



Kirst, M. W., & Stevens, M. L. (2015). *Remaking college: The changing ecology of higher education*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

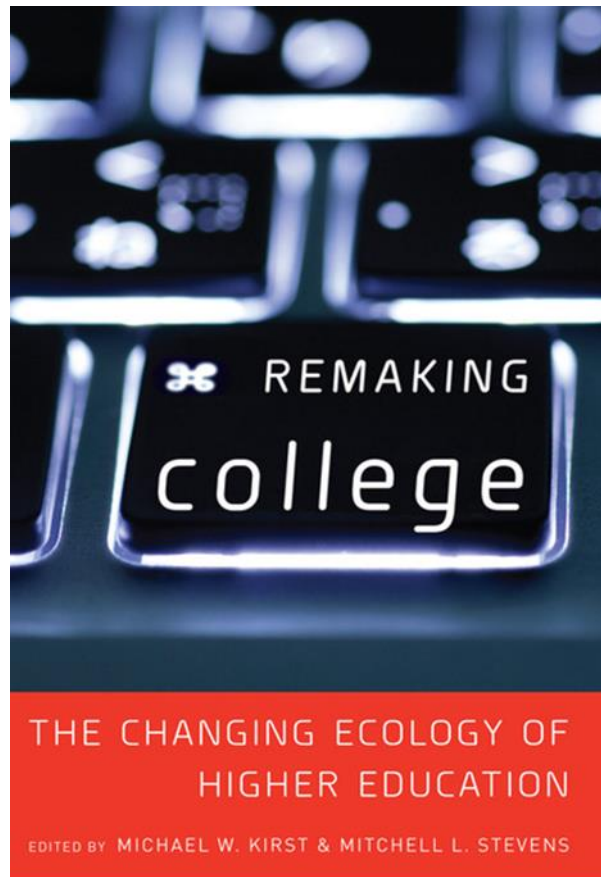
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ISBN: 978-0-8047-9329-2

**Reviewed by Jay Parrent  
Madisonville Community College  
United States**

In *Remaking College: The changing ecology of higher education*, editors Michael W. Kirst and Mitchell L. Stevens gather a powerful collection of essays focusing on one of the most tumultuous eras in the history of American higher education. The last 30 years have been marked by the reduction of state financial support for colleges and universities leading to an increased tuition burden placed on students and families. The immediate and disruptive role of technology has changed forever what many students know of a college classroom, with many degrees and credentials awarded to those who never set foot on a physical campus. Increased calls for accountability through the mechanisms of performance funding and degree completion have forced many universities to make material changes to programs and curriculum. Within the context of this massive change, Kirst and Stevens focus on the broad-access institutions that enroll, educate, and graduate the vast majority of our college students today.

Increased calls for accountability under the Obama Administration through the *Gainful*



*Employment* regulatory action and the crackdown from the Department of Education to address abuses in the for-profit sector alerted many institutions that student debt and outcomes would need to become a focal point in their work. When combined with the push for greater access for students through what many states have termed ‘free’ college scholarship programs, higher education has been stretched in many directions over the past decade. Policy makers and university leaders are facing a variety of questions on developing the workforce of the future and how to best balance the need for access with responsible fiscal support for institutions and students who need help funding their education.

Kirst and Stevens intend to steer higher education study in a different direction, one in which research is encouraged to move from traditional linear models on student behavior through postsecondary education. When the volume’s contributors “describe a higher education ecology, they refer to a specific way of thinking about how organizations work in relation to one another and to their social context” (p. 4). The traditional research design in higher education, according to Kirst and Stevens, has focused primarily on the study of how students progress through an institution to completion, exit, or transfer. This approach has been buoyed by the statistical application of linear regression analysis to answer these questions. This new direction recommended demands a deeper understanding of how stakeholders in this ecology interact and compete for resources and students. Study of this college and university “marketplace” and how the various actors engage in the pursuit of students and the delivery of academic programs must be extended, especially given the radical changes to this traditionally staid sector of American life.

Kirst and Stevens suggest, and rightly so, that the top research universities and Ivy League institutions will operate much as they

have in the past. These campuses are immune in large measure from the turbulence that has beset the rest of the higher education sector due to stable enrollments, significant endowment holdings, and the ability to market to well-resourced students. The broad-access institutions enroll many more students and they represent the most common college experience of people today. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, there are as many undergraduate students enrolled in community colleges as are enrolled in four-year public and private colleges and universities. This population and the colleges they attend deserve attention and increased study to understand their barriers and opportunities as job training and workforce development issues continue to dictate state government discussions about the cost of higher education. Understanding the environment and changing ecology is essential to providing the experience that college students need and deserve to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

The vast availability of higher education options for students via the internet, in massive, open, online courses (MOOCs), and through other modalities might be the greatest factor in the remaking of colleges and universities for the future. But that model might be radically different than what is considered online or traditional coursework. The chapter by Anya Kamenetz argues the digital in higher education cannot be removed now – all of higher education is now some form of hybrid learning, with in-person and online experiences. Institutions must work with students to expand access while not sacrificing quality nor overlooking innovation in the delivery of coursework that will improve student learning. The question for the practitioner becomes then what is the future of the traditional brick and mortar institutions in this hybrid world? How will college leadership create experiences for students that acknowledge the cafeteria of course options while maintaining institutional identity?

The rise and fall of the for-profit institutions impacting the national discussion on student debt and the role of accrediting agencies in ensuring a quality education is addressed in the chapter by Paul Fain and Doug Lederman. With access to student financial aid eased, these institutions have grown tremendously over the past decades and in return recently received scrutiny from the Department of Education for questionable practices. Fain and Lederman observe the many political and economic factors that have impacted the for-profit sector, which will likely change in the coming years but certainly not disappear. With the ascendancy of those in the Department of Education who value competition and choice for students, one can expect the for-profits to make a comeback under a Republican congress and a Trump presidency.

The demands for accountability in higher education have lagged significantly behind those placed upon elementary and secondary public schools during the recent accountability era. Beginning with *A Nation at Risk* and culminating with No Child Left Behind, public schools have been under tremendous pressure to improve student outcomes, high school graduation rates, and to close achievement gaps. Colleges and universities have been able in large measure to avoid the ranking systems and other mechanisms in K-12 education policy to encourage student outcomes in employment and completion until recently. Pushed largely by the cost debate, colleges and universities are now in their own accountability era defined in many cases by the introduction of performance based funding formulas. The increased regulatory efforts from the Department of Education on the administration of various forms of student aid has also address new pressure for postsecondary institutions to perform. The chapter by William Doyle and Michael Kirst suggests that states will have to develop new models of course and degree delivery that

function as networks – not systems – to effectively meet the needs of students.

The contribution by Susanna Loeb, Agustina Paglayan, and Eric Taylor asserts that an absence of research exists on the role of the faculty member and the middle-manager in the broad-access institutions. This absence is especially striking considering the depth of research available on teacher impact in K-12 education and the clear connection between good teaching and student learning. The work of the university is conducted by people; the need to understand how these professionals interact in their roles is essential. Much deeper work is needed in this area and interesting questions about the instructional effectiveness of college faculty members, the impact of middle-management on student learning, and the challenges brought to the study of people by distance learning and technological advances deserve greater attention and further study.

The traditional pathway to the middle class has been challenged during this disruptive time in higher education and the conventional wisdom on the value and the upward mobility of our student populations no longer holds true. The cost question has also forced a dialogue that plays out in statehouses across the nation about the true purpose of a college education. Should colleges focus on just workforce preparation or is there still room in this climate for the study of arts, languages, and the humanities? Several states have adopted performance funding formulas that seem to discourage the pursuit of humanities degrees in favor of short-term credentials that are designed to only build technical skills needed in the workplace. It is essential that the public, from those in the system to the consumers of higher education, consider new ways of thinking about education policy. Administrators and college leaders are searching for new avenues to reach students and to ensure access and success while meeting their mission of workforce preparation and creating an

educated citizenry. The challenges to do so are immense and will require entrepreneurial and innovative ideas.

*Remaking College* is a prophetic title in many ways given the changing attitudes in much of the country toward the value of higher education. Depending on the ability of colleges and universities to answer these tough questions, the remaking might come at the hands of those who believe very differently

about higher education than those in the academy. Kirst and Stevens succeed in providing the framework for a new research agenda for the broad-access institutions within the newly defined ecology of competitors, stakeholders, and students. A sense of urgency should exist on the part of campus leaders to understand the changing ecology and to contribute to the reshaping of higher education to fit the needs of students today.

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### About the Reviewer


Jay Parrent is the Chief Student Affairs Officer at Madisonville Community College in Madisonville, Kentucky. He has worked in student affairs and higher education leadership for nearly 20 years. Parrent was appointed to the Kentucky Board of Education and served from 2010-2015, including a period as Vice-Chair. He holds a BA in history from Kentucky Wesleyan College, an MA from both Murray State University and the University of Louisville, and a doctorate from the University of Kentucky.



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**Supported by the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University**

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