



'I didn't pay to attend Zoom': Students sue colleges, universities for tuition refunds

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WASHINGTON (Sinclair Broadcast Group) — Summer break will look different in the age of the coronavirus, especially for the students who are spending it suing their colleges and universities for a refund.

Students attending at least 26 colleges have filed class-action lawsuits demanding refunds for tuition and fees after schools shut down campuses amid the pandemic.

The lawsuits argued that students should be refunded or credited a portion of their tuition, as well as unused housing and campus fees covering the weeks they were forced off-campus.

Most of the complaints revolve around what students say is a decreased quality of education by switching from the classroom to online learning. Many of the suits also cited the loss of other benefits, like access to labs, libraries, extracurricular activities, athletics, social development and the independence of living away from home.

This shift to online learning has led many to question the value of their education and whether they are getting their money's worth.

An MBA student at Northwestern University explained the situation in a Wall Street Journal [opinion](#) piece. "Would you pay \$75,000 for front-row seats to a Beyoncé concert and be satisfied with a livestream instead? It doesn't make sense for universities to charge full price while delivering a fundamentally different product than their customers paid for," Kunal Pasrija wrote.

At the same time, colleges and universities have been forced to adapt to new circumstances. Many have claimed they do not have the resources to reimburse tuition. They continue to pay for staff, administrators, buildings as well as the additional costs of shifting to online learning platforms.

"I think students need to be understanding that the colleges also have expenses," explained Neal McCluskey, director of the Cato Institute's education program. "The costs associated with maintaining housing don't go away just because the students aren't there."

Smaller schools struggling with budgets are less able to offer tuition relief. According to Inside Higher Ed, colleges with large endowments or access to federal and state grant money or land leases are likely to be in a better financial position to provide students with refunds.

Many of the suits involve colleges with endowments surpassing \$1 billion. The use of that money is complicated, but the size of the endowments has led students and their attorneys to question their school's reluctance to reimburse for lost educational opportunities.

Additionally, dozens of colleges and universities are expected to get millions of dollars in relief for the financial strain and disruption caused by the pandemic as part of the \$2.2 trillion CARES Act.

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Among the defendants are some of the costliest Ivy League schools like Brown, Columbia and Cornell as well as public universities like the University of California and California State University systems, New York University, Michigan State, Penn State and Purdue.

At Penn State, one of the most expensive public schools in the country, student Tyler Thomson is suing for breach of contract and unjust enrichment. In the legal complaint, Thomson's attorney argued he and his classmates were deprived of the "true college experience" and forced to pay for services they did not receive.

Online education "is not commensurate with the same classes being taught in person," wrote Stuart Carpey, Thomson's attorney.

After shutting its doors in March, the university announced it would not reimburse tuition because online classes were still available. Penn State did say they would offer prorated housing and meal plan reimbursements.

One of the biggest questions in seeking a refund is estimated the cost difference between online and on-campus classes. Penn State acknowledged that its online degree program is 44% to 80%

cheaper than on-campus tuition. The school is also offering discounted rates for the summer 2020 semester, a fact that Carpey suggested would help the case for tuition reimbursement.

A student in California went a step further, alleging that the University of California and California State systems are "profiting from this pandemic." UC Davis student Claire Brandmeyer filed a class-action suit last week "on behalf of all people who paid fees" for the spring 2020 semester.

The lawsuit further accused the University of California of "pass[ing] the losses on to students and/or their families" after switching to online classes.

The UC system has an endowment of more than \$125 billion. UC Berkely, one of the colleges named in a lawsuit, is expected to receive \$30 million from the CARES Act, half of which will reportedly be spent on emergency financial assistance for students.

At New York University, a student filed a \$5 million class-action suit arguing that online classes are not worth the \$36,000 in tuition and fees. In an online petition calling on NYU to discount tuition, one student wrote, "I didn't pay to attend Zoom."

Among the Ivy Leagues, Columbia ranks the most expensive. Undergraduate tuition and fees topped \$62,000 for the current academic year.

The university has offered some refunds on housing and fees after it moved classes online but the students suing the college are demanding a tuition refund after the university shifted to a pass/fail grading system. Among the allegations, the complaint stated that "the value of any degree issued on the basis of online or pass/fail classes will be diminished for the rest of the Plaintiffs' life."

The lawsuit continued that the school has refused to refund student tuition. Its endowment is over \$11 billion.

At Brown University, students paid \$28,556 for tuition for the 15-week spring 2020 semester. According to the lawsuit, the cost of room and board was \$4,710, meal plans cost up to \$2,956 and students were also charged roughly \$200 in activity fees and \$470 for health services.

Unlike other colleges offering students partial refunds for unused housing and tuition, the complaint argued that Brown "has refused to provide any tuition or fee refund for the Spring 2020 semester. Defendant only offered minimal adjustments for housing and meal plans."

HIGH COSTS OF HIGHER EDUCATION DURING COVID-19

The disruptions caused by the pandemic have been a challenge for everyone in higher education. Students, teachers, college administrators have been forced to adjust to an online learning environment and, in some cases, rapidly build the technology for it.

While no one was at fault for the virus, universities and colleges should still offer students a portion of their tuition or risk longterm harm to their reputations, according to college educator and author Ron Auerbach.

"[G]iving students back a portion of their tuition to compensate for the lack of campus instruction is the least I feel that should be done under the circumstances," Auerbach said. "Not offering a refund, even a partial one, makes the college or university look like the 'bad one.' This is something that will only make them look worse not better."

Refunding tuition will be more expensive in the short term, "But it will also help you profit later."

Another loss will come as students consider re-enrolling next semester or incoming freshmen weigh the pros and cons of starting their college lives working from a laptop at home. Some students may delay college or take a semester off but the conditions could drive other students to drop out.

"Among the students already at risk of not persisting, we're going see an uptick in the number of students dropping out as a result of this," said Michael Ellison, founder and CEO of CodePath.org.

A lot of vulnerable students, including first-generation college attendees, low-income students and underrepresented groups, are struggling to work within the new environment where there is less support. Others are questioning the benefit of attending college if it means they don't have the ability to network or collaborate with students and professors.

"The challenge is a major hardship for them," Ellison continued. "If you're coming from a low-income population, sometimes it's a struggle to even justify going to school versus getting a job to support your family."

Ellison emphasized that schools should be focused on providing better online learning options and the infrastructure to the most vulnerable students.

There are also concerns that students in different disciplines will be hurt more than others by campus shutdowns. For example, students with a lab requirement, or those studying science, engineering or medicine are more likely to suffer from not having access to resources on and off-campus. It is also unclear when students will be able to travel abroad for their education.

The debate over the high price of higher education has been coming to a head for years. It was center stage in the 2020 Democratic presidential race with candidates Vermont Independent Sen. Bernie Sanders and Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren advocating tuition-free college.

In some cases, the coronavirus has become the last straw for students and families facing the astronomical and rising costs of higher education.

In the current academic year, the average cost of a public four-year college was roughly \$21,000, an 18% increase over 2010. The average price of a private school came close to \$47,000, marking a 31% over 2010.