

# The Learning Class

The coming transformation in higher education

by Anya Kamenetz, from *DIY U*

**ALMOST NINE OUT OF TEN** American high school seniors say they want to go to college.

This is a new historical fact. For most of the thousand years or so since it was invented, a university education was thought to be suited only for a tiny group—a ruling class or a subculture of scholars. Since World War II, this country has turned it into not only a mass-market product but also the best hope of achieving a middle-class income. Sending your kids to college is now part of the American Dream, just like home ownership; and just like home ownership, it's something we have been willing to go deeply into hock for.

Faith in the universal power of higher learning is at the heart of modernity. From enhancing our basic humanity to preserv-

worldwide are caught between the spiraling cost of college and an apparently bottomless hunger for it.

Meanwhile, here in America, the birthplace of mass higher education, our faith is no longer moving mountains. Since the 1970s, our educational attainment has stalled while the rest of the world is roaring ahead.

About 30 percent of high school students drop out, and almost half of all college students don't graduate, so only a little over a third of Americans end up with any kind of college degree. For centuries the world's most educated nation, we have fallen behind five others. Unlike citizens of every other rich country except Germany, Americans in their late teens and early 20s are no more educated than older generations.

**The good news is that all over the world people are thinking big about how to change higher education.**

ing culture, economic and technological development to social equality, and redressing ills from global warming to AIDS, there are very few needs for which more education has not been prescribed.

Warranted or not, this belief is the closest thing we have to a world religion. And it is winning converts at unprecedented speed. People around the world are demanding more education as a human right and as a pathway out of poverty. In 1900 about half a million people worldwide were enrolled in colleges. A century later the number was 100 million. According to a 2009 report by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 150 million students are now enrolled in some kind of education beyond high school, a 53 percent increase in less than a decade.

That number represents more than one in four college-age young people worldwide. The growth has touched even the most impoverished and war-torn countries. Sub-Saharan Africa, the world's poorest region, has 5 percent of its population enrolled in higher education, and this is the lowest participation rate on the planet. UNESCO concluded that there's no foreseeable way that enough traditional universities could be physically built in the next two decades to match the demand. Young people

President Obama is clear on the problem. In his first address to Congress, he promised: "We will provide the support necessary for all young Americans to complete college and meet a new goal: By 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world."

Obama has appointed some wonderful advocates for students to the Department of Education. His administration has backed great proposals, like increasing the Pell Grant, cutting corporate subsidies out of the student-loan program, simplifying the federal student-aid application process, and raising funding for community colleges. But nothing on the table is addressing the underlying issues that make tuition rise, nor the capacity problems and leaks in the system.

What's to be done about dropout rates approaching 50 percent and outstanding student-loan debt that currently totals more than \$830 billion? At first, I stood with progressives who say the federal government should increase grants and rein in the parasitic student-loan business. But while the student-loan industry has been part of the problem, and more grants are part of the solution, there is more to this story. College tuition has been outpacing inflation for decades. Between 1990 and 2008, tuition and fees rose 248 percent in real dollars, more

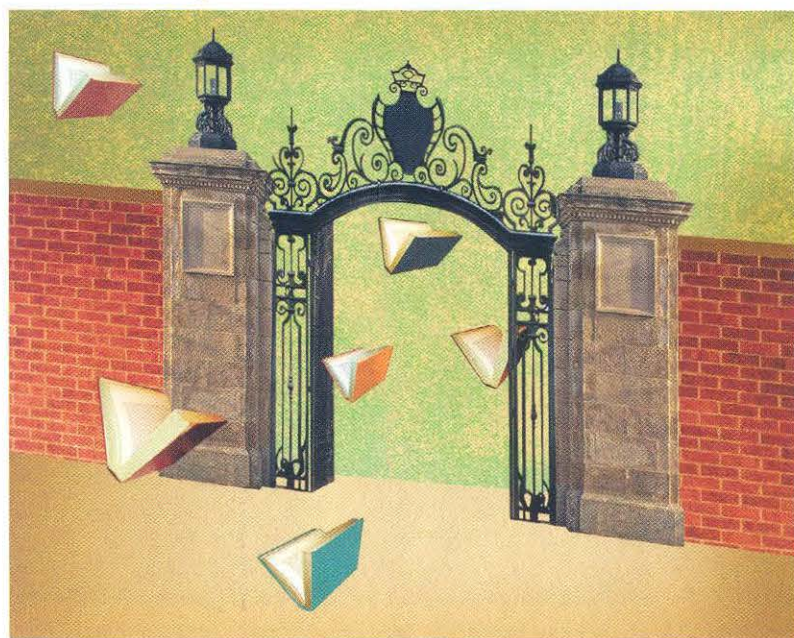


than any other major component of the Consumer Price Index. Raising the Pell Grant doesn't address this underlying problem. Constant transfusions of public money help keep the patient alive but do not stop the bleeding.

Metaphors aside, the higher education system has a lot in common with another great challenge our country is confronting: health care. Colleges, like hospitals, have little incentive to conserve resources or compete on price. They can actually gain prestige by raising tuition. They shift costs to students to make up for gaps in state funding, and then hand out grant money to the applicants they want the most, not the ones who need the most help. Community colleges dedicated to serving the poorest get a fraction of the public money that goes to flagship state universities. Millions of students are taking online classes, but technol-

ogy hasn't yet changed the prevailing model or brought down costs in higher education as it has for so many other industries.

in education. Nor can we grapple with the challenges we face as a global community without meeting the world's burgeoning demand for education. The way I see it, there are two basic options: fundamentally change the way higher education is delivered, or resign ourselves to never having enough of it.



The good news is that all over the world people are thinking big about how to change higher education. Brick, stone, and marble institutions with centuries of prestige behind them are increasingly being joined by upstarts, both nonprofit and for-profit, and even more loosely organized communities of educational practitioners and apprentices. The open education movement started at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 2001, when the school decided to put its coursework online for free. Today, you can go online to MIT Open Courseware and find materials for 2,000 courses, nearly every one MIT offers, from physics to art history. More than 78 million people have raided this trove.

ogy hasn't yet changed the prevailing model or brought down costs in higher education as it has for so many other industries.

As a top higher education policy aide told me, "We are just tinkering around the edges." And an Obama appointee (who also did not want to be identified) agreed that the nation is highly unlikely, given current tactics, to reach Obama's target, which would essentially mean doubling the numbers who graduate within one decade. The National Center for Education Statistics released a report in September 2009 estimating that college enrollments will increase by just 13 percent by 2018.

This isn't good enough. The claims we make on behalf of formal education are at times exaggerated. On its own it is no panacea. And there's a dangerous confusion between ends and means—between growing educational institutions and advancing the cause of learning itself. Yet the power of learning, while it is mysterious, is real. America can't remain a global economic powerhouse while it slides to the middle of the heap

Open educational content is just the beginning. Want a personalized tutor to teach you math or French? A class that's structured like an immersive role-playing game? An accredited bachelor's degree, in six months, for a few thousand dollars? A free, peer-to-peer Wiki university? These all exist today, the beginnings of a complete educational remix. Do-It-Yourself University means the expansion of education beyond classroom walls: free, open-source, vocational, experiential, and self-directed learning.

**THIS OPENING WORLD PRESENTS** huge questions about the true nature of a college education. The university is more than a thousand years old, older than modernity itself. On American soil it has grown like *Katamari Damacy*, the Japanese video game in which a magical "clumping spirit" snowballs around the world collecting every-

thing in its path until it attains the size of a star.

The latter-day "multiversity," as it was dubbed by University of California President Clark Kerr in 1963, clumps teaching with research; vocational and technical education with liberal arts; sports, clubs, and parties with intellectual life; accreditation and evaluation with mentoring and friendship. For students "college" means very different things at different times: the place to grow up, be out on your own, make friends, take leadership roles, prepare for and find a good job, and even learn.

Technology upsets the traditional hierarchies and categories of education. It can put the learner at the center of the educational process. Increasingly, this means students will decide what they want to learn, and when, where, and with whom; and they will learn by doing. Functions that have long hung together, like research and teaching, learning and assessment, or content, skills, accreditation, and socialization, can be delivered separately.



Here are four trends guiding this transformation:

**1. The 80/20 Rule.** Most of the growth in higher education over the next century will come from the 85 percent of students who are “nontraditional” in some way—older, working adults, or ethnic minorities. They will increasingly attend the 80 percent of institutions that are nonselective, meaning that they admit the vast majority of applicants. This includes most mainstream public universities as well as community colleges and for-profit colleges, which saw the most growth between 2002 and 2006.

For-profit colleges are the only U.S. institutions that are seriously committed to expanding their numbers, community colleges already enroll half of all undergraduates, and both disproportionately enroll the demographic groups that dominate the next generation of Americans: Hispanics, all other minority groups, first-generation college students. Some of the boldest thinking is happening in these “nontraditional” institutions. Concerns about quality and affordability in the new mainstream of higher education have to be addressed head-on.

**2. The Great Unbundling.** Universities historically have combined many social, educational, and other benefits in one-stop shopping. Increasingly, some of these resources (faculty time, for example) are strained, while others (like written course content) are approaching a marginal cost of zero. As it has with industries from music to news, digital technology will compel institutions to specialize and collaborate, find economies of scale and avoid duplications.

Books can be freed from the printed page, courses freed from geographical classrooms and individual faculty members, and students freed from enrolling in a single institution.

Stripped-down institutions that focus on instruction or assessment only, or on a particular discipline or area, will find larger and larger audiences. The most cutting-edge sciences and the most traditional liberal arts can both flourish in a specialized, concentrated, and technologically enhanced setting. I have seen professors elevate the craft of teaching rhetoric, composition, and critical thinking itself to new heights using social media and applying cutting-edge research about learning.

**3. Techno-hybridization.** No, it’s not mutant robots from outer space. According to U.S. Department of Education research, a blend of technology-assisted and traditional class instruction works better than either one alone. This blending can occur with institutions enrolling students on campus or off, in classrooms or online—studies have shown that students do a better job collaborating online if they meet in person even once.

**4. Personal Learning Networks and Paths.** There will likely still be plenty of demand for the traditional collegiate experience, but as only one of many options and entry points. People who graduate from high school at 18 and go straight through four years of college are already a minority of all young Americans,

around one in ten. Pulling America out of its educational slump requires designing programs flexible and supportive enough to reach the 44 percent of students who currently drop out of college and the 30 to 35 percent who drop out of high school. These programs have to provide socialization, personal development, and critical-thinking skills, not just job training.

Self-directed learning will be increasingly important. Already, the majority of students attend more than one insti-



tution during their college careers, and more than half seek to enhance their experience with an internship. In the future, with the growing availability of online courses and other resources, more individuals will forge a personal learning path, combining classroom and online learning, work and other experiences.

Open education pioneer Alec Couros at the University of Regina, Saskatchewan, talks about assembling personal learning networks that include mentors, colleagues, media sources, books, and collections of links. The existing system will be challenged to come up with new forms of accreditation, transfer credits, and certification so that the value of this work can be recognized by potential employers and others.

**EDUCATION IS AN ESSENTIALLY** conservative enterprise. If we didn’t believe that one generation had something important to transmit to the next, we wouldn’t need education. So changing education makes people really, really nervous. In a shake-up, the elites have the most to lose. So much of the present-day



value of a college degree is based on centuries of accumulated reputation. Real reform will mean a system that is judged and judges its graduates on quality of results, not on names alone.

Traditional educators raise concerns that are legitimate even when they are self-interested. There's no good way to measure the benefits of the old-fashioned face-to-face educational model; there's worry that something important will be discarded in the race ahead. More fundamentally, no one knows if it's possible to extend the benefits of higher education to the majority of a population without diluting its essence.

Still, in an ideal world, opportunities to stretch your abilities, test your personal mettle, follow your natural curiosity, and jam intellectually with friends, colleagues, and mentors—all the good stuff that is supposed to happen in college—would be more open to more people at all ages and transition points in life. Traditional colleges will continue to find plenty of eager applicants who want the experiences only they can provide. The 80 percent of American college students who currently attend

while continuing to squeeze jobs, wages, and benefits.

Even jobs that require a college degree increasingly do not offer traditional middle-class trappings like full-time hours, health insurance, retirement security, or a path to advancement. College students can see that even their own instructors, people who have sacrificed their entire lives on the altar of education, are often cobbling together part-time adjunct jobs at poverty wages and without benefits.

Solving this problem requires a movement. More progressive taxation. Universal health care. Better laws to guarantee benefits such as paid vacation and family leave. And strong support of the right to organize, with laws like the Employee Free Choice Act, so workers can fight for their fair share of corporate profits. This kind of social justice work will increase access to better opportunities for a decent living for all Americans, regardless of how many years of education they manage to get.

At the same time, we can continue to increase access to education itself by opening up the institutional structure of

## To truly progress in education, and in our society as a whole, we need to redirect our resources and energy away from institutions and toward individuals.

nonselective institutions will have many more options, and so will the majority of young people, those who drop out or who never apply.

Tuition costs would reach sane levels due to increased use of technology, true competition, and better-allocated federal and state incentives. This would lower one of the most important barriers to educational access. By modifying the economics of the nation's second-largest industry, we would save money and tap the resources and energy of a whole new generation to tackle challenges like building a greener society, expanding the middle class, creating better jobs, and providing health care. Alternatives to the four-year bachelor's degree would become more visible and acceptable, which might help bridge one of the biggest social divides in American life. Whether these incipient changes will lead to that kind of positive transformation, however, still hangs in the balance.

**IF A FOUR-YEAR COLLEGE DEGREE** is your only hope of getting a good job, and a flimsy hope at that, the problem is not that there aren't enough people with four-year degrees. The problem is that there aren't enough good jobs, whether blue-collar or white-collar.

The 2008 recession gave way to another so-called jobless recovery, in which companies rebuilt productivity and profits

education, offering more mix-and-match, smaller-scale options, self-directed and self-contained courses of study in which people are able to follow their interests—informed by knowledge of what career options are out there, and which fields have good prospects down the road. People also need new ways to communicate their achievements and success so that they can be recognized by peers and potential employers.

The good news is that there's a great deal of this kind of innovation going on inside and outside the higher education establishment. These innovations offer the chance of breaking the iron links between how much money colleges spend, how exclusive they are, how prestigious they are, and especially how successful their students are. To truly progress in education, and in our society as a whole, we need to redirect our resources and energy away from institutions and toward individuals. **UR**



Anya Kamenetz, a senior writer at *Fast Company*, blogs about higher education issues at <http://diyubook.com>. Excerpted from *DIY U: Edupunks, Edupreneurs, and the Coming Transformation of Higher Education* (Chelsea Green, 2010).