How to Reinvent College

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An undergraduate having to pay off $120,000, and a university that has more than $165 million in debt? Paying adjuncts less but having them teach more, and instructors who give as little as 43 percent of the time? Nick Romeo on a new book that critiques how higher education has changed, and what needs to be done to save it.

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Ask a 17-year-old about college and you’ll probably hear the word “fit.” It’s the most pervasive and elusive metaphor of the college search: a quasi-religious, quasi-romantic sense of rightness that descends on students as they tour the manicured lawns of the perfect school, the one that feels, in some mystical way, like a good fit.

The hazy imprecision of this notion is a triumph of college marketing. Many colleges hope that whims and intangibles will guide student decisions. It’s simply not in their interest to encourage students to think closely about the economics of their choice.

Consider Kelsey Griffith, who fell in love with Ohio Northern University, and heeded the school’s advice to “get over the sticker shock” of its tuition. She graduated with $120,000 in loans. While a six-figure debt load is rare for undergraduate borrowers, it’s common for students to select a college based more on impulse and intuition than data.

Jeffrey Selingo, an editor at the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, thinks college in America is poised to change in fundamental ways. In [*College (Un)bound*](http://www.amazon.com/College-Unbound-Future-Education-Students/dp/0544027078/ref%3Das_at?tag=thedailybeast-autotag-20&linkCode=as2&), he identifies signs of the current system’s imminent demise and surveys the disruptive forces that are changing the experience of college for millions of students.

Some resources, like the popular website [Payscale](http://www.payscale.com), already provide data on projected income sorted by school and major. Though the figures are partial and based on self-reporting, the site enables parents and students to calculate return on investment based on the cost of attending a given college and the projected earnings of its graduates by major.

The colleges with the most to conceal tend to be expensive 2nd- and 3rd-tier private institutions. For instance, 85 percent of students from Ohio Northern graduated with debt averaging almost $49,000, while the median starting salary for graduates is just $44,800. Compare these figures with the statistics for Princeton, where the average debt is $5,225 for the 23 percent of graduates with *any* debt, while the median starting salary is $56,900.

Some colleges are just as indebted as recent graduates. North Carolina’s High Point University has more than $165 million in debt and only $105 million in annual revenue. This extravagant borrowing funds a steakhouse, outdoor hot tubs, a first-run movie theater, and a roaming ice-cream truck.

An amenities arms race between schools is just one front in a broader struggle for students, prestige, and profits. Selingo sees the proliferation of new majors as analogous to the release of new products to fuel demand. Just as Gillette wants consumers to think that they need to shave with the Gillette Fusion, American University wants prospective students to think they need a nights-and-weekends MA in media entrepreneurship to find work. Nearly four in 10 majors today did not exist in 1990. Richard Vedder, an economist at Ohio University and director of the Center for College Affordability and Productivity, has noted an inverse relation between an institution’s prestige and the number of new programs it designs. “It isn’t Harvard, Yale, or Princeton creating these programs. You’ll find a large percentage of them at schools desperate for revenue.”

This intensifying struggle to gain prestige and profits has led to rising costs and falling quality. Schools attempting to rise in the *U.S. News and World Report* rankings often subsidize scholarships for top students by raising overall tuition prices. They also save money by shifting more teaching duties to teaching assistants and adjunct faculty with minimal job security and heavy workloads (see the [recent rant](http://www.slate.com/articles/life/culturebox/2013/04/there_are_no_academic_jobs_and_getting_a_ph_d_will_make_you_into_a_horrible.html) in Slate by one such disgruntled instructor).

Adjuncts anxious about job security have realized that giving higher grades improves their student evaluations, which often determine whether they remain employed. The “resortification” of colleges also encourages students to view themselves as customers, and instructors as retail workers employed to serve them. The A is now the most common grade on college campuses nationwide; it accounts for roughly 43 percent of all grades given. Meanwhile, results of the Collegiate Learning Assessment, a test used by more than 500 colleges to measure academic progress, reveal that 36 percent of students make absolutely no improvement in writing, complex reasoning, or critical thinking during four years of college.

Given this rather dismal state of affairs, it’s understandable that many commentators see online education as the white knight galloping to the rescue of American higher education. Though Selingo is skeptical of treating technology as a panacea, he does make a strong case that real and lasting benefits can be gained from new tools in digital pedagogy.

One of the more familiar forces is MOOCs, or massively open online courses. These courses allow hundreds of thousands of students to learn from renowned professors at a fraction of the cost of traditional courses. Top-scoring students in a computer-science course offered by Udacity, a company founded by a former Stanford professor, have landed jobs at Google and other companies based in part on demonstrated mastery of specific skills valuable to employers. The use of such courses as recruiting tools hints at a more radical possibility: the gradual elimination of colleges as middlemen in corporate recruiting. Selingo and many educational entrepreneurs envision a competence-based certification system in which students earn badges for discrete skills as they perfect them. Diplomas would become obsolete, at least in some fields. With the rise of big data, companies could sift through hundreds of student assignments to gauge talent and analyze patterns of performance that predict success in various positions.

This trend is part of a broader phenomenon: the unbundling of the college degree. Phone companies once provided a mounted phone, long-distance service, and local calls for a single price. But consumers now customize service packages and products by using a range of providers. Colleges are still a relatively bundled service. Most provide classes, dining halls, computer labs, career counseling, and countless other services for a single price. But some colleges are starting to isolate these components. Thirty-one percent of American college students now take at least one online class, more students than ever live at home or work part-time, and the rise of companies like Udacity has begun to link employers directly to students.

Other technologies are refining the concept of a “fit” between school and student. One service, [Naviance](http://www.naviance.com), begins collecting information on students’ personalities and academic profiles as early as sixth grade. In an era when dating services use sophisticated algorithms to match couples, the tools that pair students with colleges are often inefficient: students apply to schools that would never accept them, while schools market to students who are unlikely to be interested. The Gates Foundation is also funding software that helps guide students through course selection once they’re in college. Based on students’ academic performance in past courses, the software can predict with 90 percent accuracy the letter grade a student will earn in any course.

There’s something undeniably appealing about the romance of the chance discovery, whether of a subject or a college. But the costs of the current system are unsustainably high. If students and families still want to follow their marketing-fueled whims to a given college or pursue a subject with dismal job prospects, no one will stop them. But as Selingo observes, American higher education in its current state risks becoming, like the auto industry, a failed icon of arrogance, waste, and inefficiency.