

Book Review

College (Un)bound: The Future of Higher Education and What It Means for Students

by Jeffrey J. Selingo

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Reviewed by Lorneth Peters, Austin Peay State University

Jeffery J. Selingo's controversial book *College (Un)bound* explores both the obvious and ambiguous challenges facing higher education as it prepares to operate in a new era. Selingo presents a vision of why our educational system is broken and then describes the work that must be done to transform the system. Selingo explores the problems—the rising cost of higher education, low retention rates, and the outdated mindset of those in leadership—and some of the tangible solutions to America's higher education difficulties.

The opening story of the book provides a glimpse into the life of Samantha Dietz, a first-generation college student who graduated from high school with a GPA of 3.9 and AP credit. Dietz, who was offered grants from many schools, decided to attend Fairleigh Dickinson University, the school that provided her with the most financial aid. Like many 21st century students, Samantha worked 25 hours a week and felt overwhelmed. The strain caused her not to return to school the following semester. Four years later, Samantha was working for a real estate company and taking classes at a community college. Samantha's story helps to illustrate what studies have shown for years—that only 50 percent of students who enter college actually leave with a four-year degree.

In Chapters 1-3 of *College (Un)bound*, Selingo makes the case that education has evolved into a big business, which has resulted in students incurring high college debt, but learning less. Higher education institutions employ over 3.5 million people, hold \$990 billion in assets, and receive \$490 billion in revenues each year. One of Selingo's examples is the University of Rochester in New York; the university now employs over 20,000 workers, surpassing private businesses in the city. More colleges are now offering

attractive majors and scheduling weeknight and weekend classes, which helps maintain or increase revenue. Revenue is usually sustained through the high cost of attending college, thus increasing student loan debt. Selingo's research found that one in four college students owes more than \$28,000 in student loans. He goes on to explain that the focus on money has caused a power shift in the classroom from the professor to the student, resulting in a sense of entitlement among students. The hiring of adjunct professors is presented as another problem that leads students to have less interest in learning and to demand grades they do not deserve. Selingo claims that as institutions have become more involved in the entertainment, housing, and restaurant business, they have become less focused on the issues that directly affect educating students.

Chapters 4-6 of *College (Un)bound* discuss how the recession and personalized education started a shift in education beginning in the mid-2000s and continuing to the present. Selingo believes the root of the crisis was in 2008 when Lehman Brothers filed for bankruptcy, becoming the largest bankruptcy in U.S. history. This event sent the economy into a deep recession, and colleges are still feeling the effects today. State colleges that were once seen as access institutions are now becoming more like private colleges. Since funding for higher education is still considered discretionary spending in state budgets, students are contributing a higher percentage of the cost toward earning a college degree than the state does.

A shift in education that is seen as positive by Selingo comes in the form of personalized education. One example is an adaptive learning tool powered by Knewton. This tool is used in a math course at Arizona State University to assist students who need assistance solving problems. Knewton founder, Jose Ferreira, says this tool allows professors to spend more time with students on higher level concepts while it assists them in learning basic math skills. Another tool that personalizes education is Naviance; it helps students as early as sixth grade plan their careers, guide college choices, and manage the application process. Recommending courses based on a student's predicted grade is another significant tool shaping the direction of higher education. Tristan Denley created Degree Compass, a software program that recommends courses based on students' predicted grades by matching them to similar students who previously completed the same

courses. The final topic explored in the second section of the book is MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses). These online courses are free to the public and offered by many elite colleges such as Harvard and Stanford. The only drawback to MOOCs, says Selingo, is that students are not awarded academic credit. Since online education is here to stay, awarding academic credit to students completing MOOCs will need to be addressed in the near future.

Chapters 7-10 of the book outline new trends for the future of higher education. Since education has expanded from on ground to online, many discussions must take place to settle the conflicts between traditional and contemporary models of education. Some in higher education see online courses as profitable because students are charged the same or more for online courses, even though producing an online format is less expensive. Critics of the current set-up believe universities should see online learning as a way to cut prices for students, not to increase student debt. An additional concern is the value of academic credits because they are the currency in higher education. Classes without credits, such as MOOCs, are useless to students who desire a degree. Temporary fixes were used to overcome this stumbling block until the late 1990s when Western Governors University (WGU) was established. Members of this online consortium believe degrees should be based on how much students know, not how much time they spend in a classroom. The average WGU attendee completes college in two and one-half years for less than \$20,000, and WGU has become the largest supplier of math and science teachers in urban schools. One of the last trends discussed is the popularity of community colleges, possibly due to inexpensive tuition. Sallie Mae, the student loan corporation, found that 23% of students from households earning \$100,000 or more attended community colleges in 2011-2012, up from 12% previously.

Selingo does not make it clear how the changes he proposes would assist all populations of students, including first generation and underprepared students. However, *College Un(Bound)* provides thought-provoking information for educational administrators, college faculty, students, and parents. This book reminds everyone in higher education that changes must be made to meet the challenges of a new generation.