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<https://www.wsj.com/articles/choosing-a-college-during-coronavirus-how-four-students-decided-11600315318>

JOURNAL REPORTS: COLLEGE RANKINGS

Choosing a College During Coronavirus: How Four Students Decided

This was an especially difficult year for students to choose where to start their freshman year



Zoe Damaschino and Cristian Rodriguez are starting their college careers in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic.

PHOTO: ZOE DAMASCHINO, CRISTIAN RODRIGUEZ

By [Melissa Korn](#)

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Choosing a college in the best of times is stressful. Choosing a college during the pandemic has brought intensified anxiety and uncertainty not just over longstanding issues such as financial aid, but also new ones like virus trends in different geographies and whether classes would be in-person or online.

Four first-year students shared their experiences. Their stories have been edited for clarity and length.

(You can see the [full Wall Street Journal/Times Higher Education College Rankings](#) as well as sort the complete rankings by a variety of measures and reweight the main contributing factors to reflect what's most important to you. Or you can [compare two colleges](#).)

Matthew Gandara, Dallas

New York University's Tisch School of the Arts



Matthew Gandara

PHOTO: MATTHEW GANDARA

NYU had always been the school I wanted to go to. I applied to all the art schools I could think of. I got into a lot of them, too. But at NYU I was wait-listed. So I had almost decided to go to U Arts [University of the Arts, in Philadelphia]. Then, in May, I got an email telling me I got into NYU.

When my mom found out, she started crying. I talked it over with my parents and we all decided it would be better for me to go to NYU, regardless of how much it cost. My family doesn't have a lot of money. I did get financial aid; it was not nearly as much as I would like. My parents and I both took out loans. But it's OK. I have faith that throughout the four years, I'm going to be able to make some start on getting the debt out of the way.

My sister went to community college and she graduated. But I'm the first to be going to university. The whole process has just been really, really weird. There's been no guidance, no direct help on how to get everything done.

I've never even been to New York. This fall was going to be the first time I would have been out there, and been that far away from Texas. They asked us, if we were from a hot-zone state, to come into school two weeks early for a quarantine period. Two weeks straight without being able to leave. There was no way I would be mentally healthy in that environment.

I'm going to stay in Dallas for the first semester taking classes remotely.

I really did want to go to New York. To be given this opportunity, and then to decide it would be better for me to not go, it was crazy.

Hopefully, next semester I will be able to go to New York. I have been connected with students around the country that are staying in their states as well. We can talk about that and relate to each other on that level.

Zoe Damaschino, Danville, Calif.

Diablo Valley College



Zoe Damaschino

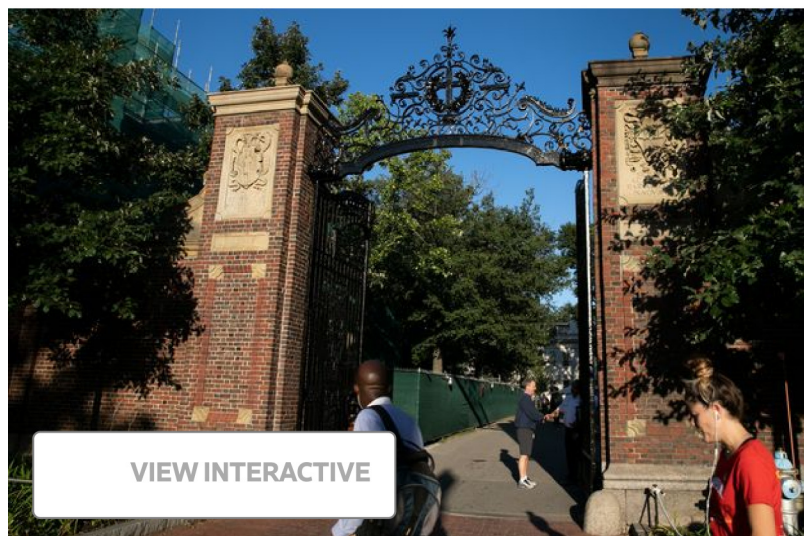
PHOTO: ZOE DAMASCHINO

I applied to 11 colleges. The University of Oregon was my top choice. I was definitely looking for an out-of-state school, a bigger university, a big college campus, college town, lots of school spirit. I visited two schools in Colorado, the University of Oregon and Oregon State in the first week of March or last week of February. University of Oregon was the school I liked most and could see myself at. It took a lot of convincing for my parents. It's a big commitment to go to a school that's out of state and will cost about \$53,000 to attend.

I was planning on taking out partial student loans. I reached out to some big benefactors, including Lorry Lokey [founder of Business Wire]. He told me a lot about my financial options, the money I'd be saving if I went to community college. He kind of talked some sense into me. Then I reached out to Phil Knight [co-founder of Nike]. He raved about Oregon, and said there were two options: go to Oregon, take a chance, get a job; or stay home, save up, go to community college for a year or two, then go to Oregon with money in my pocket and get the college experience I wanted.

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KAYANA SZYMCAK FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

I started to think: Is it worth it to pay \$53,000 for possible online schooling, possibly not even having in-person classes at all? Imagine going there when you're stuck in your dorm and it's not safe to go out to restaurants. That first-year experience you expect, and coming to terms with the fact that that probably won't be the experience you'll be having.

I decided in July. I'm at Diablo Valley College, taking seven classes for \$900. I'm loading up. The plan is to transfer next year, back to Oregon or maybe apply to a few more schools.

It's really hard when you're sitting in high school and you're thinking you want to go to a four-year institution because that's the norm. I would just advise people to do their research, not be too closed-minded about the one future you saw for yourself. Your future is not always set in stone.

W. Henry Michalak, Marietta, Ga.

Wofford College



W. Henry Michalak

PHOTO: HENRY MICHALAK

I applied to all of my schools early action. I wanted to maximize the amount of scholarships that were available. I applied to Sewanee: The University of the South, the University of Georgia, University of Mississippi, Louisiana State University and others. I think it was something like 13 schools.

I didn't really have a top choice. I kind of just applied and then I would go on the tours. I was able to visit a lot of them before Covid.

I got into the Wofford Scholars Program. It's an academic-merit scholarship that covers most of the cost of attendance. And I have always learned better in a smaller environment, smaller classroom. So Wofford provided that. When I got on campus I just kind of fell in love with it.

I committed to Wofford in early April.

Wofford sent us emails updating us on everything, but I didn't know how school was going to play out. I really wasn't sure if we were going to be on campus. Wofford kept telling us we were going to try. I personally thought that if we went back to school, we'd go for a little bit and then be sent home.

I got a little cabin-feverish when we got sent home by my boarding school last spring. I do like to go outside, go out and do things. That was hard.

My parents were a little bit concerned about how the Covid stuff was going to work at Wofford. I drove to campus with my parents at the end of August. Both were just like, be safe and have a good time.

It's nice that I get to be on campus, but they had to put a lot of restrictions on things that we typically would do, a lot of the normal college experience.

Cristian Rodriguez, Whittier, Calif.

University of California, Berkeley



Cristian Rodriguez

PHOTO: CRISTIAN RODRIGUEZ

I knew I wanted to go somewhere that offered the right balance between prestige and money, like financial aid.

Some of my top choices were UC Berkeley, UCLA, University of Southern California and UC Santa Cruz. Oh, and I applied to Yale, just for fun.

The only campus that I applied to that I had already visited was UCLA. It was a little bit scary. Even now, I've never even been in the city of Berkeley.

I was naive when the pandemic first started. Even our high school was saying this break is only for two weeks, we'll be back in class. I didn't think I would have to be studying from home.

At first Berkeley didn't give me that much financial aid, but due to the pandemic my dad lost his job, so we were able to get more. I sent in an application and it all went really smoothly. They were very nice.

[Berkeley is conducting undergraduate classes remotely.] It seems like it would be too expensive and inconvenient, living out there, away from my parents. It's a lot easier to just stay here and have all my meals paid for and I can continue to save money until I need it for next year.

I feel like I wasn't as disappointed as I should have been. But the pandemic has been one never-ending disappointment. I've gotten a little numb.

I'm taking classes in philosophy, Japanese literature, earthquakes and a very fitting class called plagues and pandemics.

All of my friends are staying here at their homes, except for one who just moved out to Harvard. I see them sometimes. We try to keep it safe, small numbers.

I did think about going to a community college, just for a tiny bit. But the amount of financial aid I got from Berkeley, I'm literally not paying anything to go there right now.

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