



Predictions on what the 2020s will bring to higher education (opinion)

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It has been a challenging decade for higher ed -- a 10 percent reduction in state subsidies per student; rises in suicides, shootings and trigger warnings; withering attacks on science and truth; significant increases in the number of colleges and universities at financial risk; and an unstable regulatory environment.

Yet we march on into the unknown, and some things are going right. Online learning is growing explosively, and the primacy of teaching and degrees has been reinforced by a steady flow of economic and other data. There is, indeed, life after winter break.

I am optimistic about the coming decade. Based on my work with dozens of universities; hundreds of presidents, provosts and chancellors; and thousands of faculty members, here are my 10 predictions about higher ed in this decade. Some of these reflect some wishful thinking; I'll let the reader decide which is which.

(1) Depending on how you define the term, close to 75 percent of today's undergraduate students are "nontraditional" learners [1]. This could mean they hold a full-time job while enrolled, they are financially independent from their parents or they are a primary caregiver themselves. Perhaps they have a GED rather than a traditional high school diploma. Further, 37 percent of undergraduates are now part-time. It's time for us to let go of our outdated understanding of bachelor's students and restructure the educational experience around their new reality.

Increasingly, it's pointless to talk about freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors; instead, schools and students will simply state the percent of their college education learners have completed. Speeding this transition will be the realization that this change makes students more employable and gamifies completion in ways that raise graduation rates.

(2) Following two decades where tuition and fees have largely stayed flat to inflation, the real cost of a degree will fall by 20 percent. Schools with neither a large endowment nor a plan to reduce administrative costs will face an existential risk -- this is an easy prediction because it's already happening [2].

(3) To bring some optimism to that last prediction -- this long-awaited consolidation of colleges will be driven less by proximity and more by shared values. This decade will see the formation of a new generation of national universities with regional campuses.

Forward-looking universities will find each other and enter into strategic partnerships, co-investing in robust online learning infrastructures and sophisticated marketing campaigns. For early adopters, national brand recognition will soar in tandem with reputation-- and they'll begin to chip away at today's major online nonprofits like Western Governors that host far less academic research.

(4) A standardized, widely recognizable microcredential format tied to third-party certification -- let's call it a specialist degree -- will replace the inchoate array of certificates [3] between a bachelor's and a master's.

Specialist degrees would be short (perhaps 12 credits) and stackable toward master's degrees. You might think of them as the associate degree of the postgraduate world. Like the A.A., they should be portable, meaning a specialist degree received at one school should be stackable toward the master's degree at another school offering that same specialist degree.

This idea requires a certifying body, an honest broker to own the trademark for each specialist degree and convene annually with the universities offering it to jointly set its basic parameters: What competencies will be taught, and how long should it take to learn each competency? My thought is that the American

Council on Education might be the right organization, but others come to mind as well.

Like any graduate program, the specialist degree experience will come in different flavors depending on where one studies. But prospective employers and students will trust that completion of a specialist degree will meaningfully indicate a clear set of competencies in the same way that every M.D. program is different, but we can expect certain things from a practicing doctor.

Specialist degrees will attract a broad range of students and act as an on-ramp to master's programs at participating schools. As they gain employer buy-in, they will crowd out the one-off programs and better position higher education to meet the rising demand for lifelong learning.

(5) This decade, some enterprising schools will finally stop talking about published (or stated) tuition, which is equivalent to an airline only advertising their highest-priced seat. In reality, everyone on a plane pays a different price depending on dozens of factors. The same can be said about tuition. But given both merit and need-based aid, the vast majority of students pay less than the stated price of a degree.

Colleges and universities that shift toward this approach will be able to attract more highly qualified students by advertising their net tuition -- the average price a student pays for their degree after factoring in aid of all types -- instead of their published tuition. In doing so, price will become less of a signal of quality and more a signal of a school's commitment to its students.

(6) Colleges and universities will get out of the remediation business and leave that work to a new generation of bridge organizations funded by Title I ^[4] money (federal aid to elementary and secondary schools that educate significant numbers of students from low-income backgrounds). These new organizations will be compensated in part or whole based on the success of their graduates in completing college and will make remediation more effective, more accountable and less expensive.

(7) Based on disappointing longitudinal data, educators will realize that faculty-free and faculty-light models of higher ed are not a compelling alternative to

traditional programs.

Even the most engaging asynchronous content, it will turn out, means little without plenty of organic face time (virtual or in person) between student and professor; the correlation between good teaching and student outcomes ^[5] will hold firm.

(8) In the 2020s, universities and colleges will learn that the benefits of collaboration far outweigh the drawbacks -- and will team up to lower cost and raise engagement. Unlike institutions determined to go it alone, or those working with expensive, opaque, inflexible OPMs, these schools will enjoy huge amounts of anonymized benchmark data, access to extremely high-quality case studies and simulations, and custom-built social learning tools.

Schools that work together effectively and at scale will have significant advantages over those determined to go it alone or continue to pay half (or more) of their tuition revenue to OPMs for their online programs. The glue that brings them together cost-effectively will be the next generation of OPMs.

(9) Employers will increasingly find value in education as a benefit but will become more sensitive to both quality and cost of that education and will scale back that benefit when the next recession hits.

(10) And finally -- after decades of alternating between market fundamentalism and overregulation, in which for-profits thrive and then are (deservedly) closed, for-profit universities will start to regulate themselves rigorously and become a useful part of the education ecosystem.

So a lot of good things await us this coming decade. That said, someone chipping away at that \$1.5 trillion in U.S. student debt ^[6], or persuasively arguing to policy makers and the public that liberal arts education is neither liberal nor anachronistic, might have to wait till the 2030s ...

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[1] <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2015/2015025.pdf>

[2] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/06/13/list-private-colleges-have-closed-recent-years>

[3] https://8606adb0-7829-4e6c-a502-3e181c6f3720.filesusr.com/ugd/cc7beb_a74e1be71afb4e72bb7f44adaf03d9eb.pdf

[4] <https://definitions.uslegal.com/t/title-1-school/>

[5] <https://www.chronicle.com/article/3-Key-Findings-From-a-New/247546>

[6] <https://time.com/5662626/student-loans-repayment/>

[7] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/news-sections/digital-learning>

[8] <https://www.insidehighered.com/editorial-tags/adult-education>

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