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Antony Davies & James R. Harrigan: Colleges' new option — less is more

ANTONY DAVIES & JAMES R. HARRIGAN | Saturday, Feb. 17, 2018, 7:11 p.m.



Barry Reeger | Tribune-Review

A sign describing tuition payment hangs in the Student Services Center window in Founder's Hall at Westmoreland County Community College on Wednesday, March 23, 2016, in Youngwood.

A growing number of universities offer “MicroMasters” (<https://www.edx.org/micromasters>) credentials, designed for holders of bachelor's degrees, that look a lot like streamlined versions of undergraduate majors. Courses can be completed in a few weeks, the certificate in a matter of months. While the market for these certificates is at the graduate level now, they could become an interesting part of higher education's future generally.

At roughly \$250,000, a college education's average cost is more than 20 times (https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17_330.10.asp?current=yes) what it was 50 years ago. Part of what has driven the cost is a growing disconnect between what students want and what colleges deliver. Colleges attract students with promises of future jobs, but when they arrive, students take any number of courses that seem to exist only as a faculty jobs program. Students who want jobs, as opposed to educations, must complete 120 credit programs to get the 24 credits they actually need. For them, 70 percent of curricular requirements are superfluous. Curricula serve colleges more than they serve the students who undertake them. Given the costs, this has to change.

The higher tuition rises, the more valuable students are to colleges — particularly lesser-skilled ones who don't require academic scholarships. As a result, colleges are increasingly tempted to admit students they know won't succeed, and to pressure faculty to relax academic standards to retain them. Consider that over 40 percent (https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/tables/dt16_303.70.asp) of 18- to 24-year-olds (<https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/distribution-by-age/?dataView=1¤tTimeframe=0&selectedDistributions=adults-19-25&sortModel=%7B%22colId%22:%22Location%22,%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D>) are in college today, versus 20 percent 50 years ago, despite the ballooning expense. Either colleges are relaxing standards, or today's children are geniuses compared to their parents.

The fact is that colleges have become unsustainable. A college education's cost is so high that students question whether the degree is worth the price. Meanwhile, the substance of the education has eroded enough that employers question whether the degree means anything in the first place.

A better option for all might be for colleges to continue offering baccalaureate degrees to students who want educations, but to offer something like a MicroMasters certificate — call it a micro-baccalaureate certificate — to students who primarily want job preparation. A micro-baccalaureate would prepare students for the workplace at a fraction of a four-year degree's time and cost. This would be a winning move for colleges, too. Instead of wrapping a product students want into a much larger package that they don't, colleges could serve their biggest stakeholders, students and employers, in a cooperative way that would strengthen everyone.

A micro-baccalaureate would not replace a four-year degree, but would more closely match many students' goals and aspirations. Colleges should be more than open to changes like this, though they will upend colleges' traditional business model. Given

current enrollment and cost trajectories, that business model is unsustainable. The choice many colleges will face is not whether to adapt, but whether to continue at all. This new model offers them a chance to do so.

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