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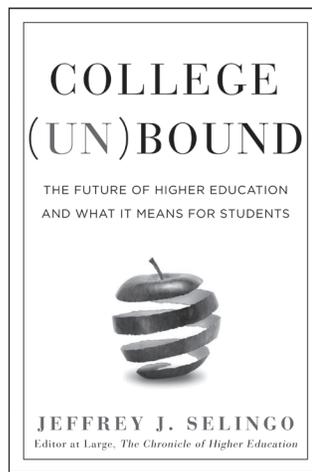
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LAURIE BRILL

# A College Degree or a College Experience? Reflecting on Selingo's *College (Un)Bound*

Jeff Selingo, author of *College (Un)Bound*, suggests that the \$490 billion higher education industry—which employs 3.5 million people and holds \$990 billion in assets—is collapsing under an unsustainable financial model. After the recession of 2008, with continued increases in college costs and the student loan debt surpassing the one trillion dollar mark, families are beginning to question the value of higher education. Most agree that the tuition increase trajectory impacts families' ability and willingness to pay. Selingo implies that the traditional business model within higher education needs to become a more efficient system. The challenges, in part, arise from a new student-centered world. For example, technology provides an array of choices for students, but that might just entail a disruptive force within higher education.

Rather than continue to conduct the "business as usual" approach (including a sixteen week semester), Selingo asserts that higher education is in need of a paradigm shift to meet the needs of this new student-centered world. While degrees have historically been awarded based upon the number of credit hours, Selingo recommends that competency-based options must be explored. Higher education will be forced to respond to the demands of the marketplace because today's students "regard their professors as service providers, just like a cashier at the supermarket or a waiter in a restaurant" (Selingo 20).



Selingo writes: "Prestige in higher education is like profit is to corporations. The focus should be on students and learning rather than reputation and rankings" (12). He is right—we should be focusing on students and learning. While he reflects often in his book on the most selective top one hundred colleges and universities and remarks about the lavish facilities—including Lazy Rivers, "essentially a theme park water ride where students float on rafts" (28)—being constructed on campuses and expresses his frustration with the competitive behavior of college presidents regarding rankings interest, Selingo does not differentiate by sector. Thus, he presents only a broad brush-stroke of what he observed while working at The Chronicle of Higher Education.

While many of Selingo's observations, conclusions, and recommendations are controversial, he offers an opportunity to more critically examine the current state of affairs in higher education and to more effectively resist compromising the college experience. The media narrative continues to circle around the topics of unemployment, student loan debt, accountability, graduation rates, and college affordability. Federal officials are in the midst of developing a ratings system that they believe will provide outcome data that will enable families to more effectively evaluate and compare the "return on

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investment” of a college degree. Performance-based funding is also on the federal agenda. These issues have sparked conversation among parents—students’ primary influencers—and are clearly influencing behaviors. We in Lutheran higher education must respond to these issues of concern with a tactical approach in order to influence today’s conversation.

## College Counseling and Selection

A “college degree” is one outcome of the overall college experience. The question to ponder is this: What is the difference between a college degree and a college experience? If a college degree is perceived to be primarily proof of information delivery by the marketplace, then higher education professionals committed to the importance of the overall college experience must re-frame and re-shape the conversation among college-bound families. Unfortunately, the driving force influencing the initial college choice is cost, which often results in the selection of a college that is not the right fit for the student. If more students had access to informed college counseling, more would find a good fit and degree completion rates would improve. Financial literacy is also an issue when dealing with the prospect of financing a college education. If a streamlined course on financial literacy (including details on money management, retirement, financial aid, student loan options, responsible debt management, etc.) were delivered to students and parents, they would be better equipped to make informed decisions and choices regarding financing college.

The college search and selection process is difficult for many families to navigate, despite expansive use of technology. Many become paralyzed by the wide array of options and an inability to obtain informed and reflective college counseling at the high school level. Nationwide, the caseload of public high school counselors serving public high schools is at an all-time high. It is nearly impossible to work with six hundred students in an engaged and meaningful way; this deficiency within our educational system is profound. At the same time, the independent consulting profession is growing exponentially—those families who are able to pay seek college selection guidance from consulting professionals. Those who cannot afford private counselors typically talk with alumni, peers,

and teachers, searching for an “easier” way to narrow down the list of choices. The same students often place too much emphasis on rating systems like *US News & World Report*. Furthermore, families who do not understand the financial aid process often rule out private higher education due to the lack of transparency of the process.

“When students discuss what they are passionate about and what matters to them, they do so differently than when discussing the majors that their parents deem to be a good fit.”

All too frequently, we ask intimidating questions of prospective students: “What are your academic interests?” and “What major are you considering?” Most high school students cringe at the prospect of being asked about a major of choice. Students can speak quite fluently about the classes they enjoy—that is a better starting point. An even more provocative question may be, “What difference would you like to make in this world?” A college experience offers an opportunity to explore and discover, develop relationships with students and faculty members, engage in leadership opportunities, participate in activities, travel abroad, and formulate career objectives. A Lutheran college experience does all this; it also enables students to integrate faith and learning. When students discuss what they are passionate about and what matters to them, they do so differently than when discussing the majors that their parents deem to be a good fit (typically with strong income potential). Many desire permission to engage in conversation “on the porch” before stepping through the front door to select a major. If the college experience is about more than information delivery, we must shift the focus of the conversation from the beginning.

## The Meaningful Impact of a Lutheran College Experience

In the quest to respond to the marketplace, we sometimes lose sight of our focus on sharing information about outcomes and developing relationships of trust with

students and parents. It is necessary to pay attention to and respond to “the market,” but we must remain grounded in our mission and committed to relationship-building.

The Lutheran Educational Conference of North America (LECNA), which consists of 41 member Lutheran colleges and universities, engaged in a collaborative research effort to more closely examine what Lutheran college and university alumni (Lutheran and non-Lutheran) perceived about their college experiences. Graduates of flagship public universities were also surveyed, resulting in a rich comparative alumni study. This research, completed in collaboration with Hardwick-Day, continues to be a valuable resource for LECNA member colleges and universities. The initial survey in 1999 (updated in 2004 and 2011), quantifies the compelling values of the undergraduate *experience*—including mentoring, leadership, internships, study-abroad, participation in athletics, and the integration of faith and learning.<sup>1</sup>

“Alumni reflect not only upon the degree earned but, more importantly, on the emotional, spiritual, and vocational aspects of their college careers.”

The research findings indicate that Lutheran colleges and universities offer opportunities for transformational, intentional development of both the mind and the soul. Students attending Lutheran colleges and universities appreciate that aspect of the experience at different times in their lives. Very few can firmly grasp this transformation during their college experience. And yet, years after entering graduate school and/or the workforce, alumni reflect not only upon the degree earned but, more importantly, on the emotional, spiritual, and vocational aspects of their college careers. Alumni of Lutheran colleges and universities are not equipped to clearly articulate the value of the Lutheran college experience by anything other than their own personal experiences. Their word-of-mouth engagement with prospective families is valuable beyond measure.

Social, economic, technological, and demographic forces are beginning to reshape higher education. Perhaps

Selingo is on to something—we may be in the midst of a paradigm shift, a shift that will threaten the existence of some models of higher education. The traditional colleges that survive will be those that “prove their worth” (Selingo 71). Lutheran colleges and universities can and do prove their worth. Just as Martin Luther gained a reputation for questioning, it may be time for us to engage in the same to more clearly articulate the value of a Lutheran college experience. We are called to question everything and advance knowledge for the collective good. Rather than be critical of Selingo’s predictions, we should embrace the opportunity for meaningful discussion with current research and prospective college families. While there are many options for degree attainment, the process of developing the whole person—mind, body, and spirit—is a critical aspect of the college experience. Enrollment officers, development officers, faculty, and staff must speak clearly about the transformational impact of daily life at a Lutheran college or university.

The Lutheran intellectual tradition is grounded in vocation and cultivated by community. God is present and active everywhere; education in the liberal arts for vocation emphasizes living life in relationship with others and enables students to focus on a life outside of one’s self. The commitment to the exploration of vocation—a calling to learn, to engage this world, to enact change, and to utilize careers in service to others—shapes the Lutheran college experience for students of all faith traditions (Torvend). Parents desire that their children live lives of purpose and meaning and positively impact the lives of others. They seek counsel on ways to assist their children in exploring their unique abilities during this launch to young adulthood, particularly in the midst of our seemingly individualistic culture.

At the 2013 Annual LECNA Presidents’ Meeting, Andrew Delbanco encouraged Lutheran college and university presidents to consider the following question: How can we preserve the college experience as a place where young people enter into a process of discovery, become engaged through an experience with a mentor, and emerge from college an intellectually curious adult? He reminded them that educated citizens are vital for a high-functioning democracy. In his book *College: What it Was, Is, and Should Be*, Delbanco writes, “Students have always been

searching for purpose. They have always been unsure of their gifts and goals, and susceptible to the demands—overt and covert—of their parents and of the abstraction we call ‘the market’” [22].

Selingo touches upon the same issue: “I worry at times about what might be lost in an unbound, personalized experience for students. Will they discover subjects they never knew existed? If a computer is telling them where to sit for class discussions, will they make those random connections that lead to lifelong friends? Will they be able to develop friendships and mentors if they move from provider to provider?” [183]. The sacrifices resulting from a mobile-provider model and competency-based approach to higher education will be striking. At worst, newer approaches to degree attainment void of the traditional model will potentially yield *unfulfilled lives*. Preserving and articulating the value of this transformational experience is essential. As Delbanco suggests, to lose that could never be compensated by any gain.

## A Pathway to Purpose

During the 2014 Annual LECNA Presidents’ Meeting, Brandon Busted, Executive Director of Gallup Education, painted a compelling portrait for advocacy of the liberal arts. He reflected upon the details of a research study of 650,000 students in grades 5-12, which highlighted that measures of engagement are predictive of real performance. Busted concluded that our colleges and universities are troubled with unsophisticated ways of measuring and articulating outcomes, thus presenting difficulties in articulating value. Professed outcomes (better job, better life, engaged citizen) are not being measured outside of features in alumni magazines.

An Inside Higher Education survey conducted by Gallup of chief academic officers reported that 96 percent of provosts are extremely or somewhat confident that they are preparing Americans for the workplace. To the same question, only 12 percent of Americans and 11 percent of business leaders answered the same. Moreover, when Gallup asked parents of 5-12 graders what they thought was the best pathway to getting a good job, liberal arts did not surface as important. According to Busted, the words “liberal arts” do not represent effective branding,

although parents do value twenty-first century skills such as teamwork, critical thinking, skill collaboration, and leadership.

“A good job should instead be defined by the opportunity to do what you find meaningful, to believe in the mission and purpose of the organization, and to build up others by your work.”

And yet, the dream for young people, according to Gallup research, is to get a good job. According to UCLA CIRP data, the top reason freshmen cite for going to college is to “get a good job.” Are we certain, though, that Americans understand what it means to “get a good job”? Busted argues that the real definition of getting a good job is much closer to “developing a meaningful philosophy of life” than most of us would imagine. We need to change the way that we define “a good job”—which is often equated to monetary compensation—and help people understand what a good job really means. Rather than focus on the financial benefit, a good job should instead be defined by the opportunity to do what you find meaningful, to believe in the mission and purpose of the organization, and to build up others by your work.

The more students are engaged, get their hands on things, solve real problems, and do real work, the closer they will get to outcomes that are measurable—but not by earning potential alone. According to Gallup research, the number one predictor of an engaged student is an engaged teacher or staff person. The number one predictor of an engaged teacher is his or her own great leader. In high school, that would be the principal. In a college, that’s the president. With such strong leaders and mentors, students will be able to say “yes” to three things, and so embark on a life of purpose: “Yes, I have someone who cares about my development. Yes, I am discovering or doing what I like to do. Yes, I am discovering or doing what I’m good at” (Busted).

How can Lutheran colleges and universities do a better job of articulating their mission in the wake of political and economic headwinds? Selingo, along with Delbanco and Busted, provide insights that enable us to shape and refine conversations with prospective college families and

empower our alumni to speak more intentionally about the contribution Lutheran colleges and universities make in the realization of a life well-lived. We are called to respond by more clearly articulating the value of a Lutheran college experience using language and sharing experiences that resonate with students and parents.

## Endnotes

1. This research required a significant investment from LECNA member colleges and a grant from Thrivent Financial for Lutherans, years before specific interest in “outcome” research made its way into the federal agenda. The methodology of the LECNA effort paved the way for additional college consortia to replicate the study, including The Annapolis Group, Catholic College Admission Association, Women’s College Coalition, Minnesota Private College Council, and Council of Independent Colleges. The results of the updated research are on the LECNA website (<http://lutherancolleges.org/>) and briefly recounted in LECNA’s brochure entitled “Your Values, Our Value” (see LECNA below). This brochure is circulated in a wide variety of settings throughout the year and is mailed to those who request specific information about LECNA member colleges and universities.

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