

The Death of Higher Education in America and the Rise of the 21st Century Entrepreneur

Jeff Sandefer
Co-Founder, Acton School of Business

The Failure of Traditional Universities

We desperately need to equip and inspire our next generation to take on the opportunities and challenges of the 21st century. But our traditional universities have become trapped in a bureaucratic death spiral, and are more interested in preserving and expanding pay and perks for tenured faculty and administrators than serving students.

The decline has become so self-evident that students, parents, employers, taxpayers—and even the rabble with Occupy Wall Street—now recognize the problem. Our best and brightest students invest up to six years in return for few practical skills and little knowledge about themselves or the world. Many leave with tens of thousands of dollars in debt that will burden them for the rest of their lives.

Faculty senates at traditional universities seem indifferent to the mounting problems, demanding ever-higher pay, more perks, and lower teaching loads. Undergraduate teaching is farmed out to poorly paid and poorly trained adjuncts so tenured faculty can focus on replicating themselves, producing an ever-increasing surplus of PhDs that no one wants to hire. Overpaid administrators multiply like kudzu. University presidents distract alumni with football and calls to tribal loyalty, appealing to fading prestige as they beg for more and more handouts.

Those who expect traditional universities to reform on their own are kidding themselves. The final trajectory of the bureaucratic decay is as certain as the fall of the Soviet empire or the decline of General Motors, its path kept steady by a faulty governance system and perverse incentives that promote incompetence and reward petty power-seeking pseudo-intellectuals to positions of power.

A few brave reformers like Michael Crow at Arizona State University and Kim Clark at Brigham Young University at Idaho are pursuing serious reforms, but they will be outliers. Stanford University seems willing to invest its mighty brand in high-quality distance learning, but stands alone among the major universities in doing so. For-profit colleges that once held some promise are now embroiled in a regulatory battle and seem more interested in aggressive marketing than in offering transformational learning.

Is there any hope at all for preparing our next generation for productive and meaningful lives, at a cost we can afford? Yes, but the new models likely will come from radically new approaches to education, not from the old guard.

Preparing Graduates for a Lifelong Adventure

The decline of traditional universities and rise of new learning technologies and related innovative pedagogies have opened the door to an entrepreneurial rebirth of higher education and radical new designs.

The first step in any such transformation must be to elevate our goals from delivering graduates who “serve society” in some government or corporate cubicle, to equipping and inspiring students for a lifelong adventure, by preparing them to ask and answer the following questions:

1. Who am I and why am I here?
2. What skills do I need and which skill should I master?
3. Who will affirm me and hold me accountable?
4. How can I prove what I can do?

Here it is worth pausing to see how far traditional education has strayed from its mission: First, we have removed the question of values almost entirely from an undergraduate education. Second, employers and graduates alike complain that we are not delivering 21st century skills, much less helping students discover which skills they are specially equipped for. Third, grade inflation and a lack of results-based management have failed to hold students accountable, and surveys suggest that students feel increasingly distant from teachers. And finally, a college degree shows little proof of what an individual graduate can contribute to the world.

Any entrepreneurial approach must prepare graduates to ask and answer these questions, in a way that is scalable and affordable for students and society.

A Modest Proposal: A Return to the Past, Enhanced by 21st Century Pedagogy and Technology

One of the more promising ideas we are exploring at the Acton School of Business is the return to the apprentice-master system that served America so well until the early 20th century, an approach that used one-on-one learning and accountability to develop skills and character and to establish the reputation of up-and-coming craftsmen or citizen-leaders.

Unlike the assembly-line approach of public schools today, the ultimate goal of any promising new approach should not be just “learning to know”—memorizing and reciting facts—but “learning to do” and “learning to be.” Knowledge then becomes a *means* of achievement and deepening of the human spirit in the real world—not merely an end in and of itself—and education evolves into something that helps graduates lead richer and more meaningful lives.

The enormous potential of game-based education, the power and scalability of the internet, and the ever greater understanding of the ways in which we most effectively learn are all converging to lay a new foundation for learning—at a fraction of the cost of traditional education.

We believe the most powerful solution will be a combination of concepts: (1) Superman and Heroes, (2) Google and Gaming, (3) Alcoholics Anonymous, and (4) the Boy Scouts.

Superman and Heroes: We have found that it is relatively easy to convince students that they are “heroes on a hero’s journey,” destined to change the world. Tapping into this deep human need and encouraging learners to find their most precious gifts—and use those gifts in a way that brings them joy and helps others—is providing powerful motivation to do the courageous work required for transformational learning.

Google and Gaming: The newest simulations and interactive technologies help students to develop new skills, and, when combined with the right narratives and latest tricks of behavioral psychology and game-based incentives like points and badges, keep them engaged over a long period of time, without the need for teacher controlled classrooms.

Alcoholics Anonymous: Transformative learning requires difficult work and keeping learners on task for long enough to break bad habits and instill good ones. At Acton we are finding that this means establishing one-on-one learning covenants and accountable relationships with role models—those whom the student aspires to be like—and with “accountability partners,” friends or fellow students who promise to affirm and hold a learner accountable for the promises he or she has made.

In the same way that Wikipedia has transferred the gathering, review, and editing from a few highly paid editors to a crowd-sourced army of volunteers, affirming and holding learners accountable may be transferred from teachers to an army of volunteer mentors, learning partners, and self-organizing study groups.

The Boy Scouts: Over time, like merit badges from the Boy Scouts, badges become proof that a learner has acquired the skills and character needed for a learner to be trusted with more advanced challenges in the real world. When verified by credible third parties, these badges become a far richer form of proof than a college degree and a grade point average.

The Last Remaining Challenge: College Degrees vs. Portfolios

Students, parents, and employers are increasingly skeptical about the value of a college degree, but unsure what will replace it as a signaling device to employers. Plus, a college degree from a top-tier university continues to convey social status, even if little learning has taken place.

As an instrument, college degrees have become crude and expensive signaling devices. They are little more than a raw IQ measure disguised as a standardized college entrance exam, coupled with some indication that a student had enough guile and perseverance to graduate, while hopefully having some fun along the way.

But college degrees are more than a signaling device. They denote status. Harvard is different than a state university, which is different than a community college. University officials and the popular press have convinced many Americans that a college degree is the way for a son or a daughter to achieve a “better life,” defined not only by income, but by social status as well.

So if a new form of education is going to take hold, we are going to have to offer the Facebook generation both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards that help them begin weaving the story of their lives – who they are and who they want to become, one challenge at a time – into a rich, interactive portfolio.

A portfolio that takes mere badges and scores and transforms them into a meaningful, deeply personal narrative that has been verified as true by others, has the promise of becoming a powerful draw for millions to more deeply embrace the difficult journey of life, as a lifelong learner.

If educational entrepreneurs do this, and convince millions of volunteer teacher-guides, accountability partners and students to embark on the adventure of a lifetime, we will change the world.