A Tuition-Free College Degree

I would like to share with you a new model of higher education—a model that, once expanded, can enhance the collective intelligence of millions of creative and motivated individuals who otherwise would be left behind. Look at the world. Pick a place and focus on it. You will find people chasing higher education. Let’s meet some of them.

Meet Patrick. Patrick was born in Liberia to a family with twenty children. During the civil war, he and his family were forced to flee to Nigeria. There, in spite of his situation, he graduated from high school with nearly perfect grades. He wanted to continue on to higher education, but since his family lived on the poverty line, he was soon sent to South Africa to work and send money back to feed his family. Yet Patrick never gave up on his goal of higher education; late at night, after work, he surfed the Internet looking for ways to study.

Meet Debbie. Debbie is from Florida. Her parents didn’t go to college, and neither did any of her siblings. Debbie has worked all of her life, pays taxes, supports herself month to month, and is proud of the American dream—a dream that, for her, won’t be complete without higher education. But Debbie didn’t have the savings for higher education. She couldn’t pay the tuition. Neither could she leave work.

Meet Wael. Wael is from Syria. He is experiencing firsthand the misery, fear, and failure imposed on his country. A big believer in education, he knew that if he could find an opportunity for higher education, an opportunity to get ahead of the rest, he would have a better chance to survive in a world turned upside down.

Unfortunately, the current higher education system failed Patrick, Debbie, and Wael, exactly as it is failing millions of other potential students—millions who graduate from high school, millions who are qualified for higher education, millions who want to study yet cannot access higher education for various reasons.

The first reason is financial. Colleges and universities are expensive. We all know it. In large parts of the world, higher education is unattainable for the average citizen. This is probably the biggest problem facing our society. Higher education is not a right for all but is, rather, a privilege for the few. The second reason is cultural. Many students who are qualified for and can afford higher education, who want to study, often cannot because higher education is not a “decent” place for a woman. This is the story for countless African women, for example, who are prevented from higher education because of cultural barriers. And the third reason? UNESCO has stated that by 2025, 100 million students will be deprived of higher education simply because there will not be enough seats to accommodate them, to meet the demand.

They will take a placement test, they will pass the test, but they still won’t have access because there are no places available.

These are the reasons I founded University of the People, a nonprofit, tuition-free, degree-granting university: to create an alternative for those who have no other—an alternative that will be affordable and scalable and one that will disrupt the current educational system and open the gates to higher education for all qualified students regardless of what they earn, where they live, or what society says about them. Patrick, Debbie, and Wael are only three examples out of the 1,700 students, from 143 countries, who have been accepted to study at University of the People.

We didn’t need to reinvent the wheel. We just looked at what wasn’t working and used the amazing power of the Internet to get around the problems. We set out to build a model that will cut out, almost entirely, the cost of higher education.

First, brick-and-mortar institutions have expenses that virtual universities do not. So we don’t need to pass these expenses on to our students. We also don’t need to worry about capacity. There are no limits on the number of seats in a virtual university: nobody needs to stand at the back of the lecture hall. In addition, through the use of open educational resources and through the generosity of professors who are willing to make their materials accessible and available for free, our students do not need to buy textbooks. Even professors, the most expensive line in any university balance sheet, come free to our students. More than 3,000 higher education professionals—including presidents, vice chancellors, and academic advisors from top colleges and universities such as NYU, Yale, Berkeley, and Oxford—are on-board to help our students.

Finally, we believe in peer-to-peer learning. We use this sound pedagogical model to encourage our students from all over the world to interact and to study together and also to reduce the time required from professors for class assignments.

If the Internet has created a global village, the University of the People model can develop its future leadership. We offer only two programs: business administration and computer science—the two programs that are most in demand worldwide and the two programs that are likeliest to help our students find a job. When our students are accepted, they are placed in a small classroom of 20 to 30 students to ensure that those who need
personalized attention will get it. Moreover, for every course (nine weeks per course), students meet a new peer group, a whole new set of students from all over the world. Every week, when they go into the classroom, they find the lecture notes for the week, the reading assignment, the homework assignment, and the discussion question—all of which form the core of our studies. Every week, each student must contribute to the class discussion and also must comment on the contributions of other students. In this way, we open our students’ minds, and we develop a positive shift in attitude toward different cultures. At the end of each week, students take a quiz and hand in their homework, which is assessed by their peers under the supervision of the instructors; they get a grade and move on to the next week. At the end of the course, they take the final exam, receive a grade, and progress to the next course.

Our model has opened the gates to higher education for every qualified student. Any student with a high school diploma, sufficient English-language skills, and an Internet connection can study with us. We don’t use audio. We don’t use video. Broadband is not necessary. We are tuition-free. The only cost we ask our students to cover is the cost of their final exams: $100 per exam. A full-time bachelor degree student taking 10 courses a year for four years will pay $1,000 per year, $4,000 for the entire degree. For those students who cannot afford even this, we offer a variety of scholarships. It is our mission that no prospective student will be left behind because of financial reasons. If we increase our numbers to 5,000 students by 2016, this model will be financially sustainable.

Five years ago, University of the People was a vision. Today, it is a reality. In February 2014, we were awarded the ultimate academic endorsement of our model: University of the People is now fully accredited. With this accreditation, it is time for us to scale up. We have demonstrated that our model works. I now invite colleges and universities and, even more important, the governments of developing countries to replicate this model to ensure that the gates to higher education will open ever more widely. A new era is coming—an era that will witness the disruption of the current model of higher education, changing the model from one that is a privilege for the few to one that is a basic right, affordable and accessible for all.

Note

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