



PHOTO / MARTHA STEWART

While K–12 Schools Resist, Digital Learning Disrupts Higher Education

“By 2019 about 50 percent of courses will be delivered online,” wrote

Clayton M. Christensen and Michael B. Horn in a pathbreaking essay in 2008 (“How Do We Transform Our Schools?” *features*, Summer 2008). Five years later, the authors stand by that prediction (see “Data Support Disruption Theory As Online, Blended Learning Grow,” *Forbes.com* blog entry, May 30, 2013), though they expect most of the online delivery to be blended into traditional brick-and-mortar classrooms. In my view, the estimate, optimistic even when written, now seems out of reach. Although digital learning is making definite advances, it has yet to disrupt secondary education.

When it comes to higher education, however, the prediction is deadly accurate. Hardly a day passes without news of another institution joining the online stampede. As I write this, Coursera, a for-profit firm, announces that it is inviting professors in 10 state university systems—from New York and Colorado to Georgia, Tennessee, and New Mexico—to create online courses for the company to market. The firm, barely a year old, already offers 375 classes taught by some 500 professors from 80 different institutions. Meanwhile, the spread of online learning in K–12 education is halting, uncertain, and unsure, as Michael Horn reports to us in his fascinating survey of the state legislative landscape (“Legislation Roundup,” *features*, Fall 2013).

Purveyors of conventional wisdom place the blame on either students or teachers for the difference between secondary and higher education. College students, they say, can be expected to study on their own, while high school students need to be motivated (or pushed) by classroom teachers. Yet we all have met a plethora of highly motivated 16-year-olds and been appalled by gaggles of slovenly 20-somethings.

Or the problem may lie with their teachers. Many of today’s secondary-school teachers were trained in the predigital era and chose the profession for its dependable salaries and tenure guarantee. Anticipating few rewards, most teachers are reluctant to spend time inquiring into the latest innovations.

As compelling as the latter arguments may be, they apply no less to the college professoriate. When San Jose State University

decided to offer for credit an online Harvard-based course in political theory, its professors went ballistic. Fifty of my Harvard colleagues recently signed a letter complaining about the university’s venture into online learning. At a recent seminar, I listened to many of them insist that students could learn only if a professor was at the other end of the log, or at least wandering about the room. Research would suffer if colleges could no longer demand high tuitions. Above all, jobs would be lost.

Despite faculty objections, online learning is hardly missing a step as it marches across the higher education landscape, even while it is being bottled up at the secondary level into just a few cutting-edge charter and district schools. Why?

Surely, the best explanation is that old stalwart: competition breeds innovation, while monopolies stultify it. School districts are monopolies that operate within a state regulatory framework that insists that high school students *not* take *any* online courses unless they take *all* courses online at an all-virtual school that can admit only a limited number of students. Only in a few instances can students choose between course providers. Other digital-learning initiatives are no less burdened with restrictions.

By comparison, higher education looks like the Wild West in the days before marshals and sheriffs. Students pick their college, and federal and state money helps to pay the cost via scholarships, Pell grants, and student loans, creating a free-for-all battle for student applications. Nor does a provider need government approval to enter the higher education space. A college has to be accredited, but entrepreneurs can turn even marginal ones into profitable, inexpensive, largely online institutions of higher education. Other colleges must then cut costs to survive. Higher education is doomed to suffer changes not unlike those that have swept through the print media.

Perhaps then the transformation of the K–12 system will begin.

— Paul E. Peterson

MISSION STATEMENT In the stormy seas of school reform, this journal will steer a steady course, presenting the facts as best they can be determined, giving voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments. Bold change is needed in American K–12 education, but *Education Next* partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points.
