

An end to college as we know it

Bill Hall/Lewiston Tribune

Has college for your kid become uncertain?

A startling new book is going to scare the socks off a lot of college administrators.

On the other hand, that same book offers some hope of a joyful liberation one day soon for students who have been bled white by college and university tuition excess.

The book is "The End of College," with the subtitle "Creating The Future of Learning and The University of Everywhere."

If author Kevin Carey is correct, his University of Everywhere will soon separate students from today's narrow, one-campus learning and let them study electronically in several colleges at a time.

One effective star professor will simultaneously teach 50,000 students scattered around the world. That in turn could cut the cost of college to almost nothing.

But won't that sacrifice some of the positive aspects of classrooms? Don't students in a classroom help teach each other?

That's partly true. On the other hand, there are already students living in remote areas who had no other choice but going to college electronically.

Carey believes colleges as we have known them will not only become far less expensive but they are already starting to go through major changes. Huge, hulking buildings will be far less the focus of colleges as we have known them. Schools like Harvard, MIT and Stanford are already testing those waters. And according to Carey, you ain't seen nothing yet.

(Carey is a higher education writer whose stories have appeared in the New York Times and Washington Post.)

He asks several pertinent questions. Why, he wonders, are all fields of study the same length of time in regular colleges? Why are almost all bachelor degrees four years?

Why not five or six years for pre-med, three years for elementary school teachers and about a year and a half for newspaper columnists and football coaches?

For that matter, how come some countries don't attach sports teams to colleges? They have less expensive town teams and not massive football factories like the University of Oregon or the University of Washington that have turned football meccas into a new religion.

And then there is potential computer inventors, people like Bill Gates, who dropped out of Harvard and went home to do something worthwhile like become a Microsoft billionaire.

We are just beginning to sober up and recognize that we are pricing our colleges out of the market. Each year the boards of colleges and universities raise the price of tuition to enormous levels that greatly exceed national inflation. Colleges and universities are right up there at the top with those other infamous big spenders - medicine and war. Is it any wonder that some colleges and universities are beginning to see declining student enrollments?

Carey calls our attention to what looks like the crumbling of higher education as we know it. And being saner than most college leaders, he is concerned about how much families of modest means are alarmed.

"This," he says, "is why the rising cost of higher education has struck such a deep chord of anxiety. People have been told that their children's future and their success as parents are absolutely dependent on higher education. Yet the price of fulfilling that obligation has grown farther and farther out of reach."

Almost every family's dream is of a substantial education for the children. Not so many years ago, such a dream was well within reach of most families. Fifty years ago, Idaho and California - states I have long been familiar with - offered an absolutely free higher education without any tuition.

All that was expected in return was that students of my generation would pass on that favor to the next generation in return for the free education we had received.

But then terrified legislators, never inclined toward courage, refused to vote the financial support, the taxation for higher education. And of course, the trembling boards of regents and the college presidents knuckled under.

Sorry, kids, you're on your own. And good luck with your mountains of student loans.

The dream has long since melted. No wonder an important book has now appeared, waking us up to the bad news and, one day soon, the good news.

Suddenly, the classroom is going to be everywhere, scattered around the world. The halls of ivy are part of the past and thus part of the problem.

Read Kevin Carey's book and see if you agree that the gilded colleges of today don't deserve to survive.

Hall is editor emeritus of the Tribune's Opinion page. His email address is wilberth@cablone.net.

