The Great Unraveling

A Review of

College (Un)Bound: The Future of Higher Education and What It Means for Students
by Jeffrey J. Selingo
http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0035574

Reviewed by

Geoffrey M. Cox

Higher education is an odd business. Its primary input—money—is easily quantified and valued. Its primary output is much harder to value, or even define. Is it the advancement of knowledge? A better educated citizenry? A well-trained workforce? A winning football team? Does education aim at promoting the general welfare, or does it primarily endow certain fortunate individuals with greater social status and, one hopes, advanced knowledge and intellectual skills? Is higher education a great engine of social mobility or a great enforcer of privilege?

Whatever one defines as the product of higher education, its relationship to the cost of producing it is mysterious to most people. Ultimately, higher education in the United States rests heavily on the tuition-paying and tax-paying public’s confidence that the whole enterprise is worth it. But today colleges and universities are facing the greatest challenges they’ve encountered in more than 50 years, the root cause of which amounts to a crisis of confidence.

Jeffrey Selingo’s book College (Un)Bound: The Future of Higher Education and What It Means for Students can be read as an account of the origins and effects of this crisis of confidence. Selingo is editor at large of The Chronicle of Higher Education, an online and print journal that is to academia roughly what Politico is to Congress and Variety is to Hollywood: the place where many academics go on a daily basis to find out what’s happening in their world and what they’re supposed to think about it all. As the journalist with perhaps the broadest purview of this beat, Selingo is in an excellent position to see the big picture—the large trends and forces that are playing themselves out across some 5,300 campuses that collectively hold nearly a trillion dollars in assets, employ more than 3.5 million people, and spend $440 billion annually on goods, services, and people (p. 4).

The numbers alone suggest that there are big stakes on the table, but we also tend to think that higher education represents something more than just its economic impact. Academia likes to think of itself, and likes to be thought of by others, as one of the last preserves of
higher culture in our society, a place that cannot be reduced to mere commercial transactions. However, as Selingo describes the present situation, the higher education industry may have lost its claim to this special status. It is "beset by hubris, opposition to change, and resistance to accountability. Even the leaders of colleges and universities think we're in trouble. More than one-third of them say American higher education is headed in the wrong direction" (p. x). As a result, academia can no longer command the unconditional respect of the students they serve, the communities in which they operate, or policy makers who will determine their future. As Selingo flatly declares, "American higher education is broken" (p. x).

The book is divided into two sections. In the first half, Selingo attempts to describe how we got to the present state of crisis. This has now become an oft-told story about how higher education, like so many other industries, has suddenly found itself vulnerable to rapid, disruptive change. Although many commentators attribute the pressures on higher education to abstract forces such as new technologies, demographics, or a declining economy, Selingo is equally disposed to blame university administrators, trustees, and professors for errors in judgment, if not outright malfeasance. He tells stories of students who were persuaded to attend institutions that they plainly could not afford, of institutions inventing new programs and majors that lead only to dead ends in the job market, of professors inflating grades in order to get better student evaluations, and of the mad rush to compete for status, students, and dollars by adding marquis academic programs, ruinously expensive athletic teams, and gold-plated campus amenities.

These decisions are partly the result of a sort of herd mentality among academics, who, after all, are mostly products of the same kind of education, read the same things, and talk to the same people. Selingo writes with faint derision about university presidents who troop into his offices at the Chronicle looking for publicity for their latest new idea, not realizing that he has heard the same thing from dozens of other presidents already. But these common patterns of behavior among academic leaders also suggest that larger forces are indeed at work, and the range of responses is highly constrained by the present structure and culture of higher education.

Selingo identifies five major issues that will inexorably change higher education in the coming years:

- Deficits and debt loads that have imperiled many, if not most, institutions that do not have significant cash reserves or endowments, coupled with an inability to raise tuition levels at historic rates due to a declining economy and moribund job market.

- The massive withdrawal of state support for public institutions, which serve 80 percent of all students.

- Demographic declines among traditional-aged students in the United States, and even sharper declines in the number of such students with the capacity to pay full tuition.

- The steady improvement in "unbundled" alternatives to traditional university degree programs. These include alternative sources of training, low-cost online
courses, and universities offering formal credits based on demonstrated competence, not the amount of time spent in a classroom.

- The growing gap between the price of education and its value in the labor market. To be sure, a college graduate can still expect to earn more over a lifetime than a high school graduate, but that college graduate can increasingly expect to enter the workforce with massive amounts of debt that will take years to pay off. Given that roughly half of all entering students will fail to finish with a degree, entry into college has become a large gamble on the future, not a sure thing.

As a regular consumer of news about higher education, I find nothing surprising in this list of challenges; indeed, these are the things that cause me as a university president to lose sleep regularly. Similar diagnoses have appeared in several other recent books about higher education, including William G. Bowen’s (2013) *Higher Education in the Digital Age*; Andrew S. Rosen’s (2012) *Change.edu: Rebooting for the New Talent Economy* (reviewed by Cox, 2012, in *PsycCRITIQUES*); and *The Innovative University: Changing the DNA of Higher Education From the Inside Out* by Clayton M. Christensen and Henry J. Eyring (2011). There seems to be a growing consensus about the causes of the present perils for so many institutions of higher education, as well as the need for dramatic change.

There is also a growing consensus about the direction of that change, with the same innovative examples cited frequently by observers and commentators. Institutions such as Arizona State University, the University of Southern New Hampshire, and Western Governor’s University are on nearly everyone’s watch list, in part because each of them has quite deliberately set out to create cultures of innovation and has shown some success at chipping away at traditional impediments to change. These are some of the institutions that are pioneering mixed modes of instruction (blending online and in-class instruction), highly personalized educational programming, competency-based credentials, and so forth.

The university of the future, it seems, may well be a place that helps students assemble portfolios of academic tokens—“badges,” courses, credits for experience or work, transfer credits from other institutions, and so forth—that might eventually add up to a formal credential. The students would likely set their own personalized schedules and draw from a variety of education providers, including large-scale online courses offered by private companies or “name” universities, low-cost providers of commodity courses that are essentially the same anywhere, and the occasional traditional in-class experience. The added value of the university may well have more to do with its ability to provide access to internships and jobs than its direct provision of instruction. And, of course, the financial relationship between the student and the institution may change dramatically. No longer would the student pay one large bill for a prepackaged semester’s worth of services; it is more likely that fees would be collected for each separate service rendered, with the student far more in control of the rate of spending and borrowing.

This is at least one vision of the future, some of which is already in place de facto. Most U.S. college students already engage in studies part time and assemble their degrees from many institutions, both online and in classrooms, over a time period that extends beyond the traditional four years. But this is still not the preferred way of gaining an education, and it falls far short of the idyllic, ivy-draped picture of college life that still dominates much of our thinking and policy making.
The big, unanswered question is whether we will ultimately settle for this unbundled approach to education for the majority while elite institutions continue to cater to a highly selective, and highly fortunate, minority of students. Even though we all recognize that a clear hierarchy of institutions currently exists, from the Ivy League on down, we have so far maintained the notion that a college degree is more or less the same kind of thing regardless of where it comes from. It seems to me that this notion is rapidly unraveling, and those whose college credentials are not magically opening doors to employment and affluence are the first to question whether their degree is really all that the fancy marketing brochures promised.

Selingo closes his book with short descriptions of some institutions that have garnered attention for innovative programs and new ways of doing business. In this regard, his final comments are optimistic, as if to say to other university presidents, “You, too, can do these things.” But it also becomes obvious that each case study is different, and each institution has had to figure out some natural advantage to develop. Ultimately, for all the talk of a higher education “system,” there is no systematic approach to these issues. Five thousand three hundred sets of presidents, boards, and faculties are all trying to look around the corner, and each one will develop its own plans, take its own risks, and rise or fall with the consequences. One can only hope that out of such apparent chaos, a new order will emerge that preserves the best of the old and reestablishes the public’s trust in the larger higher education enterprise.

**References**


