

College (Un)bound: The Future of Higher Education and What It Means for Students, by Jeffrey J. Selingo. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013, 256 pp., \$26.00 hardbound.

Change Is Coming

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Higher education is undergoing its most critical examination in several generations. Tuitions have increased faster than inflation for decades, a constant source of irritation that turned into anger as incomes were squashed by the recession. At the same time, serious questions about the quality of higher education are being raised by scholars such as Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, authors of *Academically Adrift* (2011), in which they showed that 45 percent of students made no gains in critical thinking or writing skills in the first two years of college. Add to this simmering pot of discontent over college cost and

quality: *College (Un)bound: The Future of Higher Education and What It Means for Students*, by veteran higher education journalist Jeffrey J. Selingo.

College (Un)bound presents Selingo's take on the state of higher education, the changes disrupting the status quo, and the implications for tomorrow's college students. The book provides "a campus tour of sorts—it gives you the lay of the land in the current higher-education system and shows how it's likely to change in the future." In this, Selingo succeeds—though in the interest of full disclosure, readers should know that Selingo is a nonresident fellow at my organization, Education Sector, and we are co-authors of a paper measuring the value of a college degree.

Selingo's main argument is that technology-fueled change is coming to higher education, and for students this will largely be beneficial. The driving force behind much of what looms: new technology that allows for the personalization and "unbundling" of education. These changes will disrupt the way colleges have operated for centuries.

Selingo highlights, for example, a number of new tools that act like super-counselors: *Naviance* helps

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high school students gauge their chances of being accepted at different colleges and guides them through the application process. *ConnectEDU* lets students know if they are on track for acceptance at their first-choice colleges. *Degree Compass* provides Netflix-like course recommendations once students are in college. And Arizona State University's *eAdvisor* monitors academic progress to determine if students are on track for graduation or at risk of dropping out.

But the really disruptive aspects of personalized education, Selingo says, involve a more fundamental shake-up of the status quo. We are already seeing lectures, assessment, and tutoring tailored in real time for each student based on whether the student demonstrates an understanding of the material. Students who master a concept quickly can move on at their own pace, while those who are struggling receive targeted assessments to diagnose the obstacles and come up with remedies. When a student gets “stuck on a problem related to linear functions,” for example, “he’s pulled into a tutoring lesson” to clear up the confusion.

In a traditional classroom, personalizing education requires very small class sizes, but computers can personalize education for every student. This has the potential to

replace the in-class lecture and “flip” the classroom on a much wider scale:

Students amass information outside of class largely through online materials and class time is spent processing that information and working through problems with the professor or other students.

As for the other disruptive force that Selingo identifies, “unbundling”:

The traditional college is becoming unbound—its students less tethered to one campus...and its functions...no longer in a one-size-fits-all package.

Over time, students will increasingly receive their education from more than one college—Selingo calls this the “student swirl,” and this bouncing around from college to college should not be confused with the traditional concept of transferring from one college to another—picking and choosing only those aspects of college that appeal to them. Full-time workers attending college part-time are generally less interested in socialization with fellow students, for example, and it will become much easier to unbundle this facet of college life from their more academic pursuits.

Probably the most significant unbundling the new technology will

foster is the diminishing relationship between seat time in a classroom and credits toward a credential. As computer-based courses and assessment software improve and allow for certificates and degrees to be awarded based on competency, it will undermine college and university reliance on a specified number of credit hours to qualify for graduation. To get a sense of how fast things are changing, competency-based education was still on the drawing board when Selingo completed *College (Un)bound*, but the competency-based program at Southern New Hampshire University that Selingo profiled just received approval from the federal government, so some students at one college are already “unbound” from credit hours. They will not be alone for long.

Overall, Selingo is correct in his main point that personalized education and unbundling will change higher education. Moreover, he is admirably nuanced in making his argument, neither overreaching as some techno-utopians are prone to do, nor downplaying the significance of new technologies as is the wont of some techno-phobes.

Where Selingo may have not dug deeply enough is in explaining the causes of the problems he identifies in higher education. To be fair, *College (Un)bound* was intended

more as a guide to where we are and where we’re going rather than a retrospective analysis of how we got here. If the forces that drove us to our present state are still operative, however, they could well affect the pace and direction of the changes Selingo identifies.

To the extent that Selingo diagnoses the source of higher education’s problems, he mostly blames recent wayward leaders:

I believe that colleges lost their way in just the last decade and were consumed by the ego-driven desire of their leaders to keep up with competitors and rise in the rankings. I call this period from 1999 to 2009 the “Lost Decade.”

While I am equally displeased with the actions of university leadership, I think this has been going on for much longer than a decade, and I do not think ego has had much to do with it. When thousands of colleges are doing the same bad things in the same bad ways, it strikes me as unlikely that this can be attributed to a sudden and simultaneous increase in moral failing among university presidents and board members. More plausibly, it’s the structure of higher education itself that is encouraging these actions and decisions.

In my view, the fundamental problem is that universities must strive to be more prestigious, because that's the only arena for competition. College quality and college outcomes are not tracked, so the only way for a college leader to differentiate his college is to bolster its reputation—by building a bigger and nicer campus, recruiting top students and faculty, and spending more on public relations. In this telling, far from being the source of the problem, university presidents are pawns in a broken game.

Selingo uncovers each piece of this story, noting, “Prestige in higher education is like profit is to corporations,” and lamenting the lack of information on quality and outcomes:

Students need to know what they will get in return in terms of skills, knowledge, and employment prospects if they pick College A over College B. Until that happens, families will continue to pick a college based on location, marketing, recommendations from friends, or a reputation determined by a magazine.

But despite uncovering all the relevant pieces, Selingo never quite fits them together. This incomplete puzzle matters because it indicates that many of the changes he identifies will be embraced if they contribute to

prestige (providing Massive Open Online Courses, or MOOCs), but will be fiercely resisted if they are non-prestigious (giving credit for MOOCs). This dichotomy may well explain which changes will be embraced by higher education with ease and which will be fought at every turn.

Selingo has an unrelenting focus on what these changes mean for students, a refreshing stance when many other commentators concentrate too much on what changes will mean for colleges or faculty. This mindset is a point many of Selingo's critics miss. Consider the following statements:

- “Is a degree from Podunk U worth \$50,000 a year?”
- “Right now, higher education benefits from confusion in the market because schools can hide behind national averages on salaries.”
- “The attitude from college has always been that we should just trust them on the quality of their product.”

Some of Selingo's critics see these statements as gratuitous carping. In truth, they raise precisely the issues that students need to consider before stepping onto campus. An entire chapter is devoted to helping students think about which colleges and degrees are worth the investment. And *College (Un)bound* is full of advice that students—and parents—would be

wise to heed. Early on Selingo warns: “Education debt may be good debt, but even too much of a good thing can hurt you.”

At the end of the book, Selingo lays out dozens of questions that everyone should ask before college enrollment. While I doubt any school would actually answer more than a handful, just asking the questions will put students and their parents in the right

frame of mind to consider whether a specific college is worthy of their time and money.

Overall *College (Un)bound* succeeds in what it set out to do—help students understand the current higher education landscape and prepare for the changes on the horizon—and should be required reading for students and parents who are getting ready to apply to college.