

Forbes

Will Online Education Render Traditional College Obsolete?

By [George Leef](#), Contributor, I write on the damage big government does, especially to education.

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Technological change has made online coursework very competitive with the traditional means of teaching. Will it lead to dramatic change in college, or have only a minor impact? Consider the analogy to music.

From the dawn of time until the early 20th century, when people wanted to hear music, they either had to play it themselves or go to a performance where someone else played. All music was live. Then the technology for recording and reproducing music developed.

Primitive at first, the technology rapidly improved (remember that old commercial, “Is it live, or is it Memorex?”) and today humans spend far more time listening to recorded music than to live performances. Live music hasn’t disappeared and performances can be more exciting or moving than even the greatest recordings, but recordings give us fantastic variety, high quality, and complete freedom of choice at low cost.

Similarly, for eons humans learned “live” – listening to and working with teachers and mentors. Beginning in Renaissance Italy, colleges and universities attracted students who wanted to study with established scholars. For some 800 years, college [education](#) meant students in a room with professors.

Then, late in the 20th century, another learning possibility emerged, namely distance learning through the Internet. Just like recorded music, at first the quality of online courses was poor, but for some students it was the best option available. The technology steadily improved and now a large percentage of college students take at least one course online and quite a few take all of their work online through institutions such as [Western Governors University](#).

The fact that online college courses have continued growing in popularity has led to a raging debate: Will this fundamentally transform higher education? Last November, [Cato CATO - 0.16%](#) Institute dove into this dispute in its monthly “[Cato Unbound](#)” feature, offering four

essays on the value of online courses. More recently, the Foundation for Economic Education turned to this question for its regular debate, [The Arena](#).

Arguing that online education will fundamentally transform higher education was Michael Gibson, a vice president at the Thiel Foundation who describes himself as “a proud Oxford dropout.” Opposing him and arguing that higher education will remain essentially the same was Peter Boettke, professor of [economics](#) at [George Mason University](#).

Gibson maintains that higher education faces “a future shaped by gales of Schumpeterian creative destruction set in motion by [entrepreneurs](#), a force that universities have held at bay thanks to government protection and the limitations of old technology.” Entrepreneurs have this opening largely because colleges and universities have so dramatically raised the cost of attending over the last several decades, far outpacing the growth of average family income. To afford most colleges, students need to borrow substantially and/or have their families empty out much of their accumulated wealth. Stories such as that of [Kelli Space](#), who piled up \$200,000 in college loan debt in pursuit of her sociology degree, are all too common.

With online education improving (and not just the much-discussed Massive Open Online Courses, or MOOCs, but also more individualized modes), more and more students will, Gibson thinks, partake of the learning they want, when and where they want it online. They’ll abandon the very costly “Howdy Doody era of education.”

Professor Boettke doesn’t deny that higher education has become very costly, nor that online education can be good. His argument, rather, is that traditional classroom education will survive largely as it has been because there is no other educational experience as deep and affecting as a student learning from a teacher who cares about imparting knowledge and stimulating thinking. He writes, “the alternative models – including the most technologically advanced version – simply cannot capture the educational experience that students receive in the traditional college/university.”

Boettke writes passionately about his own introduction to economics under a master teacher who caused him to start thinking seriously about the discipline. Furthermore, traditional college education has the great value of catalyzing the exchange of ideas among students. He concludes, “Online chat and social media sites do not compare to the hands-on, face-to-face working through difficult issues that the physical clustering of learners provides.”

The Arena allows readers to vote as to which advocate they found more persuasive. At the time of this writing, Boettke was leading, 62 percent to 38 percent. I tend to side with Gibson, however.

While the kind of college and grad school education Boettke enjoyed is ideal, the sad fact is that most students these days do not want that kind of cerebral experience. Furthermore, rather few professors really want to engage with their students the way many of Boettke’s did with him. A great many college students today merely want a credential attesting to some level of occupational competence, and they want it with as little effort as possible. And a large percentage of college professors do not want to spend much of their time working with

undergraduates; they're happy to enter into Professor Murray Sperber calls "the faculty/student non-aggression pact" thereby minimizing the effort they have to devote to their classes.

For every real scholar like Professor Boettke who accomplishes wonderful things with young minds (and to get a taste of his commitment to teaching economics, I recommend his latest book, [*Living Economics*](#), published by Independent Institute), there are many more who are indifferent to teaching or who do educational damage with their desire to proselytize on behalf of zealously-held political beliefs – *i.e.*, preachers rather than teachers. I suspect that Gibson is correct in thinking that a huge number of Americans will turn away from that high-cost but often educationally flimsy college experience as online alternatives improve and become better known.

Boettke suggests that a hybrid model will emerge. He's probably correct. The demand for the kind of quality educational experience he is so rightly enthusiastic about will never vanish, any more than the demand for live music performed by virtuosos will vanish. I suspect, however, that the proportion of college education that occurs that way will shrink dramatically in the years ahead, while the proportion that occurs online will keep growing.