Serious Issues Affecting Contemporary Higher Education: Transformation in the Digital Age

Janet K. Henderson, Ed.D. Bergen Community College

Abstract

Issues affecting contemporary Higher Education relate to changes occurring as a result of digital technology and questionable responses to it. This paper, therefore, argues for a need among educators to make significant revisions in the archaic framework of institutions. There is varying response among colleges to changes in enrollment patterns and student abilities; fortunately, some have positively challenged the “old ways” which gives inspiration for even more dynamic thinking. This paper concerns transformation which recognizes that digital technology is here to stay accompanied by “new ways of thinking.” However, there are literate luddites who fear that society already has too much electronic technology available. They write that it can lead us into a new dark age of over-stimulation and social disconnection. While some of their points are valid, it would be irresponsible to not utilize continuing digital transformation within education. Spiraling costs are hurting both students and institutions. The first part of this paper clarifies what some of these problems are. The second part suggests pragmatic changes for improvement. This paper does not propose to be a total “fix” but to be a basis for continuing conversation toward amelioration of relevant vexing issues.

Serious Issues Affecting Contemporary Higher Education

Previously unthinkable situations and scenarios are arising as institutions of learning either hesitantly or boldly respond to an increasingly digitized future. Historians are in general agreement about the events that have had the most significant effect upon humanity. The invention of an alphabet and writing is one such event. Another turning point was the invention of the printing press which made books available to the masses advancing knowledge. We are now, some say, in another significant event in human history with digital technology making all previous knowledge available to anyone with a computer and basic knowledge of the internet. What a wonderful time in which to live when we have virtually unlimited access to knowledge.

Neurologists tell us that our brains are being rewired as a result of our diverse encounters on a daily, if not hourly, basis, with multiple stimuli resulting from exposure to smart phones, social media, blogs and formal or informal websites-just to name a few such stimuli. This is challenging and scary for individuals, certainly, and for the institution of Higher Education.
Isn’t transformation an ameliorative word? Yes, change is generally positive but for the laggards who hold back or don’t take advantage of the benefits to be found in a dynamic process, it is destructive. This is true for individuals, society itself and educational institutions within it. A great deal of recent research has been done in this area of change occurring or needing to occur in higher education. Cathy N. Davidson, *Now You See It (2011)*, Cathy N. Davidson and David Theo Goldberg, *The Future of Thinking (2010)*, Gary Small, M.D. and Gigi Vorgan, *iBrain (2008)*, William G Bowen, *Higher Education in the Digital Age (2013)*, and Kevin Carey,*s The End of College (2015)* are but a few of such notable books to which I will be referring.

**Transformation as Problem**

It is undeniable that today’s society is rapidly changing. Institutions of higher education must change as well from time honored but outmoded concepts of purpose, cost and knowledge delivery in order to serve its constituents in the advancement of knowledge in a digitized civilization. Ultimately learning institutions must adapt to survive or they may viewed as “unnecessary” in this brave new world.

Students are already questioning the procedure to obtain what has previously been the hallmark of successful people, degrees. For centuries, select members of an advanced population center achieved a diploma from hallowed halls verifying that they had knowledge transferred to them via distinguished sages over several years which in most cases cost a great deal in tuition. Today, few realistically expect to become the next Bill Gates but they are wondering if a vocational/technical school could more quickly serve their needs. For example they may dream of creating, with diligence, ambition, home study and perhaps a targeted distance learning course, a new app for software worth thousands or millions of dollars. They
question if they need a college degree to achieve their goals, however fuzzy. Some (2010) have asked, what are the implications of this long tail of learning for institutions if people discover they can be “self-educating via the internet” (Davidson and Goldberg p.23).

Teachers are rethinking how to deliver useful learning outcomes to students and are exploring ever changing technology for use within the classroom and even beyond it in a distance learning format that is student, not teacher centered. They see large numbers of students entering institutions of higher learning without having achieved even basic learning. They question what has gone wrong in earlier schools to produce this dismal result. Are students too glued to their smart phones and social media to be students? Parents and young people find themselves paying for remedial courses which cause frustration, anger and humiliation. Teachers experience negativity from students who have delayed graduation, and have a phenomenally high education bill which includes empty remedial credits and mind-blowing levels of debt that looms in their future. Their poor math skills only temporarily hide from them impending financial disaster. There is a challenge and wonderful opportunity for educators to embrace electronic technology for its potential to enhance critical thinking skills, to stimulate social awareness while working in collaboration with others and to aid in the development of a better informed population than the world has ever seen. The task is huge.

It is clear that colleges, students and faculty have not only encountered a digital society but all have been affected by it. There is no going back. The challenge is how to handle this world where much has changed. This paper will consider a number of possible answers to existing problems in Higher Education and look at the changing roles of students, administrators and teachers caught up in the unique challenges of pedagogy in a modern electronic age where “publish or perish” may be a quaint outdated concept related to an older world.
Institutions of Higher Learning

When a market is targeted, appeals are geared to the members of the selected marketplace. In this case, it is students, generally in the 18-19 year old range. Parents and students know that they are being wooed to select a specific college or university. Colleges are wooing the best students and working hard to get a desirable tier to maintain their competitive ranking. SAT scores and GPA averages are part of the process of selection. Each, ironically and synergistically, needs the other to achieve their independent but related goals. At least that has been true for a great many years.

Therefore, what has been viewed by students as a competition to be selected is, ironically, also a competition among colleges to be selected---to attract the best prospects possible who also are in a position to bring financial assets with them in one form or another. The race is to admit either financially secure upper class prospects, or those whose low financial circumstances will guarantee federal financial aid, or those whose brilliance will attract grants, benefactor and alumnae recognition. Recently, David Leonhardt wrote in The New York Times (2015) that colleges are avoiding enrolling low income students who need financial aid which can “strain a university’s budget. Although many of the students have stellar grades, they often have somewhat lower SAT scores which can hurt a university’s ranking” (New Prize Rewards).

The college selection system worked well, year after year, decade after decade, as needs on both ends of the process were generally met. But much is now being reevaluated. William Bowen, president emeritus of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and Princeton University, writes in Higher Education in the Digital Age (2013) that “we must recognize that if higher education does not begin to slow the rate of increase in college costs, our nation’s higher
education system will lose the public support on which it so heavily depends” (p. 63). That could easily happen.

The *New York Times* (2015) in a recent editorial, notes that nearly 560 colleges and universities—“the majority of them for-profit institutions—have been placed under student aid restrictions because of concerns about their finances” (Students and Parents in the Dark). Corinthian College shut down about 100 campuses over this. What is a logical public response? Bowen (2013) warns about a rising tide of anger and resentment (Bowen p.26).

In fact, the competition for students is heating up. According to the *Bergen Record* newspaper, in 2013, enrollment at colleges and universities declined for the second straight year after increasing from 2006 through 2011 (“College enrollment declines again” p.2). Financial problems in a floundering job market are a likely source of this decline. Costs increase; job opportunities decrease. Any teenager on social media knows this. It doesn’t require heavy research as students see friends a few years older than themselves take low level jobs after graduation and move back home with their bewildered parents who thought their kids were advancing in class and status.

In view of this, from the college perspective, what can they do? What any business does---improve their attractiveness. Dormitories are becoming more and more lavish. Rock-climbing walls are part of some recruitment brochures. Stadiums are becoming state of the art, lavish in size and crowd appeal function, as can be seen at Rutgers University, New Brunswick. Coaches all around the United States are offered enormous salaries, often larger than that of famous, distinguished professors and even college presidents. Campus building programs do not, cannot stop, in the race to erect ever more splendid citadels of specific learning and therefore attract more students and donors.
As in any business, there is debt, ever growing debt, which must be paid. An inverse ratio has developed. Costs to students have been increasing, students (and their parents) are increasingly worried about debt, and the word is most certainly out that they may not get a job after graduation. Leonid Bershidsky (2014) discusses a newly released profile. A new cohort of teenagers are called Generation Z-those born after 1995, “Generation Z is less pampered and more worried about money than Generation Y” (aka the millennials). They worry about their future prospects and college costs. They have a strong presence on social media and they are “over-connected, playing with multiple devices, online all the time” (Bershidsky, “Generation Z…”).

Just like students who worry about the future, colleges worry also. And they should. According to Kevin Carey in his recent book, *The End of College* (2015), something may be ahead that most of us would find inconceivable---the bankruptcy of large numbers of overbuilt campuses that may have been existence for a long time. He says “those that cannot change will disappear (Carey p.7). William Bowen, past president of Princeton University (2013), says the same. “There are numerous voices saying that many colleges and universities, including even prestigious places, are on financially unsustainable paths” (p.24). In their desperation to attract students, they may have increased debt beyond what can be maintained.

Two-year community or as some still call them, junior colleges, offer students education at less cost. Who attends and what are their problems? All is not a rosy picture here either. Most attendees are products of blue collar families. As first generation college students, they have the weight of family expectations resting on them, and don’t receive much financial help from families who have nothing to give but emotional support.
These students often aspire to attend four year colleges in their future. They may have friends who have traveled this route and it worked for them. But a number of factors dampen their enthusiasm. In a vast number of cases, the two year to graduation promise does not hold for them. Only 10 percent (2015) of all students who enroll in community college aspiring to get a bachelor’s degree get one within six years. Nearly half just drop out (Carey p.63). They often must take remedial, non-credit courses as a result of their low scores on entrance exams. These courses eat up their time and money, thereby extending their projected graduation by a full year or more. In order to pay college expenses, most work full or part time. Many arrive on campus tired and poorly prepared for daily classes. In addition, they either drive or take public transportation; either way it increases college costs. They don’t live in dorms but still pay in time lost and transportation. Some have children of their own requiring a baby sitter and attention.

There are also additional costs they may not have considered when they started, such as books, lab fees, and student activity fees. As a result, a large percentage of community college students take out loans. If they become over extended in expense, worn out from the difficult routine, or become subject to losing their jobs which are needed to help their families, is it any wonder that they may drop out of their classes and have little to show for their failed aspirations? If anything, they may be financially worse off for the experience.

According to Federal data, “the default rate for students at for-profit colleges and community colleges are almost identical.” Nationally, the figure is about 20 percent. Lauren Asher, president of Institute for College Access and Success cautioned, “It is still a buyer-beware environment” (Harris, “City Consumer”). Even worse for community college students,
sometimes their credits do not transfer to four-year institutions so they doubly lose, both in time and dollars.

In 1976, a Harvard economist, Richard B. Freeman published a book, *The Overeducated American* in which he predicted that a surplus of college graduates would push long term wages down. *People* magazine, in reference to Freeman’s book, asked “Is a college degree still a passport to white collar success?” (Carey p.57). The anxiety evident in this question has been around for at least forty years. What is the belief today--Is a college degree still worthwhile?

Current research suggests that a bachelor’s degree remains important in the current job market since it provides entry to professional level, white collar jobs. However, it does not guarantee that knowledge has been acquired. Carey baldly states that, contrary to what we want to believe, American higher education is NOT the best in the world. He points to what is sadly becoming common knowledge about testing results:

In 2005 a U.S. Department of Education study of adult literacy found that the majority of college graduates couldn’t do things like compare and contrast the viewpoints in two newspaper editorials. Fourteen percent of college graduates scored at only the “basic” level of literacy----The results showed a sharp decline from the same exams given a decade before. The study was written up in the *New York Times* and then disappeared from the public debate without a trace (Carey p.9).

He goes on to cite even more current evidence of college educated students who do not perform well on a variety of tests. Is it any wonder that the public is becoming, as William Bowen feared, hostile, at paying enormous amounts of money, often in the form of loans, for education which, nationally, is not delivering or resulting in useful knowledge for the employment marketplace?

**Transformation as Solution**
If the modern digitized age has caused at least some, though not all, of the problems previously discussed, is it possible to see a number of solutions embedded in some of the causal problems? Some researchers (2010) ask, how will educational institutions utilize new “epistemologies and pedagogies and how (will) they institutionalize these new modes of learning?” (Davidson and Goldberg p.199)

Perhaps we need to redefine what learning is in today’s world and culture. As noted in a recent article in the New York Times Book Review (2015)

Soon all the collections in all the libraries and all the archives in the world will be available to everyone with a screen. Who would not welcome such a vast enfranchisement? But universal accessibility is not the end of the story, it is the beginning. The humanistic methods that were practiced before digitalization will be even more urgent after digitalization, because we will need help in navigating the unprecedented welter. Searches for key words will not provide contexts for keywords. Patterns that are revealed by searches will not identify their own causes and reasons. The new order will not relieve us of the old burdens and the old pleasures, of erudition and interpretation. (Wiesettier p.15)

Not to belabor the point but education is being redefined whether we actively acknowledge this or not. The Future of Thinking: Learning Institutions in a Digital Age (2010) states, “Increasingly, learning is about how to make wise choices-epistemologically and methodologically concerning productive collaborative partnerships to broach complex challenges and problems” (Davidson and Goldberg p.55). Note that the sentence above is about “collaborative partnerships.” This surely must to be a key concept in rethinking what learning is if savvy online young people are already engaged various forms of self-teaching.

The student-centered classroom is not a new idea, but our social media, digitally connected culture may make it a near necessity. According to the book, iBrain (2008) “while the brains of today’s Digital Natives are wiring up for rapid-fire cyber searches, the neural circuits that control the more traditional learning methods are neglected and gradually diminished” (Small and Vorgen p.21). This surely doesn’t mean traditional learning methods
are or should be abandoned; however, colleges do have to face the reality of a changed learning environment. Small and Vorgen (2008) also state that the average age of video gamers has risen to thirty years (p.36). This is contrary to the stereotype many hold that gamers are wired adolescents. Who are these people who enjoy gaming? One answer (2005) is they are people with sharpened skills, able to choose and prioritize, who have developed a new form of learning how to think (Johnson p.41). This phrase a “new form of learning how to think” has been used by a number of researchers.

We are not living in our grandparent’s world or even our parent’s world. It may be hard to fathom but I remember a relative who worked as a medical secretary for years. What caused her to retire was the change from rotary dial phones to pushbutton phones. She just couldn’t transfer her skill level to the new-fangled device! In contrast, modern students of today have existed in a digital world as far back as they can remember. A sophomore student at Bergen Community College who recently gave a presentation in the Honors Program used a sophisticated power point as an adjunct to his paper. He said he first learned to use a power point in fourth grade!

Colleges that can adjust to the concept of a new way of thinking, usually involving multi-tasking, will attract dynamic students who are an asset to their learning environment. Cathy Donaldson has been called one of the nation’s great digital minds. She discusses the brain science of attention in Now You See It: How Technology and Brain Science will Transform Schools and Business for the 21st Century (2011). Her belief is that our brains prefer multi-tasking and become bored with mono-tasking-if it ever existed. Assembly line workers were not known to be happy in their mindless, repetitious, often backbreaking work. The self-
reprogramming capacity of modern thinkers means that participatory learning will advance frontiers in educational thinking as well as the work environment.

For colleges to attract students who will not get bored, will not drop out and who will be qualified to land meaningful jobs and be successful in their chosen professional fields, a lot more needs to be done than building larger stadiums and ever more splendid dormitories. According to Davidson and others, conceptual changes in education can produce desired dividends.

For example, multitasking needs to be encouraged, not discouraged, The old view that one task must be completed before moving on to the next is simply not acceptable to modern teenagers who have a craving, an eagerness for new forms of technology and are known to use many simultaneously. Researcher Small and Vorgen (2008) note a difference between digital natives (those growing up with this technology) and digital immigrants (those coming into digital technology at a slightly or much older age). This could, in part, explain education’s somewhat slow embrace of all that is available.

While Digital Natives remain plugged into cyberspace and videogames, Digital Immigrants spend considerably less time exposed to this type of new technology. --Although these Immigrants are adjusting to the digital age, their approach differs greatly from Digital Natives. The typical Immigrant’s brain was trained in ways completely different ways of socializing and learning, taking things step by step, and addressing one task at a time. Immigrants learn more methodically and tend to execute tasks more precisely (iBrain p.40).

There are those who believe, for a number of reasons, that the old ways remain the best ways. Nicholas Kristof (2015) notes an epigram from E. W. Wilson which states “We are drowning in information while starving for wisdom” (Kristof, op.ed.). He even referring to the digital age which didn’t exist in Wilson’s day. But was he prescient?. Are we, indeed, drowning in information?
In her book *Distracted The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age* (2008), Maggie Johnson calls our present day an “Attention Deficient Culture.” Her premise is that the way we live is eroding our capacity for deep, sustained, perceptive attention. “The waning of our powers of attention is occurring at such a rate-in so many areas of life- that the erosion is reaching critical mass---in short, we are slipping toward a new dark age” (Johnson pp.13, 14). This is a startling view and has implications for education if it is accepted. She further warns that “we can’t be a nation of reflective, analytic problem solvers while cultivating a culture of distraction” (p.19). She has a number of followers and there are other authors who have similar dark prognostications.

These are opposite views concerning the growth of technology which cannot be readily absorbed or resolved. Does distraction cause shallowness, superficiality, lack of social skills, and even depression? This, if true, would indeed herald a dark age coming for our “wired always on” digital society.

However, Davidson (2011) takes a stand that collaboration is not distraction, even if the collaboration involves diversity of ethnicity, age grouping and even countries. She believes strongly in crowdsourcing, inviting a group to collaborate on a solution to a problem. The term, she notes, was coined by Jeff Howe of *Wired* magazine in 2006. It referred to the Internet practice of posing an open call requesting help in completing a task. Crowdsourcing literally means “outsourcing” to the “crowd.” This is an example of what it means to work and learn together in the digital age. She poses the open-ended question, “What form of education is required in a world of social networking, crowdsourcing, customizing, and user-generated content: a world of searching and browsing...?” (Davidson, *Now You See It*, p.70).
Educators are attempting to give answers; however, sometimes the advice can be diametrically opposed. In this paper a few concrete pragmatic suggestions will be offered. But first, a few puzzling facts have surfaced. According to the *New York Times* (2015),

A major factor driving increasing costs is the constant expansion of university administration. According to the Department of Education data, administrative positions at colleges and universities grew by 60 percent between 1993 and 2009, which Bloomberg reported was 10 times the rate of growth of tenured faculty positions (Campos p. 46).

In view of this vast growth in administrators on campuses, one wonders why diverse problems in education are not being addressed more readily. Leaders generally are at the forefront of problems, giving direction akin to generals in battle leading charges to victory. The labels that Small and Vorgan discuss in *iBrain* (2008) suggest that many leaders are likely to be Digital Immigrants (those who are new to this technology).

Could this be true among leaders in politics as well who direct national policy and education funding? According to *The Record* (2015) newspaper, in “Offline and Out of Touch,” when Senator Lindsey Graham, R-S.C. was asked if he had a private email address, he answered that he had never sent an email. Senator John McCain, R-Ariz., said he doesn’t use email either. This was followed by Senator Pat Roberts, R-Kan., who said the same. Senator Richard C. Shelby, R-Ala., said he sent very few and preferred hand-written notes. Senator Orrin G. Hatch, R-Utah said he “dabbles not very much” in emails and Senator Charles Schumer, D-N.Y. stated that maybe every four months, he does one email (Rampell, Sec.O. Opinion, pp. 2 & 4).

Since these men are in positions to set federal law relating to the digital age, it is disheartening to realize that some have not entered it. It is a known fact that President Obama has been addicted to his Blackberry and interacts easily with emerging electronic technology. However, it is statistically and undeniably proven that students in America are falling behind
many other countries in the acquisition of skills needed for the digital/electronic age. Political leadership in this area might be increasingly productive if more leaders were personally invested in basic technological operation of today as well as for tomorrow. This will, of course, happen as increasing numbers of younger leaders will not be digital immigrants.

**Suggestions for Specific Transformation**

Cathy Davidson (2009, 2011) has written convincingly about the necessary transformation of schools in the 21st Century. Kevin Carey (2015) warns that many colleges we have known for a long time will end as the University of Everywhere takes over. In an educational “nutshell,” the pragmatic warning is that we must meet the educational needs of all of today’s students in a no-frills, effective, inexpensive, learning environment that utilizes the “new ways” of thinking resulting from use of electronic technology in our digital age.

Some solutions to rising student costs are already being addressed. For example, Ron Topham, writing in the NJEA Higher Education Newsletter states (2015) “the cost of college textbooks has increased faster than tuition, health costs and housing. Since 1978, the cost of textbooks has increased by 812 percent whereas tuition has increased by 559 percent” (Topham, NJEA Newsletter, p. 2). When higher education usually requires 4-5 years for a degree, one can see that the total book cost is a major factor in overall expense.

What is a possible answer to textbook costs? Digital technology comes to the rescue in the form of books and articles being posted online. Princeton professors are regularly doing this as well as quite a lot of Bergen Community College professors. Book buyers are already mourning the loss of a lucrative business of buying back textbooks and reselling them. Publishers have been offering online classroom texts for the last few years at a significant price reduction from hard copy. Textbooks can also be rented inexpensively.
Textbook-free degrees are growing throughout the United States. For example, the NJEA Newsletter (2015) notes that Tidewater Community College in Virginia is offering an associate degree in business without textbooks. Instead they use Open Educational Resources (OER) all of which are in the public domain (Topham, NJEA Newsletter, p.2).

Digital Technology can also come to the rescue in the form of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCS). Although such online courses are often free and wonderful sources of self-paced learning for students, it would be naïve to think that no one pays. Technology, structuring, content, and organization are just a few areas of “production” costs. Princeton University (Princeton Alumni Weekly 2015) has offered 15 different free MOOCs across more than seven disciplines on Coursera and NovoEd. The University estimates the average cost to create each course is between $25,000 and $35,000. It wants to recover at least a portion of this. Also, faculty members are wondering how this will affect ownership of a course they create. Princeton History professor Jeremy Adelman was among the first to teach MOOCs. He states, “he doesn’t believe the University will be fully committed to digital learning and teaching until it puts rules for teaching online courses in writing” (Paying for MOOCs, p. 12).

Kevin Carey begins his recent best-selling book The End of College (2015) by recounting his experience as an adult purposefully taking a difficult online course, offered by Eric Lander, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T.) professor. Along the way, he discovered that not only was he “rusty” on his past science courses but he didn’t even have the required prerequisites. Yet, he persevered, studying at his own slow pace, reviewing material he couldn’t readily grasp until he “got it.” His online fellow students, who helped him when he was lost, were from many different countries---not studying in the U.S. but in their own countries (Carey 2015). He passed the course and reached a conclusion.
Universities involved in online courses, are creating something bigger, perhaps, than they know. It is the University of Everywhere. Carey states in *The End (2015)* that it will be like nothing that has come before and will be free. Massive amounts of digitized material will be available to anyone with an internet connection. However, the gentleman’s C will be gone. Mediocrity will be apparent since students will be compared by prospective employers to all other students worldwide (Carey, pp.5, 6). Of course, his futurist vision will not happen quickly, so a pragmatic approach by students and universities to deal with current educational problems is best. His point about online courses is clearly relevant. They allow the student, however slow or brilliant, to review material once or a hundred times until it is comprehended. Isn’t comprehension the purpose of education?

If a student’s aim is to reduce the astronomical cost of a four year education, perhaps to stay close to home, and still have access to desirable four year colleges at a later time, a community college could be the right answer.

Community colleges are a good choice if the student selects his/her curriculum carefully and checks if his/her specific C grade or better courses will be accepted at the targeted college. New Jersey has adopted a full faith in credit policy whereby all credits earned in a transfer program at a community college will be accepted by a four year New Jersey state institution upon the student’s graduation as long as he/she remains in the same major upon transferring. Of course, there are often unforeseen problems, but careful preplanning can eliminate most of these.

Since transportation can be an expensive issue, a college campus close to home helps students avoid loans, illness, physical exhaustion, depression and withdrawal. Many colleges, like Bergen Community College, are developing extension facilities. If the county is large, a campus in the outlying geographic area aids those students. Bergen has secured a bus contract to shuttle
students at no cost between its Lyndhurst campus and the Paramus campus. To reduce administrative expense, colleges can rent classrooms in areas with a high student population for those eager to get started with basic deficiency or general education courses. Bergen is just starting a whole building rental program within the city of Englewood with this in mind. Thinking in the old traditional mode has to change. Instead of students going to a college, the college can plan to go to the students.

Why should colleges across the nation start semesters at the same general times? Students may not always be ready for a myriad of personal reasons to attend starting in September and January. For example, some colleges have begun late start dates. Bergen Community College has a number of late start dates throughout both fall and spring semester. By choosing any of these, from compressed courses during the month of January, to several summer sessions offered, to late starts, a prospective student eager and ready to begin can start his/her education at nearly any month even if there is a limited course selection at the odd times.

Adult Education used to be seen as a small number of elderly people taking “fun” courses such as Mystery Fiction. Any college that experiences a drop in student enrollment may be overlooking a serious cohort of “older” students. They may have been downsized in a slow economy, hope to avoid being downsized through acquiring up to date digital technology skills, or are aiming for onsite job promotion through the acquisition of recommended course credits. *The New York Times* (2015) notes that, “By 2030 the number of Americans 65 and older will grow to 72 million, up from 40.2 million in 2010 according to the United States Census Bureau. To date, colleges and universities have paid little attention to the needs of this population (“Over 50 and Back in College”).
Community colleges are starting to see this population segment as having specific needs. The *Times* (2015) also writes that the American Association of Community College Plus 50 Initiative is creating campus programs for those 50 and older which emphasize skill acquisition for the workplace (“Over 50”).

Businesses are also encouraging their workforce to seek college degrees, especially in online courses. For example, Starbucks (2015) is offering to pay for workers’ courses in a four year degree program, as long as they get a C or better, at the Arizona State University (“Starbucks Expands”). Over 70,000 of young Starbucks’s employees have dropped out of college. Under this free tuition online program, according to the university president, Michael M. Crow (2015), “Students get advisors and eadvisors to stay on track” (*New York Times*, Education Life, p. 8, 2015). It seems to be working as 86 percent of Starbuck’s employees were retained between semesters. Other businesses are taking notice of this model of working with a college since they would like to see increased employee skills to benefit their profitability.

**Conclusion and Future Study**

Changes are taking place in higher education which affects both students and colleges. This has been noted by a number of researchers and writers who foresee the future bankruptcy of some institutions, the looming non payable debt of numerous students both employed and unemployed, and the need for greater recognition and/or better usage of digital technology. The solutions can be of benefit to all groups and they have to come quickly.

Research is proceeding at a quickened pace from a number of different angles as seen above. It is in everyone in society’s best interests to keep a careful eye on this. Education is a core necessity for any country to be a world leader and maintain a level of satisfaction for its population. Leon Botstein, president of Bard College (2015), in a recent essay, asks if we are still
making citizens. Botstein feels educators defend current education in “purely economic terms, linking education to work and productivity” (Botstein 2015). If true, we could be producing a nation of human drones in an Orwellian not so future world similar to George Orwell’s 1984.

According to a new world ranking, called the Social Progress Index for 2015, the United States ranks 16th! Nicholas Kristof of the New York Times (2015) points to a frightening conclusion: “The 2015 Social Progress Index should serve notice to Americans-and to people around the globe. We obsess on the wrong measures, so we often have the wrong priorities” (Op Ed, p.A29). We MUST first identify and then work in all areas to achieve our stated priorities for long term goals in Higher Education. Obsession in “wrong” areas won’t be of much help to education’s future and the future of America. Students must be our present and long term critically serious focus.

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