

# College Courses Online Are Disappointing. Here's How to Fix Them.

No one wants to pay \$30,000 per semester for the current experience.

**By Lisa Feldman Barrett**

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Credit...Anthony Russo

Millions of families with college-age children face a difficult choice. As school after school announces that it will welcome students back to campus this fall, many classes — perhaps most — may continue to be held online. A survey of college students in the spring found that about 75 percent [were disappointed](#) with the online

learning experience during the lockdown. Is it worth paying as much as \$30,000 per semester for that sort of education?

As a tuition-paying parent of a student at a small (and not inexpensive) liberal arts college, I've learned that my family gets the best bang for our buck when our daughter engages directly with her professors, her classmates and the material. And as a professor myself, I am keenly aware of how hard it is to sustain this kind of engagement while students learn at a distance.

Can it be done? I think it can, and here's a suggestion for how to do it: Schools could embrace an older style of teaching used by British universities — the tutorial system — and adapt it for the online world.

In the classic tutorial system, students do most of their learning in small sessions that include the professor (or an assistant) and just a few other students. The students are expected to work actively with the material as they engage critically with the instructor and one another. Discussions and additional reading are tailored to students' abilities and interests. Courses may also include larger lectures and traditional exams, but the tutorials are where the main action happens. The Universities of Oxford and Cambridge





in England employ the classic tutorial system, and some aspects are practiced by small colleges in the United States such as Williams and Sarah Lawrence.

A modified tutorial system could foster a more rewarding learning experience online. Professors could record lectures on video for later viewing, annotate them with required and supplemental readings, and then schedule live video tutorials with, say, four or five students each. This style of learning might sound more challenging than sitting passively in a lecture hall, and [it is](#). But research consistently shows that active learning [leads to better learning](#).

Online tutorials would be a natural fit for smaller colleges. Larger universities, with their stadium-style lecture courses, might find the transition more challenging. But even so, there are options. Tutorials could be bigger, perhaps up to 15 students (a class size that [research suggests](#) is compatible with high levels of student achievement), and could be led not just by professors but also by supervised teaching assistants, typically doctoral students or postdoctoral fellows.

As it happens, I use a similar system in a research laboratory course that I run at Northeastern University. Lecture-related material is placed online for students to download and consume on their own, and students meet in small groups every week with a graduate student, postdoc or full-time researcher who is supervised by me or the other professor who directs our lab. In my experience, more students end up participating collectively in the intellectual journey, rather than just the most extroverted or gregarious ones who tend to speak up during large lectures.

So, what's the catch? I won't sugarcoat it: Active, online learning means a lot more work for professors and other instructors. For a college course with 20 students, split into four tutorials of five students each, our teaching time could quadruple. And that estimate doesn't include the time required to adapt and record lectures for online viewing. Even if university and college administrators were to pitch in by hiring more instructors (hardly a certain proposition, given the financial pressure that many schools are under), my chest gets tight just thinking about the effort involved.

But extra work beats furloughs and layoffs, which have been the response of many schools to the challenges of the lockdown. Plus, the fruits of our labors could make a meaningful educational contribution, improving the quality of higher education not just now but also after the pandemic is over.

As a parent, I can say that it's exciting to imagine my daughter taking courses this way, engaging in challenging discussions with her professors. If she and her peers can get a quality education even under today's difficult circumstances, that would be something worth paying for.





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