



## Higher Education in the Digital Age

Bowen, William G.  
Princeton University Press, 2013

Book Review

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What is the unique value of higher education? What is effective instruction? Is there a cost crisis that is threatening the value and efficacy of higher education? Can technology offer a solution? These are a few of the questions posed by William Bowen and others in *Higher Education in the Digital Age*. This readable and thought-provoking book consists largely of lectures delivered by Bowen at Stanford University in 2012. The discussion of these issues is expanded to include other voices of leadership in higher education, all of whom contribute responses to Bowen's original lectures.

Bowen addresses the pressures facing university administrators who must balance all aspects of post-secondary education: cost to students, quality of education, financial support of research, and costs of personnel. The first two of three sections are lectures Bowen delivered at Stanford. The first lecture describes the economic issues facing institutions of higher education, including problems of affordability and the lack of productivity-increases in higher education compared to other industries. The second lecture implores leaders in higher education to address the dual issues of rising tuition and rising expenditures and to, at the very least, try to slow the rates of increase. His possible solutions look to technology (online or hybrid instruction) to increase productivity. In so doing, he opens up a larger discussion on what qualifies as actual learning and what costs (to quality of education and to funding for development and implementation) are acceptable.

The discussion among higher education leaders and administrators in the third section of the book is its greatest value. The discussion hits on many of the economic and societal issues Bowen brings up: the flattening of family incomes, rising tuition rates, issues of completion

rates, the pros and cons of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), and issues raised by the existence of for-profit degree-granting institutions. All of the authors come from top tier research institutions: Harvard, Stanford, Columbia, and Princeton. One wonders how different the conversation would be if more publicly-funded universities, smaller liberal arts colleges, or community colleges participated in the discussion. While some of the writers acknowledge this bias and seek to qualify it by examining data from other types of institutions, their solutions (that require a large amount of funding) seem removed from the reality at other institutions.

In spite of this limitation, the authors of *Higher Education* ask questions that invite reflection and conversation, given the financial situation in which many institutions find themselves. What value do we offer our students? Will the drive to increase productivity take that value away? Does technology offer opportunities to improve education while also increasing productivity? Can online learning maintain what is most valuable in a liberal arts education? The solutions offered are not a total fix (by the authors' own admission), but the dialogue initiated in *Higher Education* presents administrators, faculty, and staff with an opportunity to rethink and innovate traditional teaching methods.

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