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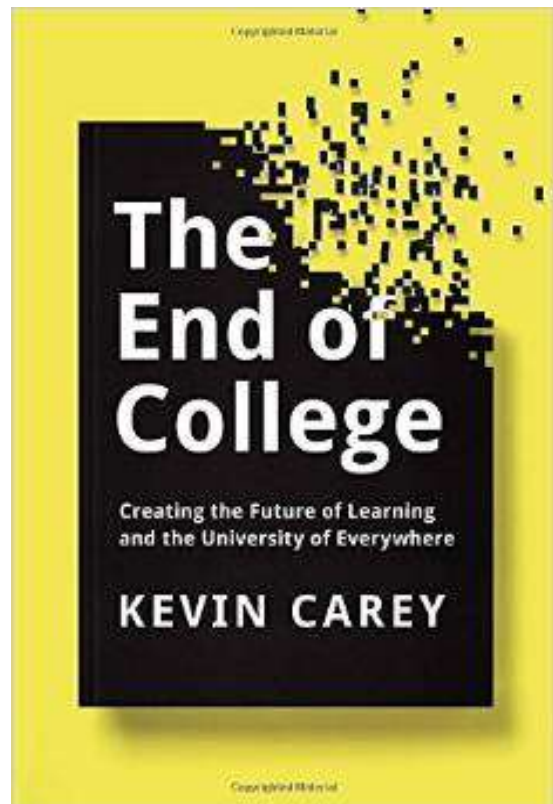
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Kevin Carey's *The End of College* is one of the most engaging books on an educational topic I've read in a long time. It calls into question the sturdiness and attractiveness of the home where many of us have spent our professional lives. Carey contends that American universities are not only bad bargains for students and parents, they are inherently flawed and will become obsolete some time during the next century. The book contains a brief history of higher education in the United States, identifying the fatal flaw in what Carey calls the "hybrid" university. This leads to Carey's powerful indictment of the institution, which, in turn, sets the stage for his provocative description of what will replace it.

The American university is a blend of three distinct traditions, claims Carey: the German research university, the British liberal arts college, and our land grant institutions that emphasized training in the practical arts such as engineering. These three meld uneasily on a single campus, but Carey's biggest complaint is that the



undergraduate's learning is frequently sacrificed to the faculty's pursuit of research. As Carey demonstrates, this criticism is an old one. He cites a passage from an essay, *The Ph.D. Octopus*, in which William James laments the university's hiring only PhD's:

Will anyone pretend for a moment that the doctor's degree is a guarantee that its possessor will be successful as a teacher? Notoriously, his moral, social and personal characteristics may utterly disqualify him for success in the class-room; and of these characteristics his doctor's examination is unable to take any account whatever. (p. 32)

Unfortunately, says Carey, a university's reputation is based largely on its research accomplishments, and those institutions with less than stellar records in that domain do their best to ape the most successful—all at the expense of the undergraduate's educational experience.

Carey's brief for the prosecution is, admittedly, strong--e.g. "Hybrid universities have been ripping off parents and students for decades..." (pp. 240-241)—yet there is more than a germ of truth in the indictment. Can this trend be reversed? Indeed, it not only can but inevitably will. Carey sees a future, already, dawning, in which higher education will be transformed beyond recognition. Ironically, it's a future made possible by scientific and technological advances emerging from the laboratories of the most prestigious universities.

"The university of everywhere" limned by Carey is based on digital learning environments capable of analyzing and responding to the strengths displayed and difficulties experienced by individual students. The students' accomplishments will be certified by an alternative system of credentials, badges, awarded for levels of accomplishment in specific domains. These badges will be based on student projects—e.g. designing an app, or articulating a business model—which will be available for scrutiny by potential employers or

others interested in knowing what a student can actually do, not what courses she's taken.

The criticism and the vision are plausible, though readers will react very differently, depending on their own experiences in college and university. There's no doubt that Carey sees the digital future of higher education through rose-colored glasses and the past and present through darkly colored ones. What makes the book such a delightful read, though, is not the cogency of his thesis but Carey's journalistic talent. He is able to enliven his argument by weaving together interviews with key university administrators, learning scientists, and Silicon Valley entrepreneurs along with his own experience as a student in a massive open online course (MOOC) in genetics. Carey's report of his personal experience will, I think, give even the most skeptical readers pause:

In debating the educational value of lecture videos, some people argue that there's something to being *in the room* that mere video can't replicate. Based on what followed, I can say this: live and taped lectures really aren't the same. Live lectures are definitely worse. (173, emphasis in original)

Carey may or may not have read Karl Marx but he is a Marxian—I don't mean a communist—in a deep sense. The dynamic which, according to Carey, will destroy the hybrid university and give birth to the University of Everywhere is a version of a dynamic outlined by Marx a little more than a hundred and fifty years ago. Marx posited that history is propelled by a tension between what he labeled the “productive forces” and “the relations of production”

The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. ... At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production. ... From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn

into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure.

(Marx, 1977/1859, p.1)

An analogy can be found in the educational domain (see Schrag, 1986). The technology of communication—think orality, the written word, the book, and now the digital revolution—each facilitates certain pedagogical relations, but eventually there is tension between the “traditional” pedagogical means and the technological innovations that subvert them. This eventuates in the disruption of traditional institutions and forms the basis of Carey’s diagnosis and prediction.

A skeptic might say that when first introduced, film, radio, and television were also thought to portend educational revolutions, but that never happened. Carey would reply that although these media could partially replace the instructor, they never were nor were they perceived to be *improvements* on the live classroom. This time is different. Is Carey right? I suspect he is, though whether it will happen in the next twenty or a hundred years is anyone’s guess. In any case, I highly recommend *The End of College*. It may reinforce your fondest hopes or confirm your worst fears, but you will not be bored.


## References

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## About the Reviewer

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