

# HigherEd

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## Coming to You Soon: Uber U

In higher education, we are increasingly facing the distinct possibility of a faceless future, teacherless courses, online everything, argues David Theo Goldberg.

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By [David Theo Goldberg](#)

Over the past two decades, and across the nation, the university has been undergoing profound changes. These structural changes underpin an emergent philosophy of the new university today -- one that should give pause to anyone concerned about the direction of higher education.

For much of the 20th century, and especially after World War II, the university served as the vehicle of upward mobility, the principal pathway to securing a middle-class and eventually upper-middle-class life. Yet that prevailing 20th-century model of the university began to give way in the late 1980s, slowly at first and then more dramatically and visibly with the onset of the new millennium.

Beginning in the early 1990s, conservative and vocal state legislatures began increasingly questioning the use of public funds by state universities for specific “liberal” courses, programs and hires. The mounting attack on affirmative action admissions and hiring in higher education, as one example, coincided with stagnation in middle-class wages brought on by an increasingly anemic American economy. One recession after another (1993 to 1995, 2002 to 2004, and 2008 to the present) further stimulated a downward spiral of public funding for higher education.

The result? Once seen to be an investment in a reliably upwardly middle-class life for millions, higher education is no longer viewed as a presumptive public good. Instead, we have seen the demonization by conservative politicians and public commentators of the university as the bastion of liberal values. This has been accompanied by an ideological “imperative” of austerity, a centralizing of administration and board oversight at the expense of faculty governance, and a focus on the professions and work preparation (STEM, technology, business and law) as the dominant if not singular goal of higher education at the expense of the human sciences and the arts. All these trends have profoundly transformed how the university is understood and how it conceives and organizes itself.

It is perhaps completely understandable that higher education would be fiscally impacted and forced to adapt to trying economic conditions. Moving beyond the shortsighted extent of the

state budget cuts, however, what is most disturbing is the way the fiscal challenges have been tied to a radically new and largely implicit -- let alone thoroughly untested -- concept of what and who the university is for and how it should be run.

Indeed, too many universities have been reorganized to privilege revenue-generating ventures and restructured along contemporary corporate lines. Administrative staffing, planning and oversight have outstripped academic faculty and intellectual imperatives and appointments. Faculty governance is being hollowed out, more frequently replaced with top-down organizational mandates with less and less substantive faculty consultation. The logics of an accounting and audit culture have assumed a central place in organizational purpose.

At the same time, administrative functionality on the ground has shifted more and more to the shoulders of individual faculty members and their departments, as too have an increasing proportion of the ordinary operational costs. Room rentals, cleaning, after-hours heating or air-conditioning and, in some cases, increased bandwidth all come with a fee structure to be borne by the academic units initiating the requests. Faculty phone lines have been cut in the interest of savings, relying instead on personal cell phone accounts. Mandatory unpaid holidays -- over end-of-year breaks, for example -- have become a matter of course. In short, units and individuals are being held responsible for covering the costs of their own infrastructural needs.

In this shifting landscape, entrepreneurialism has tended to outrun critical pushback from faculty and students. Consultancy work, spin-off start-ups, corporate ventures and the pursuit of outside grants are emerging as the main means of supporting and supplementing academic work, costs, even salaries. Indirect cost recovery now makes up an increasingly significant proportion of annual university budgeting, both institutionally and individually (in the latter instance, paying for the research and graduate student and postdoctoral support, as well as to cover operating and material costs, such as phones, computers, academic support staff and so on). Perhaps the most visible examples of profit-seeking companies that have been successfully spun off from faculty efforts are the MOOC ventures, Udacity and Coursera -- both created by Stanford University faculty. But they are far from alone.

This logic of faculty enterprise impacts undergraduate teaching, too, now disproportionately provided by adjunct or contingent instructors. Contingent faculty members, including adjuncts, have increased from 43 percent of the teaching force in 1975 to more than 70 percent today. And the growing erosion of tenure at major universities, as represented most notably by the Wisconsin university system, along with irregular salary increases and dwindling research support from within public institutions, suggest the creeping "casualization" of work conditions for ladder-rank faculty, as well.

These developments have gone hand in glove with spiraling competition both for research funding and tenure-track positions. A recent open search on my campus in a highly ranked traditional social-science department produced more than 400 applications for a single

appointment. And faculty members constantly feel like they are under surveillance -- both in the classroom and out, on the campus and off -- from administrators, legislators, political lobbying groups and issue advocates, as well as students and their parents. Morale has sunk like cement in water.

All this has had significant consequences on the learning side of the equation. As students increasingly stress certification and job placement, educational institutions are responding by highlighting the college “experience” -- as much socially as intellectually. Tuition costs have escalated as the social experience -- dorm living, recreational and social networking opportunities -- has spiraled in importance in the selection process of students and their families. Students as consumers have fueled the move to personal-interest learning -- more often than not a function of perceived marketability -- at the cost of a common body of knowledge. That is not to deny that both are important, but the former is eclipsing the latter with growing alacrity.

### **Instant Delivery Over Lifelong Learning**

Taken together, then, these trends amount to uberizing the university. How so? Broadly conceived, Uber represents on-demand access, a claim to a flawless experience with minimized hassle, immediate gratification, all at the best going rates. It provides the digital platform drawing together the elements necessary for instant delivery while hiding from view some of the significant delivery costs, such as maintenance and operations, health care and Social Security. In other words, Uber U offers, to larger or lesser extent, a platform and experience rather than the foundation for lifelong learning, conceptual and critical thinking, methodological and analytic rigor, listening and clarity, coherent argumentation and engagement. It privileges in-time, on-demand vocational skilling for the task at hand rather than the capacity for deep thinking.

It also increasingly turns to data-driven managerial imperatives. That means fewer opportunities to interact with managers for thoughtful discussion and feedback about one’s work. Operators -- whether drivers, professors or administrative staff -- are considered not employees but service providers, managed through monitoring and rating systems in semiautomated loops of big data and messaging.

Just as one can follow in real time on the platform map the progress of the Uber car approaching the pickup point, so one can map out and monitor the timeline of the student working through the training modules for which he or she has registered. Faculty members too are being subjected to mandated trainings regarding sexual harassment, inventory handling or, in the case of faculty and staff supervisors, the applicable rules and regulations by which the institution operates. Broken into modulated sessions, the platform regulates the minimal amount of standardized time to be spent on each module, mapping progress through the learning session.

But the system also regularly maps each of the clients or customers -- the new learners, the uberlearners -- to ensure they are spending the minimal time necessary to complete the lessons

offered. While there are test questions to complete each module, there often may be no passing or failing. All this means, in principle, that instructors can be monitored for the time they take both to prepare and oversee online learning modules, and students can get certified (now digitally badged) with no assurance they have learned anything. The certification autogenerated by the platform, much like the Uber receipt on one's smartphone, is more about customer service, liability and immunity from potential litigation than it is about the acquisition of consequential knowledge.

Similarly, the current culture of crowdsourcing is upending traditional modes of assessment. Uber accompanies the electronic ride receipt with a persistent request for an evaluation of the ride: one can then check the rating of one's assigned driver as the car approaches. Analogously, real-time teaching evaluations are becoming the new mode of review. The University of California, Davis, has experimentally introduced a clicker system that allows, if the professor programs it, in-class student assessment of the lecture in progress. Much like CNN voter-viewer ratings of political debates in progress, the system registers student ratings of a lecture module as boring or interesting, informative or obtuse. That way, the instructor can adjust immediately within the class to the students' thumbs-up or rotten tomatoes. RateMyProfessors is so yesterday!

This reduction to purely transactional economies has a series of ripple effects. The university aspires to be a brand -- and to become a branding institution. The perceived value of the brand underwrites the price of the certificate awarded. Ranking, of the student experience and the major sports teams, at least as much as academics, becomes the driving logic of institutional life and reputational capital. Some knowledge areas consequently get occluded, to the point first of irrelevance and then ultimately nonrecognition as even valuable. A well-placed physicist recently complained to me that in undergraduate physics courses today, for example, the conceptual thinking key to advancing knowledge in the field and once central to learning physics has increasingly disappeared. It has been replaced by heightened training in the technical and mathematical skills necessary to the discipline. Rote over reasoning.

Uber U faculty members, where necessary at all, amount to brokers in the knowledge economy, hedge-account managers whose function is to network students to those marketplace skills and social competencies necessary to get ahead. Much of the base-level training -- what should be foundational -- is outsourced to adjuncts who are expected likewise to bear a large part of the self-sustaining and reproducing costs. As those costs are passed on to less resourced and unprotected individuals, so too is responsibility for any misdirection, wrongdoing or failure. The institution washes its hands of any malfunctioning agent, the marginalized bad apple.

All these trends are now spreading across the academy, fundamentally reshaping institutional priorities and dispositions. They are disproportionately in play across a broad range of institutions, restructuring some more deeply than others. As with Uber, taken discretely rather than systemically, these developments at their most positive respond to existing needs and unsettle sedimented and often outmoded systems and structures. Just as the Uber platform makes

getting a ride easier, often less expensive, easily shareable and cashless, so the Uber U platform potentially simplifies getting credentialed and is supposed to drive down costs and render higher learning more accessible. These new developments no doubt can challenge us to think anew about higher education, opening up creative opportunities to refashion pedagogical and operating practices, advance student learning and transform knowledge production across a broad swath of areas.

Yet we should not be naïve about the costs or touted benefits. Universities are not principally service providers. In addition to training grounds in a given field, they provide the foundations for thinking, both instrumentally and critically, for how to read and write, and for civic engagement. In addition, for many people, they still offer a gateway to adulthood as well as reasoned citizenship.

Meanwhile, [Uber-inspired service platforms](#) across a broad range of enterprises -- restaurants, groceries and package delivery, parking services, personal car rentals -- are seeing higher operations costs, lower service-provider wages, declining service quality and even bankruptcies. Platform control hides behind the anonymous technological neutrality of algorithmically produced, crowdsourced data inputs and recommendation outputs, none of which has reliable checks and balances.

The immediate future for academe is one of the growing robotification of basic skills and service delivery and smart algorithms autogenerating their own code. The pressures to downsize the human interface of learning, to limit faculty determination of what and how things are valuable to be learned, and to discount critical knowledge and thinking capacity in every sense of the term will only intensify.

Uber has announced its plan to develop and purchase driverless cars, so it is now joining the roboticizing of the workforce. In higher education, we are increasingly facing the distinct possibility of a faceless future, teacherless courses, online everything. We should confront this intensifying prospect of Uber U with eyes wide-open, counter clickers firmly in hand.

## **Bio**

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