



Examining Role of 1-Year Online College Can Improve Access to Higher Learning

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ABSTRACT

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Purpose: This study aims to address the diminishing access to top universities by investigating and proposing alternative solutions to allow for additional deserving students admittance into highly selective universities.

Results: Admittance to top universities have been steadily declining over the past 20 years, which has only been exasperated recently due to the global pandemic. As college admission committees continue to modify their assessment criterions, this has caused some consternation among high schoolers who feel their chances of getting admitted to various schools fluctuate with every news release. Through literature review and analysis, this study examines the benefits and challenges of utilizing a 1-year online offering to help bolster admission rates. From research evidence, the benefits of a 1-year online structure are reduced cost to the student, enhanced networking, and study abroad opportunities while the benefit to the universities are increased inflow of tuition dollars and greater alumni base for potential future donation support. However, online learning presents numerous challenges, such as isolation and decreased motivation. This study addresses these issues by proposing schools pool their additional capital to fund offsite communal shared spaces for the very purpose of enabling face to face socialization and learning.

Conclusion: The results conclude that setting up an online learning environment for 1-year (this study used sophomore year as an example) will allow additional students to be admitted. Students can still gain social connections while realizing significant financial savings off their college bill. Universities will generate incremental revenue which, in part, can fund initiatives such as scholarships, on-campus facilities, and shared offsite classroom spaces for remote students.

KEYWORDS:

College Admissions, Online Learning, Capital Pool, College Savings

1. INTRODUCTION

All across America, the months from December through March are some of the most anxious moments of any high-school senior's life. This is the period when college decisions are released. To some, this is a joyous occasion validating their hard work and "worth" and the start of an exciting chapter in their lives. For others, it feels like a heartless dagger passing judgement over their high-school career when the words "We deeply regret to inform you..." flashes on their screen.

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College admissions committee (AdCom) find themselves in the unenviable task of deciding which applicants to offer admission to, especially when there are so many exceptional high schoolers. While It is true that there are instances of applicants with near perfect SAT scores while taking numerous AP courses and participating in nationally ranked extracurriculars being rejected from the Ivy League, college admission websites state that decisions are based upon holistic review process. Factors such as social-economic, geographic makeup and lived experience are heavily considered besides academic prowess.

The scope of this paper isn't to critique the AdCom's decisions but rather assess the viability of re-engineering the college experience with the intent of schools allowing greater number of highly qualified higher schoolers to gain acceptance to various universities. The result of the study is

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to furnish a roadmap and justifications for the outlined proposal.

2. OVERVIEW OF CURRENT STATE OF COLLEGE ADMISSIONS

2.1 College Admissions under pre-pandemic conditions

One significant trend that has evolved over the last 15 years regarding college admissions is the pursuit of a well-rounded class instead of well-rounded individuals (IvyWise). Bringing together students with diverse backgrounds enhances the community’s intellectual and social experience.

Besides the increase of applicants, another key consideration is that many top colleges have finite housing which limits the student body of a particular university. In other words, you can’t admit more than what you can house. Since 2000, the number of graduating seniors in America increased by 800,000 which equates to 80,000 top students (10% of 800,000 students). However, if you combine all of the IVYs, Stanford, Duke, MIT and Caltech, the total number of additional seats increased by only 500. Another vantage point is that as of 2020, there were 3,600,000 high School graduates while the combined seats at the Ivy’s, Stanford, Duke, MIT, and Caltech were 16,300. Therefore, 360,000 students, who comprised of the top 10%, were vying for 16,300 seats which equates to 4.5% admittance into these schools (Less High School Stress LLC).

2.2 College Admissions under post-pandemic conditions

Due to the pandemic, private and public college acceptance rates have declined in recent years. The obvious reason is due to the Test-Optional policy which schools implemented as a result of the pandemic. This has triggered the number of first-year applications to skyrocket. Colleges who historically has acceptance rates in the teens and twenties are now trending substantially lower. Another significant recent trend pertains to the focus on diversity. Diversity of regional, gender and social-economic considerations were generally promulgated, due to the death of George Floyd, a strong push for social justice has been encouraged within the admission process. Applicants who promote social activism or identify as an underrepresented minority can offset some of the applicant’s weaknesses (College Vine).

Chart 1 shows the number of admitted students and acceptance rates for various universities starting from 2018 fall incoming first-year students (class of 2022) to fall 2023 (class of 2027). The blue colored columns represents the first year of test-optional policy adopted by universities. When examining the acceptance rates pre and post test-optional policy, the rates at the most select schools doesn’t appear to have changed much. However, when examining other private schools and state public schools, the decline in rate is pronounced. Boston College dropped from 23.4% to 15.1% while University of Georgia dropped from 44.5% to 35.1%.

Chart 1. College Admission Acceptance Rate Trend

University	Class of 2027		Class of 2026		Class of 2025		Class of 2024		Class of 2023		Class of 2022	
	# of Applicants	Acceptance %	# of Applicants	Acceptance %	# of Applicants	Acceptance %	# of Applicants	Acceptance %	# of Applicants	Acceptance %	# of Applicants	Acceptance %
Princeton	32,804	5.8%	35,370	5.5%	31,056	6.1%	29,303	6.5%	27,290	7.0%	26,641	7.3%
Stanford	53,733	3.9%	56,378	3.7%	55,471	3.9%	45,227	5.2%	47,498	4.3%	47,451	4.4%
Yale	36,595	3.7%	0	4.4%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Duke	49,469	6.0%	50,002	6.2%	49,517	5.8%	39,783	7.7%	41,613	7.4%	37,302	8.3%
UCLA	145,900	8.5%	149,815	8.6%	139,490	10.8%	108,877	14.3%	108,831	12.3%	111,011	14.0%
University of Virginia	56,439	16.3%	50,962	18.7%	48,011	20.6%	40,839	20.6%	0	24.0%	0	0.0%
University of Florida	0	0.0%	65,000	0.0%	52,513	29.0%	49,401	29.5%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Boston College	36,525	15.1%	40,477	16.5%	39,875	19.0%	29,400	23.4%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
UIUC	0	45.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	43,473	63.3%	43,509	59.0%	39,406	62.2%
University of Georgia	43,700	35.1%	39,615	41.9%	39,400	39.4%	28,524	46.0%	29,314	44.5%	0	0.0%

*** Utilized various website sources such as Top Tier Admission, Ivy Coach, School Website and ect. ***

*** Some fields are blank or appear incomplete due to difficulty of obtaining information ***

Recently, there have been 2 significant events that is shaping the ever evolving college admission process.

In 2023, the US Supreme Court ruled that consideration of racial background for admission purpose is inconsistent with equal protection clause of the Constitution’s 14th amendment (UCLA Newsroom, 2023).

As of July 2024, some Ivy League schools reinstated their testing policy. Dartmouth was the first followed by Yale, Brown, Cornell. Even Harvard reversed their policy which wasn’t set to expire until 2026. The initial conclusion of reinstating testing policy centered around assessing academic readiness. Some schools stated that standardized scores are a

viable data point in determining a student’s ability to perform within a highly rigorous academic arena. It is interesting to note that Dartmouth stated their impetus for requiring testing was to maintain diversity (Dartmouth Admissions, 2024).

3. ISSUES

Regardless of how one interprets the motives of colleges coupled with the backdrop of the US Supreme Court ruling, we can conclude that the dust is yet to settle. With this backdrop of ever-changing dynamics, we can safely say that outstanding applicants will still routinely be rejected. I believe if we modify the college experience, we can help

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more high-caliber high-schoolers gain access to top universities.

4. SOLUTIONS

As you can see, there are multiple factors in play that are driving down admittance rates at various universities. While the causes may be explained, it still feels like a random selection process to some extent especially when choosing from high caliber talent pool. I believe universities would benefit, as well as applicants, if schools could admit another 5% - 20% of talented students without having to construct additional dorms and buildings.

The solution is to develop a rotational remote learning schedule that frees up classroom seats and dormitory beds. In other words, transition all sophomores (for the sake of this example) to remote online learning. At first glance this proposal may seem drastic, but I believe upon further examination, there is ample evidence that suggest if remote learning is implemented correctly, it doesn't significantly compromise learning while realizing potential benefits. There are currently educational institutions that offer fully remote bachelor's and master's degree programs. Southern New Hampshire University is one such example. They currently offer asynchronous degrees from accounting to nursing and plenty of options in between. If mirroring teaching best-practices from schools such as Southern New Hampshire University isn't appealing, then perhaps learning from numerous online master's degree programs is. The University of Illinois-Champaign Urbana has fully transitioned their entire MBA program to an online offering. Besides MBA, they also offer an online Masters of Higher Education program as well. The key take-away is that many institutions find value and have learned to adapt to online offerings, proving that online classes are an effective and viable option.

4.1 Benefits of 1-year remote learning to the students

Students' tuition can be reduced by half during their remote learning year. Additionally, they can save on a full year's worth of room & board costs.

By taking online courses, sophomores have the flexibility to take their classes either at home or even abroad. In fact, they can break up their sophomore year by doing a semester in one country while the second semester in a different country.

Another potential consideration is that some colleges may want to offer a 4-year online degree. This will enable students to save at a discounted tuition rate while fully saving on room & board cost. Some students may see this is a viable option that provides scheduling flexibility to family obligations and other considerations.

4.2 Benefits of 1-year remote learning to the college

As stated previously, the university can require sophomores to take their courses on a remote basis. This will free up dormitory rooms; allowing additional first-year students, juniors and seniors to occupy these beds.

Chart 2 illustrates how much a typical state college can raise in additional capital by migrating to a mandatory 1 year online classroom model. The chart depicts a total student body of 20,000 students each paying \$25,000 which equates to \$500,000,000 raised in tuition, which is shown under the CURRENT SCENARIO header. The next section of the chart illustrates the financials when migrating to a mandatory online curriculum during sophomore year. The total tuition raised equates to \$583,333,333. The difference between both sections equals a \$83,333,333 increase which is depicted in the last section.

The key take-away within this example is that the number of students admitted increases from 20,000 to 26,666 or a 33.3% increase. Thus, in this example, 6,666 additional students can enroll instead of being locked out or having to trade-down to a potentially lesser school. Additionally, the university can raise substantially more tuition dollars by transitioning to a 1-year online model. This provides the university with a significant amount of new capital to fund various initiatives and projects.

Chart 2. Hypothetical Scenario of Financial Benefit of Online Course Offering

	CURRENT SCENARIO			ONLINE TRANSITION DURING 2ND YEAR			VARIANCE FAV / (UNFAV)		
	Enrollment	Student Tuition	Annual Tuition	Enrollment	Student Tuition	Annual Tuition	Enrollment	Student Tuition	Annual Tuition
1st Year	5,000	\$25,000	\$125,000,000	6,667	\$25,000	\$166,666,667	1,667	\$0	\$41,666,667
2nd Year	5,000	\$25,000	\$125,000,000	0	\$25,000	\$0	(5,000)	\$0	(\$125,000,000)
3rd Year	5,000	\$25,000	\$125,000,000	6,667	\$25,000	\$166,666,667	1,667	\$0	\$41,666,667
4th Year	5,000	\$25,000	\$125,000,000	6,667	\$25,000	\$166,666,667	1,667	\$0	\$41,666,667
Total	20,000		\$500,000,000	20,000		\$500,000,000	0		\$0
Online	0	\$0	\$0	6,667	\$12,500	\$83,333,333	6,667	\$12,500	\$83,333,333
Adjusted Total	20,000		\$500,000,000	26,667		\$583,333,333	6,667		\$83,333,333

One of the obvious considerations in utilizing the additional capital could be towards merit and need-based scholarships. A certain percentage of the increased capital could be earmarked for such a worthy initiative.

Additionally, some of the capital can be used to create pre-recorded online learning modules by building state of the art

virtual classroom settings that utilizes best in class video and sound equipment to help ensure optimal student experience. An example to possibly replicate would be the University of Michigan's MBA online program. Michigan Ross School of Business has studied and implemented a dynamic and engaging framework to ensure optimal remote learning.

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There is a plateau of research on the detrimental effects of sheltering in place for an extended period of time. Sheltering in place can lead to loneliness which can lead to depression (Dr. Sam Goldstein). In other words, people need socialization for physical and mental well-being. To promote socialization for remote students, schools can create a capital pool to share the cost of rental space and equipment within various metro-areas. The shared space can consist of a common library, meeting rooms, space for clubs to meet and lecture halls for guest speakers and other large-group gatherings. Since the building is a shared space, guest lectures and clubs can be open to all students regardless of their school affiliation. By allowing access regardless of affiliation, students can network and collaborate on projects with students they normally wouldn't have the opportunity to meet if they were on their own campus. Shared support resources such as tutoring, writing and mental health assistance will also be provided onsite.

6. Dr. Sam Goldstein. *The Power of Socialization*. <https://samgoldstein.com/resources/articles/general/2022/the-power-of-socialization.aspx>

5. CONCLUSION

As shown by the literature, adopting a 1-year remote learning policy will increase the admission rate of universities by admitting additional students above their current rate. While the financial benefits to the university are the millions of dollars, students who are in their remote learning year can still gain a quality education while saving on tuition and room & board cost. Potentially, they can expand their college network by participating in clubs and events at shared sites that they otherwise would not have had the opportunity to do so.

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