Mendenhall: Despite High Costs, A College Education is Still Worth the Price

A college education is worth the price - even today
College grads consistently earn more than non-grads
Technology should be incorporated to help cut the high cost of a college education
Robert W. Mendenhall, Ph.D. | President, Western Governors University
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With millions of students returning to college campuses this year, and a nation still reeling from the recent debt ceiling debates and ongoing economic uncertainty, the question looms: Is a college education still worth the price?

Unequivocally, yes.

The return on investment for a college education still pays off in the long term. College graduates consistently earn higher average incomes than their non-degreed counterparts and experience lower unemployment rates.

Yet it's impossible to ignore the rapidly escalating cost of earning a college degree. Tuition alone at public four-year universities rose 7.9 percent in 2010-2011, to an average of $7,605. Tuition costs for private, for-profit institutions averaged $13,935, representing a 5.1 percent increase compared to 2009-2010. These tuition hikes are often accompanied by dwindling state and federal financial support for higher education.

So the more pertinent question becomes not whether a college degree is worth pursuing, but how can students get a high quality college education affordably?

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It's increasingly obvious that we can't afford to approach higher education in the same way.

While expanding college financial aid programs and working to ease college debt burdens are positive steps, they are not focused on finding ways to reduce the real cost of college by increasing efficiency and productivity.

Technology has made a significant difference in the productivity of every industry in the country, except higher education.

Online universities take advantage of technology to reduce costs by avoiding expenditures on facilities, but most often, they use technology to deliver education the same way traditional colleges always have—30 students in a class, led by an instructor, and fixed schedules for classes, assignments, and tests. They use technology to change how education is distributed, but not the method of learning. As a result, “online” does not always equate to lower cost.

This is where the true innovation is needed, and where Western Governors University (WGU) is making a difference. Student-centric, individualized, and interactive, WGU uses technology to deliver content and instruction. Students have access to modular learning resources that allow them to focus on what they need to learn and move quickly through subject matter they already know. Because materials are online, they are available at any time. The faculty role is completely different as well, changing from that of a curriculum creator, lecturer, and researcher to a coach and mentor—“a guide on the side” rather than “a sage on the stage.”

This model measures learning, not time. Students progress in their degree programs as they demonstrate their knowledge, or competence, in the subject matter. This means that rather than spending a semester studying (and paying for) something they already know, they can advance as soon as they prove that they have mastered the materials. Students graduate prepared for work in their degree fields, and they can move as quickly as they are able—the average time to complete a bachelor’s degree is 30 months.

Using this innovative approach, WGU has reduced the real cost of a quality college degree. Tuition for most programs, both graduate and undergraduate, is less than $6,000 per year, and it is charged at a flat rate rather than by credit hour. WGU is self-sustaining on its tuition and receives no ongoing state or federal subsidies. Perhaps most noteworthy given the state of the economy—WGU has not increased tuition in nearly five years, while still growing enrollment approximately 30% per year. In doing so, the university is fulfilling its mission to expand access to quality higher education.
Higher education for more people? That's something we can all afford.

Robert W. Mendenhall has been President of Western Governors University (WGU) since 1999, the same year the university enrolled its first students.

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