

FOUR NEW REALITIES FACING COMMUNITY COLLEGES

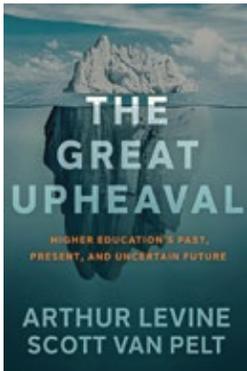
Higher ed leaders must respond to evolving preferences, competitors, models, and certifications.

By Arthur Levine



AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION will change profoundly in the years ahead to meet the needs of a country shifting from a national analog industrial economy to a global digital knowledge economy. The same thing happened during the Industrial Revolution, when classical colleges were transformed into research universities, land grant colleges, technical institutions, community colleges, and colleges for black students and women.

Now as then, every college will be affected. However, the impact will likely be greatest among community colleges and regional universities.



Four new realities will characterize the coming transformation.

1) **With near-universal access to digital devices and the Internet students will seek from higher education the same things they are getting from the music, movie, and newspaper industries.**

Given the choice, consumers of newspapers, films, and music chose round-the-clock over fixed-time access and anywhere mobile access over fixed locations. They selected consumer-rather than producer-determined content, personalized over uniform content, and low prices over high ones except for luxury goods.

The same can be expected in higher education. Increasingly, students, particularly older, part-time, and working students — the students most likely to attend community colleges — come to college principally to attend classes. In this new environment, students are placing a premium on convenience — anytime, anyplace accessibility, personalized education that fits their circumstances, and unbundling, only purchasing what they need or want to buy at affordable prices. For instance, during the pandemic, while college enrollments were declining (with community college attendees dropping 14 percent), enrollment in institutions with these attributes, such as the Coursera online learning platform, saw the number of students they serve jump. Coursera enrollments jumped from 53 to 78 million. Coursera's 25 million student increase during the pandemic is more than the entire enrollment in U.S. higher education.

2) **New content producers and distributors will enter the higher education marketplace, driving up institutional competition and consumer choice and driving prices down.** We are seeing a proliferation of new postsecondary institutions, organizations, and programs. Libraries, museums, media companies, and software makers are increasingly entering the marketplace, offering content, instruction, and certification. For example, Google offers 80 certificate programs, and Microsoft has 77.

While it is unclear what students will choose, community colleges face mounting competition from these new content providers. Students already have dramatically more choices — often at lower cost — in how, when, and where they learn.

3) **The industrial-era model of higher education focusing on time, process, and teaching will be eclipsed by a knowledge economy successor rooted in outcomes and learning.** The shift will occur for educational and practical reasons. First, the current model assumes all students learn the same things within the same period of time. In reality, if the time and process of education are held constant, student outcomes will vary widely. This is because different individuals learn the same subjects at different rates. Therefore, it makes more sense to focus on the outcomes we want students to achieve — what we want them to learn, not how long we want them to be taught.

The second reason is that the current model requires all education experiences be translatable into units of time — courses, credit hours, and

seat time. But the explosion of new content being produced by a host of for-profits and non-profits will render the historic time and process-based academic currency and accounting system unusable. Their curricular practices are so heterogeneous that they cannot be translated into uniform time or process measures. The one common denominator they all share is that they produce outcomes.

4) **The dominance of degrees and “just-in-case” education will diminish; non-degree certifications and “just-in-time” education will increase in status and value.** American higher education has historically focused on degree-granting programs intended to prepare students for careers and life beyond college with the skills and knowledge institutions believe will be necessary for the future. This can be described as “just-in-case education.”

In contrast, “just-in-time education” is present-oriented and more immediate, teaching students the skills and knowledge they need now. “Just-in-time education” comes in all shapes and sizes, largely diverging from traditional academic time standards, uniform course lengths, and common credit measures. It is driven by the outcomes a student wants to achieve. Only a small portion award degrees; most grant micro-credentials.

The increasing need for upskilling and reskilling caused by automation, the knowledge explosion, and COVID promises to generate a population seeking “just-in-time education” exceeding that currently enrolled in degree programs. Moreover, degree programs are generally discrete, one-time events, while just-in-time education is likely to occur repeatedly throughout one's lifetime and be aligned with the labor market.

These are four profound changes. They will come whether colleges and universities want them or not. Community colleges are at particular risk because of their demographics and the changing postsecondary marketplace. The greatest mistake any institution can make is ignoring or failing to respond to the extraordinary changes ahead. This is the time for every institution to recognize the world that is emerging and to determine the course they wish to follow.



Arthur Levine, author of *The Great Upheaval: Higher Education's Past, Present and Uncertain Future*, is Distinguished Scholar of Higher Education at New York University. He is also President Emeritus of Teachers College, Columbia University and president Emeritus of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation (now Institute on Citizens and Scholars). Levine has been a faculty member and chair of the Institute for Educational Management at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, president of Bradford College and senior Fellow at the Carnegie Foundation. He was also the founder and first president of the Woodrow Wilson (now High Meadows) Graduate School of Teaching and Learning.