

Higher education reform: The next big idea



How Wisconsin could lead the way
in transforming the modern university

By Charles J. Sykes

Can we fix higher education?

Is it possible to reform an institution so plagued by bloated costs, academic failure, debt and political correctness?

The questions sound naïve since so many previous attempts have failed to dent academia's stubborn resistance to reform. But that may be about to change – and Wisconsin could lead the way.

Big Idea

The keys to reform lie in:

- Bursting the higher education bubble;
- Adopting new technologies that threaten the status quo;
- Being willing to embrace big, bold reforms.

For some families, sending a child to a private university today is like buying a BMW every year — and driving it off a cliff. If the education is financed through student loans, paying for four years of college is like buying a Lamborghini on credit.

Since 2004, student debt has more than quintupled; 66% of students now borrow to pay for college, up from 45% as recently as 1993. Millions of students carry debt burdens without even getting a degree. Student loan debt now exceeds the nation's total credit card and auto loan debt. The delinquency rate on student loans is higher than on credit cards, auto loans and home mortgages.

Where does the money go? Spending on instruction remains flat, even as spending on administration, buildings, athletics and non-instructional student services has exploded. Recent decades have seen the proliferation of vice presidents of student success, directors of active and collaborative engagement, dietetic internship directors and sustainability directors, along with vast arrays of administrators devoted to diversity and inclusion.

From 1975 to 2005, the number of full-time faculty in higher education rose by 51%, but the ranks of bureaucrats rose by 85%

and the number of “other professionals” by 240%.

Soaring student debt

All of this was floated on an ocean of expanding student debt: \$1.3 trillion and rising. The unfortunate realities are that:

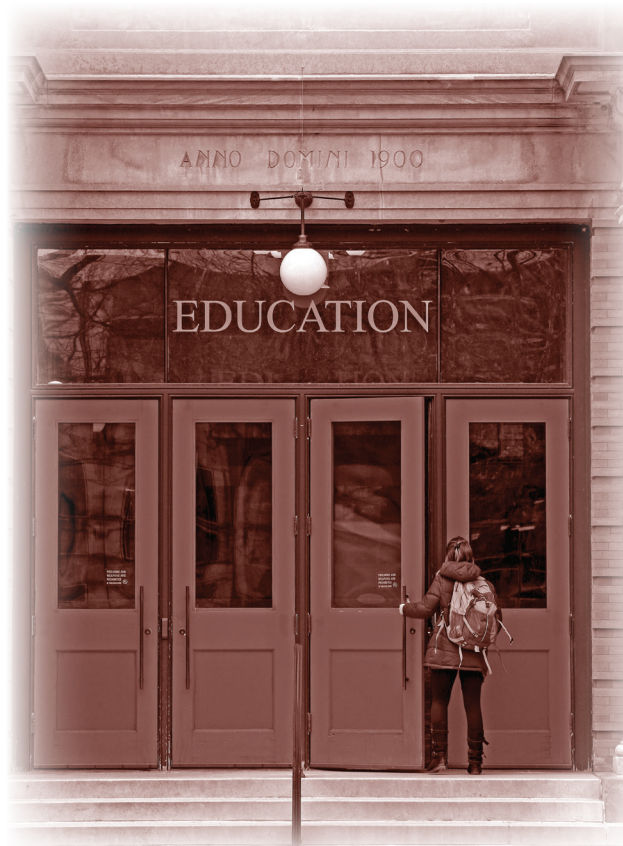
- Too many students spend too much time in college.
- Too many spend too much money there.
- Too many go to the wrong college to study the wrong subjects.
- Too many are graduating with costly but worthless degrees.
- Too many drop out without getting a degree.

As a result, far too many pay too much for too little.

So where do we start deflating the bubble? The modern multiversity needs to be downsized, starting with its massive building programs, bureaucracies and non-instructional staff. But we also need to start

asking more fundamental questions, such as: “Why does it take four years to get a degree?”

There is, after all, nothing sacred about four years. Why not three? Or two, or one? As political scientist and author Charles Murray has noted, students who want to be software designers, accountants, hospital administrators, high school teachers, social workers, journalists, optometrists or interior designers do not need to spend four years in college. Classes that would allow them to obtain “the academic basis for competence” would take perhaps one or two years. The rest



Allen Fredrickson photo

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is merely time-wasting, expensive filler.

That is why an idea floated this year by Gov. Scott Walker is so radical: What would happen if a university announced that henceforth it would offer a three-year bachelor's degree? In one stroke, it would cut the cost of a college education. While such a shift also would cut the school's per-student revenue, it would provide a distinctive way of competing for students — and put the institution on the cutting edge of reform.

A bigger idea

But there is an even more radical idea: wedding the three-year degree to massive open online courses (MOOCs), which could change the basic nature of higher education.

Futurist and author Nathan Harden sees MOOCs as a mighty and irresistible model of creative destruction: “Big changes are coming,” he wrote a few years back, “and old attitudes and business models are set to collapse as new ones rise. Few who will be affected by the changes ahead are aware of what’s coming.”

Harden explained:

“The live lecture will be replaced by streaming video. The administration of exams and exchange of coursework over the Internet will become the norm. The push and pull of academic exchange will take place mainly in interactive online spaces, occupied by a new generation of tablet-toting, hyper-connected youth who already spend much of their lives online. Universities will extend their reach to students around the world, unbounded by geography or even by time zones. All of this will be on offer,

too, at a fraction of the cost of a traditional college education.”

The results, he wrote, will be apocalyptic:

“The future looks like this: Access to college-level education will be free for everyone; the residential college campus will become largely obsolete; tens of thousands of professors will lose their jobs; the bachelor's degree will become increasingly irrelevant; and 10 years from now Harvard will enroll 10 million students.”

This is not only disruptive, it is breathtakingly radical, because MOOCs are anti-elitist but profoundly meritocratic. There are no barriers to entry, no SAT or ACT scores, no legacy admissions preferences, no class or racial bias, no affirmative action, no bloated lists of extracurricular activities. Instead, students just need the willingness to do the work and achieve mastery.

Equally radical, MOOCs will shift power from the institution to the student as academia is decentralized in a way already experienced by so many other industries that have found themselves upended by consumer-driven, on-demand models. MOOCs will challenge the status quo on just about every level of higher education — from admissions to teaching to the granting of coveted degrees. When universities no longer hold the keys to those credentials, their world will be rocked.

How big a threat does this pose? Imagine this future:

Rather than showing up with a degree from the U of Somewhere with a simple B.A., a student arrives

for her first job interview with a degree or a bundle of certificates of mastery that includes courses with world-class scholars. She can show her prospective employer a stacked portfolio that includes a course in artificial intelligence from Stanford, in computer science from Cornell and Harvard, in Alexander the Great from Wellesley, in environmental law from Yale and in globalization from Georgetown. Her degree also includes verified certificates from Princeton for a course in the paradoxes of war, from the Copenhagen Business School in social entrepreneurship and from the University of Pennsylvania in analyzing global trends for business and society.

Moreover, she can show that in each of those courses, she achieved actual mastery — in contrast to graduates of traditional colleges, who may have gotten credit for C-level work in far less-demanding classes. And our applicant shows up without a mountain of debt, since she earned her degree for a fraction of what her peers paid.

That student could mark the beginning of the end for the business model that has sustained higher education for decades. Anant Agarwal, CEO of MOOC provider edX, which was founded by Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, envisions a future where “rather than students coming in for four years to do a bachelor’s

degree, they’ll come in having taken their first year of courses as MOOCs. Then they’ll spend two years on campus, spend the final year getting a job and continuing to take MOOCs and becoming lifelong, continuous learners.”

Changes on the way

State universities — including the University of Wisconsin — could adopt the model, with equally

radical consequences, especially for college affordability. (See related story on Page 30.)

There are already signs of interest: In 2013-’14, UW-Madison launched four pilot MOOCs, which have drawn more than 135,600 learners from 50 states and 141 countries. In 2015, UW added six more courses. This is just the beginning.

In 2015, MIT announced that it would offer a full master’s degree that would involve taking about half the course content online and half on campus. The same year, Arizona State University announced that it would allow undergraduate students to take their

entire freshman year online and offer credit for MOOCs that could be applied toward a degree at ASU or transferred to other universities that would recognize the credits.

How disruptive was ASU’s announcement? Let’s count the ways:



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A new world in online courses

There is a long history of attempts at distance learning, including the venerable correspondence course. But massive open online courses (MOOCs) represent something new: With their size, quality, interactivity and potential to shake up credentialing, they change the game.

"We're nearing the point," says Harvard University professor David Malan, "where it's a superior educational experience, as far as the lectures are concerned, to engage with them online."

Coursera co-founder and president Daphne Koller explained in a talk on ted.com how the courses are different from what has come before: They start on a given day, students watch the videos on a weekly basis and do homework assignments. These are "real homework assignments for a real grade," she stressed, "with a real deadline."

And the videos are not just standard ones. Periodically, the video pauses, and students are asked to answer a question. The contrast with the mass lecture is significant, Koller noted:

"(When) I ask that kind of a question in class, 80% of the students are still scribbling the last thing I said, 15% are zoned out on Facebook and then there's the smarty pants in the front row who blurts out the answer before anyone else has had a chance to think about it.

"In the online courses, every student has to engage, and every student has to demonstrate mastery to pass. The courses use technology to evaluate student progress and provide grades. In courses that do not lend themselves to multiple-choice grading, the MOOCs rely on 'peer grading.' But the real innovation in the MOOC is the ability to personalize instruction and to evaluate the effectiveness of both teaching and learning."

The courses also can require mastery of the subject. While traditional college courses offer credit to a student who may grasp only a fraction of the material, online courses can set the bar higher. And once mastery is achieved at the end of the course?

"The students got a certificate. They could present that certificate to a prospective employer and get a better job, and we know many students who did. Some students took their certificate and presented this to an educational institution at which they were enrolled for actual college credit," Koller said.

And, unlike the bachelor's degree, which is increasingly untrustworthy as an indicator of what the student has mastered, a certificate from one of the elite online providers can be a very reliable and specific indicator of what the student has achieved and what he or she can do.

— Charles J. Sykes

- The program has no admission requirements, no SATs, no GPAs. Anyone anywhere in the world can take MOOCs for credit.
- Students pay for the courses only if they pass. The program, therefore, is risk-free.
- If students pass their courses in the Global Freshman Academy, they have to pay only \$200 per credit.

That alone is a game-changer. The full cost for a freshman taking the online courses would be \$5,160 (which includes a \$45-per-course verified student fee). Compare that with Arizona State's annual out-of-state tuition of \$24,503. Adding in room and board and other on-campus expenses, the cost rises

to more than \$39,600.

In one stroke, ASU's embrace of online courses slashed the cost of a year of college by more than \$34,000, or over 85%. ASU is already becoming a magnet for students from around the world.

Imagine if Wisconsin followed suit, turning itself into a mecca of educational opportunity and innovation.

If the governor is looking for his next big, bold idea, he already has the road map. WI

Wisconsin Interest editor Charles J. Sykes is founder of the Right Wisconsin website and a talk show host on AM-620 WTMJ in Milwaukee. This article is adapted from his book, *Fail U.: The False Promise of Higher Education*, which will be published in August by St. Martin's Press.