Hire Education

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Since the 1970s, Jeffrey Selingo, editor at large for the Chronicle of Higher Education, acknowledges, plenty of people have predicted the end of colleges and universities as we know them. Now, however, Selingo thinks they may be right. Colleges in the United States, he writes, have "lost their focus on what had been and should be their primary mission - teaching students and researching the next big discoveries." Of the students who enter community colleges, only 20% graduate within three years. At four year institutions, slightly more than half leave with a bachelor's degree. Public and private institutions, moreover, are mired in perpetual fiscal crises, as state and federal appropriations to them continue to be cut and resistance to above inflation tuition increases grows. "The current structure of higher education is beginning to crumble," Selingo claims, "and will eventually be replaced by a radically different system."

College (Un)Bound does not provide a comprehensive analysis of higher education. Focusing exclusively on undergraduate education, Selingo does not address the challenges universities face in "researching the next big discovery." He gives no more than a nod to the residential experience, which, he admits, "turns adolescents into young adults." And at times, such as his discussion of study abroad and his list of "forward thinking universities," his book seems scattered and superficial.

Nonetheless, College (Un)Bound contains lots of useful information and helpful advice about choosing a college, graduation rates, financial aid, how students learn (and why they don't), and job placement. Most importantly, Selingo makes a compelling case that technology, and especially free massive online open courses (MOOCs), play an increasingly important and positive role not only for "place bound, time-pressed students, mostly working adults," but at traditional colleges and universities. Among other benefits, technology gives undergraduates opportunities to take classes from gifted teachers at other institutions, customizes instruction, accelerates the completion of degrees, and facilitates "flipped classrooms," where students who have already viewed lectures online spend face-to-face time with their instructors tackling complex problems.

Selingo is especially good at helping non-tech savvy adults identify software and platforms designed to assist high school students and undergraduates. Founded in 2002 and available now in 5,500 schools in 89 countries, Naviance, he points out, helps students choose colleges. Its most popular feature is a scatter graph, which allows young men and women to assess their chances of acceptance by seeing whether anonymous applicants from their high school with similar grades and test scores got in.

ConnectEDU, Selingo indicates, can facilitate more informed choices by offering colleges anonymous information about students who might be a good fit for them and passing along a Facebook-like request; if it's accepted "the courting begins." And Selingo suggests that Degree Compass is a sound alternative to a process by which students take "a haphazard route" to choosing a major, based on advice from family and friends, urban legends, and faulty assumptions about their interests and aptitudes. Using SAT scores, grades and other data, Degree Compass shows how well suited a student is for a particular course or major. Nine out of ten times Degree Compass accurately predicts whether the individual will get an A, B, or C.

Selingo has interesting things to say as well about the skills needed for success in the 21st century. As the colleges and universities in the United States move toward "narrow, practical majors," he writes, several Asian countries have adopted a broader approach out of fear that they are producing nothing more than good test takers. Employers say they prefer liberal arts training. Selingo adds, "but their hiring practices might be working against this goal." Although he knows it's easier said than done, he suggests that institutions of higher education find a way to teach students pattern recognition, the ability to "pick out meaningful trends from a mass of information and think strategically."

Selingo is surely right about the transformative impact technology is having on higher education. And that the business models of hundreds of low-quality colleges (and more than a few high quality institutions) deserve to be disrupted. At times, though, you wish he'd say a bit more about the limitations and dangerous tendencies of the technology. Why, for example, have enrollments of those who study solely online flattened? How will online providers design courses and assess learning in "intuitive disciplines, like English, or for softer skill sets, like critical thinking and communications"? Are we encouraging a view that a college education is only about the paycheck after graduation? And, if credits and certification are broken up into packages, badges and classes offered by non-accredited institutions, who will "verify the entire package?"

MOOCs, hybrid classes, and adaptive learning software, Selingo would surely reply, are works in progress. But as we celebrate their potential, shouldn't we worry a bit more about the implications of colleges unbound?