-based learning for many students, especially [non-traditional students](#). Innovative models can be constructed that harness insights from learning theory and are more responsive to diverse learners—those, for example, who struggle in traditional classrooms but easily engage in field experiences, collaborative projects, and small group learning.
- **More opportunities for people with parenting responsibilities, people engaged in part-time work, and people at different stages of their career.** Various types of pathways that are partly or fully online could broaden access to many types of non-college age students. The number of [older adults](#) with parenting and work responsibilities, for example, who are seeking non-traditional undergraduate and graduate degrees is large and skyrocketing. In fact, [more than 70%](#) of students enrolled in all of higher education are "nontraditional" or "adult learners." The Harvard Graduate School of Education launched a six-week application cycle last summer for a fully online master's degree—a one-year full-time or two-year part-time experience—and received 50% more applications than it typically receives in a standard admissions cycle, i.e., for its residential master's program. These applicants were both considerably more diverse and older than applicants in the traditional application cycle.

Fully on-campus learning is also often out of reach for students with disabilities or students in other areas of the world who are unable to obtain a visa. Large numbers of these students are able to thrive in college courses but can't live on a campus or adhere to a campus course schedule.

- **Greater appeal to employers.** For financial and other reasons, many students will be drawn to combining internships and other forms of employment with courses online. And because many employers are looking for real-world experiences, these pathways are likely to make students more employable in many sectors. Employers, as we take up below, might also play a role in subsidizing and shaping these pathways.
- **Reduced student cost.** The cost to students of pathways that are partly or fully online depends on many complex factors, but there are myriad ways of creating pathways that are less costly for students and colleges. While some robust, engaging online learning can carry high upfront capital investment—such as the HBX certification at the Harvard Business School—other high-quality online learning experiences, such as those offered by [Outlier](#), are less costly. Outlier provides rigorous courses at roughly 20% of the cost of regular college courses and provides transferable credits from the University of Pittsburgh. In either case, costs can be saved over time. Pathways subsidized by employers can also enable universities to reduce tuition, and students could pay per course and pay considerably less for asynchronous courses, which are far less expensive than synchronous courses. Students can better manage costs if they're able to work at paid, credit-bearing internships as part of a pathway or if they're able to work part-time, and students can save substantially if they can live at home.
- **Reduced harmful achievement pressure in high school.** If significant numbers of selective colleges create alternative pathways, these colleges cumulatively could alleviate excessive, damaging achievement pressure among high school students—especially in affluent communities. Rates of depression, delinquency, substance abuse, and other troubles appear to be as high in [affluent communities](#) as they are in low-income communities, despite the many stresses low-income families endure; achievement pressure appears to be a prime culprit. Much of the achievement pressure now afflicting these students is driven by supply—by limited space in highly selective colleges. (It is also driven by misperceptions about supply—there are far more “good” colleges than parents commonly perceive.) One important way to reduce achievement pressure in these communities is to markedly increase the number of spaces available at selective colleges.
- **Leadership in the online and hybrid learning space.** Traditional higher education is out-invested and often out-innovated by some new colleges and tech bootcamps, like the Minerva Schools at KGI and Kenzie Academy, which are moving much more quickly and effectively to build rigorous pedagogy and immersive experiences online. Selective colleges, given their expressed commitment to high-quality pedagogy, could lead in designing innovative online and hybrid learning experiences.

Meeting the Challenges

Colleges implementing these pathways will face all sorts of challenges. For one, many in the U.S. covet the traditional college experience. They recall deep friendships swiftly formed,

late-night conversations with peers or faculty that generated intoxicating, perspective-shifting ideas, and the exhilarating energy of creating an adult life away from home. For members of powerful boards of trustees and alumni, such experiences may be central to their identities, and these stakeholders may fiercely resist alternatives to the traditional college experience.

These memories may be selective—there's ample evidence the college experience can be [stressful](#), if not [miserable](#), for large numbers of students. But it's important for even those who had wonderful college experiences to face squarely this stark reality: Despite many efforts to improve access for low-income students over the last few decades, huge numbers of qualified young people from these communities, as well as many other students, are not able to access selective colleges.

That's not a reason to completely abandon the traditional college experience. But it is a compelling reason to figure out other paths to degrees at selective colleges—less expensive paths that retain much of what makes colleges gratifying and useful yet are more attuned to the needs and interests of a broader array of students.

Alternative pathways will face many other criticisms and challenges, including the following:

- **The online experience can't be as rich as the residential experience.** Much of the criticism of online learning focuses on learning losses in online classes versus traditional classrooms and on the loss of in-person interaction with both faculty and peers. Yet research now indicates that high-quality [online classes tend to generate as much learning as in-person classes](#). Further, pathways in which students are moving in cohorts from residential to field experiences and taking online courses together would retain frequent, valuable peer interactions. Online courses also make it much easier to create diverse communities among students who are physically distant, including communities of students across countries. Primarily prompted by the pandemic, college faculty and staff are also finding new ways to build community and to connect to students online, including online office hours, virtual games, advisory pods, collaborative projects, and the creation of small online affinity groups.

That said, in-person student-faculty interaction is likely to be reduced in many pathways, and these interactions will evaporate entirely with a pathway that is completely online—a clear downside of fully online pathways. It seems hard to argue, though, that this downside outweighs the benefit of providing a high-quality education to many more—and many more diverse—young people.

- **Creating more affordable pathways could reify racial and class hierarchies.** Without careful thought, it's entirely possible that new pathways could lead to a tiered system that increases and reinforces race and class divisions. More affluent students would gravitate toward and could afford a traditional college experience while students in financially strapped families would select an alternative, less expensive pathway that is perceived as inferior. Colleges need to be intentional about creating additional pathways that are—and that are perceived to be—as exciting, rigorous, and career-aligned as a traditional college experience and that appeal to a wide array of

students across race, class, and culture. Pathways, for example, that include exciting field experiences or internships both domestically and abroad—a semester for an arts major as a guide in a museum in Florence, say, or a semester for an aspiring engineer as an intern at Google—are likely to be attractive to a wide array of students. Pathways can also be constructed that aren't viewed as second tier if they are highly valued by employers and develop a track record of placing students in sought-after careers. Further, rather than admit students to a pathway, colleges could eliminate the perception of tiers by enabling students to select pathways after they're admitted, just like they choose a major, and provide tuition discounts for students who take a certain number of asynchronous courses online (students might also get some discount for synchronous online courses, particularly if they won't have access to on-campus resources and activities). Creating new majors could both eliminate the two-tier problem and smooth the road to adoption of these pathways by traditionally-minded faculty and others who might view a major as less dissonant than a new pathway.

- **Faculty resistance.** Many faculty at selective colleges are likely to resist alternative pathways. Faculty commonly cherish the traditional campus experience, prefer interacting with students in person, and may view online teaching as second-rate. Some faculty may be worried about compromising their perceived qualifications and status by teaching in an alternative pathway. Many will simply resist change. But there are ways of making online teaching more appealing to faculty. Many liberal arts faculty, especially humanities faculty, are losing students and dealing in some cases with job insecurity, and may support innovative, more affordable pathways that attract more liberal arts students. Many faculty are committed to more meaningful equity and may be willing to teach online to achieve it. Many have developed far more competence and confidence teaching online over the last year and may be attracted to the opportunity to expand their influence by teaching more students. Teaching online also gives faculty the flexibility to live where they want. In addition, with expanding enrollment and additional revenue, colleges can hire faculty who are open to teaching online. Colleges might begin developing online pathways by first enlisting a relatively small number of faculty who are interested in developing a pathway—at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, many faculty members, based on their experience this year, have expressed interest in teaching online—and other faculty may become interested if these programs attract qualified and diverse students. Importantly, colleges will need to provide strong teaching preparation and support for faculty willing to teach online.
- **Second order effects.** What happens to less selective colleges or open admission institutions if more selective colleges absorb twice as many students? As this effect cascades downwards, does it threaten the existence of these colleges? It's quite possible that this expansion exacerbates the financial stresses on some less selective colleges of high value to students and may end up putting some of these colleges out of business. That's a serious loss. But that loss is likely to be outweighed by several gains. For one, this expansion may also help put low-value colleges out of business, including predatory colleges and poor-quality private colleges that still charge exorbitant tuition. And it could lead to mergers and cooperative arrangements

among high-quality colleges, with both savings and enrichment, as we describe below, if the network shares courses and pools resources, such as libraries. Because many low-income students “undermatch,” more spots at top schools would also mean more seats for these qualified but underrepresented students. Further, additional seats at selective colleges could strengthen competition among them to demonstrate their real value to students. That competition might result in innovative programs, more focus on student outcomes, and lower costs. New pathways could also expand the overall applicant pool, attracting large numbers of non-traditional students in particular.

- **Brand dilution.** Perhaps the most common resistance we’ve heard to adding pathways and students is that it makes colleges less selective and thus “dilutes the brand.” To be sure, all sorts of vapid status concerns, conscious and unconscious, can cause people to prize exclusivity. Yet concerns about brand are often based on the more reasonable concern that it benefits employers to receive signals from colleges both that students have been carefully selected based on capacities key to work success, and that they’ve benefited from a high-quality education alongside other talented students.

Yet adding pathways does not mean that colleges abandon a careful selection process. Selective colleges could add pathways while still admitting only highly qualified students. These colleges often reject high numbers of qualified applicants who are very capable of doing well in college and beyond. As Jerry Lucido, executive director of the University of Southern California’s [Center for Enrollment Research, Policy and Practice](#), puts it, “when it comes to selective colleges and universities, let’s say those who admit 50% or less of their applicants, the truth is that nearly all the students who apply are in no danger of underperforming. Indeed, many who are rejected could excel. Instead, they are in danger only of not being admitted.”

Many colleges will be concerned that higher admit rates will signal lower quality to students and parents and result in fewer applicants. Fortunately, admit rates are no longer a factor in *US News & World Report*’s rankings, but they are widely featured in college guides and websites and various online college search tools.

Yet the reality is that admit rates at many colleges are not likely to change much if colleges, as we expect, expand the numbers of students who apply by creating more affordable and attractive pathways. The Harvard Graduate School of Education, in fact, admitted a *smaller* percentage of students overall when it created an alternative pathway, in part because the new pathway attracted a large number of applicants. What’s more, what we’re arguing for here is a healthier, more democratic notion of brand—that selective colleges should work to create a brand that derives not from low admit rates, but from how successful they are in educating large numbers of qualified students and enabling them to obtain attractive jobs without saddling them with huge debt.

Promising Paths Forward

Shifting colleges' attention to a different notion of brand and away from a narrow focus on the traditional residential model can create room for many types of innovation and may re-energize many college administrators and faculty. As we've noted, there are almost countless ways in which colleges could combine residential courses, field experiences, and online learning. A student interested in health care might, for example, spend a year interning in an emergency room or a student interested in hotel management might work part-time at a hotel while taking courses online and attending periodic on-campus institutes both during the year and in the summer. Many more selective colleges could also create pathways to degrees that enabled students to interweave on-campus learning and work over five or six years in ways more responsive to both students' financial needs and their family responsibilities.

Career-Aligned Pathways

More selective colleges and universities might also seek to develop career-aligned pathways, as Northeastern University does, that include partnerships with major employers. A university and an employer might co-design a hybrid pathway that culminated in a job offer or at least a job interview. A university and Microsoft could, say, partner to offer a "Tech Careers" degree, where students spend four years split between on-campus learning focused on general education, interning at Microsoft, learning tech skills online, and engaging in applied field experiences (in coding, data science, robotics, etc.) with organizations domestically and internationally. Or universities might partner with Verizon or Walmart to create a track to management and marketing positions. In addition to paid internships, these employers might provide some form of compensation to colleges for creating a talent pipeline. Crucially, in creating these pathways, selective colleges would need to stay true to their mission, requiring students to take key courses across the liberal arts and to engage in courses and service experiences that build civic understanding, commitment, and skills. In addition, employers should partner with a wide range of colleges that vary in selectivity to avoid further advantaging selective college students. That should not be a stretch for employers, given the [many talented](#) students in thousands of colleges in this country.

Form A Consortium

While developing new, high-quality online programs is expensive, colleges don't need to go it alone; they could form partnerships with like-minded colleges to save costs and serve more students.

Take the legendary CS50 course at Harvard. This wildly popular computer science course moved online so the whole world could access it, and then Yale started offering students credit (and support) for completing the course. Yet if Yale students obtain credit for taking CS50 from Harvard, why shouldn't Harvard students get credit for taking Yale courses, such as the most popular course in Yale history, "Psychology and the Good Life," now offered free online? Students could take online a high-quality computer science course from the California Institute of Technology, a psychology course from CUNY, an economics course

from Skidmore College, and so on. One could imagine a future where, with the support of a team of online coaches and teaching assistants, students from both selective and non-selective colleges could access these courses as part of obtaining their degrees.

Colleges in this consortium might not only give their students access to the same online courses but collectively invest in service experiences and employer pipelines, seamlessly transferring credits, and creating greater general interoperability. More colleges could also do what colleges such as Swarthmore, Smith, and Harvey Mudd have done—create college networks within the same geographic area that enable sharing of libraries, labs, and other resources. Through these economies of scale and collaboration, colleges could serve more students at a lower price point.

Future Possibilities and Moonshots

Selective colleges are unlikely to take on initiatives that require new expenditures any time in the near future. But beyond the pandemic and in healthier economic times, colleges could consider taking even bolder steps to expand their class and provide greater access to economically diverse students. Federal and state governments might also be in a better place to abet these efforts via policies and funds.

Build New Campuses and Residential Infrastructure

Selective colleges could serve more students and build trust by building new campuses in strategic, more affordable locations, such as economically distressed areas in the industrial Midwest or in many rural areas. They might develop these campuses via public-private partnerships or partnerships with public institutions in these locations. At a time when less than half of Americans “[have confidence](#)” in our higher education system and selective colleges are widely and increasingly viewed as liberal, elitist, coastal and out of touch, building campuses in economically distressed areas of the United States could go a long way towards changing both the reality of and the narrative about selective colleges. Placing new campuses in these locations could also bring needed economic activity and serve to help interested students transition to a residential experience on the main college campus (which may be geographically and culturally quite distant from a student’s home community). Regional campuses that are closing and being mothballed create opportunities for satellite campuses. Various public and private settings (e.g., local YWCA’s, schools, or large commercial buildings), might also be converted to campuses for parts of the day or evening. Designing satellite campuses is also an opportunity to reimagine a modern campus; libraries and lecture halls, for instance, which are expensive to build and maintain, might not be necessary for students studying in part online.

Completely Reimagining Undergraduate Admission & Creating On-Ramps to College

If the central purpose and value of a degree is to signal to the labor market what competencies and knowledge a student has mastered, then universities should consider fundamentally re-engineering how students are admitted and how credentials are conferred. Selective colleges could grant degrees to anyone mastering this knowledge and these

competencies. Instead of using standardized tests, grades, and extracurriculars as predictors of future success, colleges could radically reduce and restructure their admission offices and introduce a large, if not completely open, student funnel that enables a far wider range of students to earn degrees if they achieve this mastery. Selective colleges could narrow the funnel very early on based on actual student work. Any student who does sufficiently well in two free, rigorous online courses offered by a college, for example, would be admitted to the pathway. Colleges could focus outreach on underrepresented populations. Like many online bootcamps, colleges could also provide modest levels of academic coaching to students taking these courses. Among the many benefits of such a system, admission departments could accept far more students and vastly reduce the costs to the college of the admission process itself.

Alternatively, selective colleges could grant admission to anyone who demonstrates an ability to actually do rigorous college level work during a more affordable freshman year option. Any student who meets certain minimum requirements during the year—such as fulfilling a certain number of required online courses and achieving a GPA above 3.0—would be automatically accepted. Students who successfully completed individual courses but didn't meet the full requirements for acceptance could still receive credit, or some other form of recognition for courses completed, that could be meaningful to employers and transferred to other colleges. Articulation agreements with colleges could guarantee this transfer of credits. Programs such as [Verto Education](#) or the University of Florida's [PaCE](#) (Pathway to Campus Enrollment) program enable students to earn affordable credits during a high quality freshman year experience (abroad with Verto and online with PaCE) and those credits are transferred to partner colleges.

In addition, selective colleges could be more viable for more diverse students if they are structured to allow students, including students with significant family and work responsibilities, to take courses at their own pace, especially if courses are fully or heavily online and asynchronous. Students could accelerate and decelerate learning based on the demands of their lives. Programs such as Southern New Hampshire University's College for America enables students to obtain a degree by completing projects and demonstrating mastery of skills at their own pace. When students decide they are ready, they submit their projects to subject matter experts. Students can submit their projects multiple times until these experts determine they have achieved mastery.

Many more selective colleges could also offer credentials. For example, colleges could confer valuable certifications linked to specific careers or badges linked to 21st-century skills (e.g., communication, problem-solving, and computational literacy) based on completion of online courses. Colleges could also offer combinations of general education and competency-based courses that are "stackable," and that taken together signal mastery of an important cluster of knowledge and skills that are valuable to employers.

Conclusion

None of what we describe here, of course, is easy. But it's all entirely possible. We live in a time when tremendous change can happen, and happen swiftly. In February, 2020 at the

Harvard Graduate School of Education, where two of us work, it was inconceivable that we would significantly expand our class or offer fully online degree programs in the near future. Now, based on the diversity and strength of our applicant pool for a fully online program and the excitement these students have generated among faculty and administrators, we're seriously exploring offering an online degree program going forward.

We have arrived at a moment of truth that will determine if selective colleges can fully embrace their power to open knowledge and learning, create opportunity, and advance equity and crucial civic purposes. The time is ripe to reimagine and reinvent selective colleges.

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