What College Will Be Like in 2023

Imagine a university without textbooks and classes without calendars. But still costing a lot of money.

By Gabriel Kahn

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Ten years from now college might not look too different from the outside—the manicured quads, the football games, the parties—but the learning experience students receive will

Textbooks. Lecture halls. September-to-spring calendars. Over the next decade, technology may sweep away some of the most basic aspects of a university education and usher in a flood of innovations and changes. Look for online classes that let students learn at their own pace, drawing on materials from schools across the country—not just a single professor and a hefty textbook.

All those changes probably won't make a university education cheaper—alas—but they will likely upend our perceptions about how we value it. Traditionally, schools have been judged by how many prospective students they turn away, not by how many competent graduates they churn out.

"Those are status rankings, driven by exclusivity and preservation of an old model," says Michael Crow, the president of Arizona State University. But as new technologies seep into the classroom, it will be easier to measure what students actually learn. That will "make universities more accountable for what they produce," Dr. Crow says.

Here are four areas where you can expect to see major changes and one area where you probably won't:

The Classroom

In the near future, professors will run their courses over digital platforms capable of collecting data on each student's progress. These platforms were initially developed for massive open online courses, or MOOCs. However, universities are now folding these platforms back into their traditional classes because they make it easier to share content, host discussions and keep track of student work. A professor might still "teach" a class, but most of the interaction will happen online.If professors and students do meet in a physical classroom, it will be to review material, work through problems or drill down on discussion topics. Scenes like John Houseman lecturing to an auditorium full of students in "The Paper Chase" will be a thing of the past.

These platforms are constantly improving. Soon, they will be able to monitor which students are spending 15 minutes on a calculus problem and which ones slog away for an hour. This can raise red flags for professors (and their teaching assistants) about who might need extra help. As Rovy Brannon, associate dean at the University of Wisconsin-Extension, says, "The course platform will get to know you far better than your professor does today."

The Calendar

As more classes move partially or entirely online, the requirements of having a uniform start and end date diminish. Having all the class material online also means some students could sail through a semester's worth of classes in a few weeks and then start again with new courses. Think of it as the academic equivalent of binge viewing on Netflix. Some might finish a bachelor's degree in two years. Those who stick around for four years might have three majors.

It's a move that educators are likely to encourage: Fast learning makes their undergrads look more impressive and lets schools pocket more revenue by moving more students through the system. "You used to be on a regimented schedule that produced this experience," says Dr. Crow, the Arizona State president. "We realize that's one path, but only one of several, and we have to facilitate all of them."

The Institution

It used to be that getting accepted to a prestigious university was how you accessed the best professors and could hang out with the smartest students. That's because universities were, for the most part, closed information systems that doled out their content to a select few. That's changing.

More universities are making their courses available through online platforms such as Coursera and edX, and great lectures can be found on YouTube. Students are supplementing their own school's classes with online lectures from rock-star professors at other institutions.

More and more, this type of learning will become part of the fabric of college life. "Students will be able to acquire knowledge globally, across different campuses," says Ron Kraemer, chief information and digital officer at the University of Notre Dame.

Schools, meanwhile, will take advantage of this setup to conserve their resources. They might develop courses of their own only when they think they can provide a big advantage over other schools' offerings. Otherwise, they might simply adopt a world-beating course that was developed elsewhere, and then put their own stamp on it by designing assignments, discussions and student-faculty interactions. Already, for example, students at several California State University campuses such as San Jose and Sacramento are taking engineering classes that were developed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

"The university will be part of a club where they will share their resources, because they don't all want to offer the same econ class," says Shelton Waggener, the senior vice president of Internet2, a research network founded by several U.S. universities.

Mr. Kraemer anticipates fierce battles over intellectual property as universities begin to open up their content to the outside. If a professor develops a course that catches fire at campuses across the country, who gets compensated? The professor? The university? And, as has happened in fields such as music and book publishing, what's to prevent star professors from breaking out of the confines of a university to strike out on their own?

But he also says opening up colleges will improve the learning experience. "It levels the playing field because it allows greater access to materials," Mr. Kraemer says. "It challenges everyone to up their game."

The Textbook

These 10-pound hardcover volumes used to anchor Psychology 101 or the "Rocks for Jocks" geology class. But this giant bundle, and the lucrative publishing industry that produced it, will quickly unravel as professors pick and choose the sections they like best and assemble their own course packs.

"No professor will need to assign the whole textbook," says Soo Young Rieh, a professor at the University of Michigan's School of Information. "Each class will have its own tailored materials."

The books themselves will cease to be physical volumes and instead will be sources of interactive digital content that include text, videos and simulations. In some cases, the material that used to be in a textbook will simply be integrated into the online course platform, where students can watch a lecture, read an essay and do a homework assignment. As students work their way through them, they will engage in social learning experiences with classmates or even students at other universities—everything from sharing notes on the reading to engaging in video chats about course topics.

The Cost

In the future, tuition will drop dramatically. No, just kidding.

The expansion of online delivery has led some to believe that universities will be able to scale up their classes and reduce their costs per student. While this will happen in a few cases—Georgia Tech is now offering an online computer science master's for $6,600—it won't transform the university cost structure. That's because so many of the added costs are the result of the expansion of university administrations and other nonacademic functions, from career counseling to student activities.

Technology will help increase the class size, says Anthony P. Carnevale, the director of Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce, "but that's pocket change in the whole scheme of things."