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DeMillo, Richard A. (2011) *Abelard to Apple: The Fate of American Colleges and Universities*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

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Reviewed by Laura Moorhead
Stanford University

Richard DeMillo doesn't expect many people, even academics, to recognize the name Peter Abelard in the title of his latest book. Yet, DeMillo uses the 12th-century scholar — best known for his disastrous love affair with Heloise and subsequent castration — to represent what he considers the forefront of a revolution that will lead to a new kind of higher education. For DeMillo, Abelard is a metaphor for the ancient ideal of university teaching. The gelded monk was among a handful of thinkers who shaped Western notions of education through a mix of one-on-one and community-based learning that self-organized to reach thousands at a time. Through Abelard, DeMillo gives readers — professors, administrators, and policymakers — a historical arc punctuated by his personal experience with innovation that carries them from the medieval European universities of Abelard's time to Apple's iTunes U and MIT's OpenCourseWare, platforms for teachers to engage

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with students in huge numbers. There is a message in the journey DeMillo presents: professors who do not provide value, who fixate on their profession, who confuse lecturing with teaching and scholarship with winning research grants, will find themselves relegated to the margins, working at schools that fail to create value for their students and communities — schools that ultimately fail to survive.

While DeMillo insists that his message is suited for all colleges and universities, he focuses on the two- to three-thousand schools in the middle, those ranked in reputation well below the country's seventy or so elite institutions and above for-profit enterprises. In tough economic times, DeMillo explains, all schools are vulnerable, but the elites are equipped to prosper. Like Google or Apple, they can afford to make hundreds of mistakes along the path of innovation. They sit comfortably atop multibillion-dollar endowments, and their brands are resilient. Rising tuition costs, DeMillo argues, affect the elites less than those schools in the middle. As the middle becomes pricier, he explains, the pool of qualified applicants to elite colleges grows. Top institutions draw from an increasingly narrow socioeconomic slice of America, and schools in the middle lose out. Rather than innovate, they cling to a centuries-old model of higher education built around the "sage on stage," chase after Ivy League schools in a race they cannot win, and ignore the social, historical, and economic forces at work in today's world.

DeMillo's tough-love advice is straightforward: give up the chase and figure out what makes your institution different and valuable; then — through innovation, technology, and an inevitable openness — offer that value to as many students as possible. Certainly, "innovation," "technology," and "openness" are the moment's catchphrases, and DeMillo's book contributes to a growing canon of academic self-help books (think *Academically Adrift* and *Hollowing Out the Middle*). But DeMillo's notions appear more nuanced and his tone realistic. Technology will not save middling schools, and their iTunes courses are unlikely to top those of MIT or Yale. But schools from the middle can surface as the next Kahn Academy within their communities. Through innovative thinking and action, schools can succeed in creating value and networks based on social capital that encourages peer

communities to self-organize, bettering their brand and ability to attract top professors.

DeMillo divides *Abelard to Apple* into five sections, which move forward in time and topic through vignettes that intertwine historical moments with the author's experience in both academia and industry. DeMillo, writing more like a journalist than a social scientist, marshals both academic and non-academic research. In an anecdote that places the author in the heart of Silicon Valley, he tells of coming across Abelard's name during the controversial 2002 merger of Hewlett-Packard and Compaq Computer. As HP's first chief technology officer, DeMillo uncovered "Abelard" as a code-name for Compaq and researched the word's significance. He learned that HP's CEO Carly Fiorina, a classics major, had picked the moniker with all its dubious distinction, from Abelard's hubris to his castration, while dubbing HP "Heloise." DeMillo links the scene, through a quotation about Abelard, to a lesson for academia: no one, no school should "think himself the only philosopher standing the world."

DeMillo is drawn to the middle and wants it to do better. After the HP-Compaq merger, he directed a division of the National Science Foundation and joined Georgia Institute of Technology, where he works as a professor. He has also taught at Purdue University and the University of Wisconsin, and as an alumnus of Georgia Tech and the University of St. Thomas, a small liberal arts college in Minnesota, he's from the middle (Hibbing, Minnesota, specifically). Readers might easily overlook his affection for the middle, as they read passage after passage highlighting the successes of the elites. He is clearly taken with Charles Vest's foresight to launch MIT's OpenCourseWork, and he writes a Who's Who of the elite's innovators. Still, DeMillo is determined to help schools in the middle innovate and to remind them of their imperative to do so: these predominately public institutions enroll 80 percent of the nation's 14.8 million college-age students, and according to DeMillo, they represent the country's future and well-being.

The author closes with ten valuable rules for the 21st century, including "forget who is above," "be open," and "balance faculty-centrism and student-centrism." he ends his list on a crucial theme of the book — "adopt the New

Wisconsin idea,” from an 1877 baccalaureate by John Bascom, president of the University of Wisconsin. In the words of Bascom, “All inquiry, all truth must be passed over to the community by school and college, by pulpit and press, as a community possession; and as a supplement to this, every citizen must have the means of instruction so open to him that he shall be brought in living contact with this knowledge.” In modeling themselves after Bascom’s vision, DeMillo hopes, schools in the middle abandon their “headlong rush to carve out segments of society for exclusion” and deliver value through “universal access, open content, and reliance on new technologies.” By raising the middle, DeMillo wants to raise higher education for all.

About the Reviewer

Laura Moorhead is a doctoral student with Stanford University’s Learning Science and Technology Design group within the School of Education. Her interests and research efforts center around the design and structuring of information, particularly in regard to primary sources and scholarship. Laura has worked in publishing for fifteen years, most recently as a contributing editor and writer at PBS Frontline/World and as a senior editor at *Wired* magazine.

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