

Why Higher Education Needs to Be Disrupted



James Bailey, Contributor

Can a university be great without a rock-climbing wall? Depends who's measuring greatness, according to the panelists discussing "What It Means To Be Educated In the 21st Century," with Harvard Business Review editor Justin Fox at Techonomy 2011 in Tucson, Ariz., this week.



Maria Klawe, President of Harvey Mudd College, says her institution is going great guns: her 750 students, 80 percent of whom are on financial aid to cover the \$42,000 annual tuition, are engaged 100 hours a week in learning, no climbing wall necessary. Ángel Cabrera of Thunderbird School of Global Management is less sanguine. "We all say we don't care about the [U.S. News-style] rankings. And we all lie ... Colleges do not compete on educational outcomes," he says. "We don't know if a student from Georgetown learns more than a student from Northwestern or Harvey Mudd." The way to get high rankings is to offer a plush student experience, which drives up tuition costs.

The result, notes Andrew Rosen of Kaplan, Inc., is a costly competition for the third of America's high school graduates who are all primed to "do college" and who will do fine whichever school they choose. Job studies, however, show America needs fully half its high school graduates to go on and complete college. It is not happening and rising costs are a big reason why. There needs to be a cost-effective alternative to the high-priced, high-prestige college track.

The Techonomy 11 dialogue is broadly bullish on bottom-up patterns of innovation, but here the panel split. Klawe pointed to Mudd's pioneering computer science curriculum, which boasts 40 percent female enrollment, as a model that can, and should, percolate up to the largest universities. Cabrera disagreed, arguing that models from small schools are impossible to scale to major universities or nations like India where the ministry of education estimates that it needs to establish 50,000 new colleges educate 100 million young people by 2020.

It's clear that American higher education needs to get off the treadmill of chasing rankings and commit to respond cost-effectively to fully half the graduating class. What will catalyze that disruption remains to be seen.