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College Unbound: The Future of Higher Education and What It Means for Students

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College Unbound: The Future of Higher Education and What it Means for Students

Selingo, J. J. (2013). New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Publishing Company.

Reviewed by Brad Pulcifer

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Change. Evolve. Disrupt. *Un-bind*. They are provocative catch-words that seem to be filling the corridors of administrative offices across university campuses and occupying the conversations in ballrooms of educational conferences throughout the country. *Un-binding* the college experience is a concept that is becoming all too familiar (yet again) within the national dialogue about the future of higher education and is once more the quintessential question of our time. Is the way we know and do and think higher education coming to an end? It is this question that has propelled author Jeffrey Selingo (editor at large for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*) to ink the pages of his new book “College Unbound: The Future of Higher Education and What it Means for Students.” Selingo presents a case for how technology is acutely changing the way higher education will be delivering content to its stakeholders. Selingo’s latest publication takes readers through what could be described as a survey course on the historical narrative of higher learning and follows with a summarization of the economic, social, and globalizing effects that are carrying higher education to new frontiers and innovative methods of content delivery.

Selingo begins building on his premise that technology is changing “how we do” higher education by offering a treatise addressing the all too common and prominent questions and concerns that knock on the office doors of college admissions officers and administrators: tuition costs and affordability, graduation rates, and student debt, to name a few. It’s the continuous mounting tension in these issues that lead Selingo to liken the arena of higher learning institutions to that of the auto industry, full of “hubris, opposition to change and resistance to accountability” (p. x) and in so doing argues that our current system is broken and unsustainable. In the fold of these topics, Selingo certainly questions how astute some financial decision making has been in light of mounting student debt, ultimately leading the reader to conclude that to some degree the university has itself to blame for the current crises. Today, college students have accrued a whopping estimated \$1 trillion debt, which in turn has been squandered (in his perspective) on campus purchases such as giant rock walls and Olympic sized swimming pools and, my personal favorite, the giant 645-foot rafting pool housed at Texas Tech.

With stubbornness no longer an option, financial accountability on the minds of every stakeholder, and a new demand for nimble and flexible thinking, Selingo has identified five “forces of disruption” that are leading institutions to think differently about the future: cash flow, state funding, global competition, unbundling of content, and value of a degree. Cash flow is becoming a genuine encumbrance for colleges and universities, especially in a post-2008 market collapsed economy. Based on research by Moody’s Investor Service, in a report on Drew University’s bond-rating downgrade, they stated it was a result of “persistent operating deficits and thin cash-flow driven by a decline in enrollment and net tuition per student coupled with rising debt service payments and transition of several key” (p. 60). Selingo carries the conclusion of this report and links it to the overarching narrative of cash flow issues on college campuses across the country. There also has been an enormous shift in state financial support for universities since 2008 as Selingo notes that across the country there has been a swift disinvestment in public education leaving universities with a choice: significantly cut costs (and by doing so give up on all or part of their mission) or continue to raise tuition.

Universities are also seeing the “well dry up” in regards to American students and their families with the financial viability to pay for the college bill in full. In turn, international recruitment has picked up substantially, especially in China, where families are in a position to not just pay for their education but to write a check for the full amount. Not only are educational institutions dealing with “forces of change” in terms of cash flow issues, state disinvestment, and international competition, there is also the addition of the improvement of unbundled alternatives and the definition of value of a degree. Online education and MOOCs are forcing institutions to rethink how they offer their content. Finally, there is a huge shift in demand for evidence of the value of a degree. The total sum of debt that students are saddled with after receiving a degree is at an all-time high and the pressure for repayment is pushing the national conversation to seeking justification for how a college degree is worth such an investment.

So what exactly is this *new frontier* of higher education? Selingo proposes it is a terrain modeled similarly after how one goes about bundling vacation packages or even how you attain telecommunication services. *À la carte* learning. Pick and choose how *you* will acquire your desired knowledge base. How does he come to this conclusion? Selingo points to what is *already* happening within the industry (industry being a term Selingo uses to describe higher education today). Innovative developments such as MOOCs and online classrooms are a beacon to the industry that change is not just coming, it has already arrived. Selingo draws attention to the reluctance institutions of higher education have had to adopting data accumulation in the way mega-corporations such as Google, Facebook and Netflix have done is beginning to change. Selingo signals his readers to an alarming thought; that we have used such data accumulation to help us make “mundane choices like picking out next movie from Netflix, but not to help a student select the right college or pass a class needed for a degree” (p. 74). That current thread of thinking is shifting. Citing Technology Enhanced Knowledge Research Institute leader George Siemens, Selingo quotes “we’re moving from a model where we forced one teaching method on hundreds of students in a class to a model where we can personalize the education of every student on a campus...the way we learn should be our most personalized experience because no two people process information the same way” (p. 74).

I once heard during a workshop delivered by Dr. Peter Lake, law professor at Stetson University, that higher education is one of the only customer driven markets where the customer is asking to be taken advantage of. Mr. Selingo echoes such a statement by noting how people today, when making a decision to go to college, are at the mercies of the colleges available. Selingo writes “higher education benefits from confusion in the market, because schools can hide behind national averages on salaries, and would-be schools are more apt to trust a school’s marketing materials in the absence of better information” (p. 127). This type of model is quickly vanishing before our eyes. As higher education looks to the not-so-distant future, it is one which includes a philosophy built on modality, affordability, and access; all a derivative from the boom in technological advancement.

It will become a world where the student finds that they have more control to the way they desire to learn. Colleges are urged to position themselves for the climatic shift that is already occurring. Technology has changed and is still changing the way we function in everyday life; it was only a matter of time before it grasped hold of the academic arena and altered the classroom. 

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