



Anna Mycek-Wodecki

Hire Education

by Mary Pride

Technology as Reform

Higher education has become hire education. That is the message of a series of recent books by Richard Mitchell, Charles Sykes, Thomas Sowell, Roger Kimball, Dinesh D'Souza, and Richard Huber. All of these writers would like to see academia reformed. Their proposals range from abolishing tenure (D'Souza and Sowell) to abolishing racial quotas (D'Souza and Sowell), to requiring professors to teach (Sykes), to restoring the curriculum (almost everyone), to abolishing schools of education (Mitchell), to cutting professors' salaries (Sykes and Huber), to publishing guides to the universities so parents and students can make better choices (Sowell and Sykes).

While all of these suggested reforms have merit, the reformers have been unable to come up with any mechanism to implement them. Today's students, already ill-taught through the first 13 grades, are not howling for better quality university education. A majority of the younger students are in college to party, not to study, and would be more likely to oppose reforms than to promote

them. Their parents also seem clueless, by and large, to the parlous state of the universities. Even homeschooling parents, who have awakened to the problems in the K-12 educational establishment, plan to send their children to college without worrying too much about what is going on there. In a last-ditch attempt to find some group with the will to reform academia, Sykes presents us with a vision of trustees and legislators storming the gates of academe to demand changes. Short of a major miracle, this will not happen. Trustees are trustees and legislators are legislators because they have learned the art of not rocking the boats that matter. But thanks to high technology, the reformers may get their way after all.

Universities and colleges are able to charge world-class prices for incompetent, corrupt, and absent professors teaching Mickey Mouse courses and are able to force students to submit to nonacademic brainwashing sessions and other infringements on liberty because (a) they have a monopoly as the sole dispensers of degrees and (b) businesses require university degrees as credentials for almost any decent job.

This bottleneck could be eliminated if businesses no longer found American college degrees credible. It could also be eliminated by eliminating degrees altogether. Finally, we could get around the bottleneck if numerous new, affordable degree-granting organizations sprang up to compete with the old, defiled temples of academe. Until now, all three possibilities have been unthinkable. Entire generations have been sold on the idea that the more education you had, the more income you would make. And starting a campus-based institution capable of competing with other campus-based institutions requires an investment of tens, if not hundreds, of millions of dollars.

Until now.

Lewis J. Perelman's *School's Out: Hyperlearning, the New Technology, and the End of Education* (1992) sent shock waves through the academic world. First, Perelman pointed out that there is no longer a positive correlation between

years of education and total lifetime income. After you spend \$100,000 on your college degree, you may never even make it back, let alone with interest. Second, Perelman proclaimed schools were obsolete. All schools, from kindergarten through post-graduate facilities. Why? Because with affordable new technology, there is no longer any need for campus-based institutions. In fact, tomorrow's campus-based institutions may find themselves in the strange position of trying to vend an inferior product when better, far less expensive ones are also easier to obtain.

Not everything in Perelman's book is worthwhile. For one thing, he believes in better learning through yet-to-be-developed brain-enhancing drugs. Perelman also assumes that all education operates by imparting skills and knowledge—both of which can be done by computers—and ignores the part of education that involves imparting wisdom—which requires a human mentor. These oddities aside, his book is technologically right on. Everything he wrote about two years ago is here or is almost here:

* A small entrepreneurial company offers taped lectures of award-winning university professors. Although these "SuperStar Teachers" courses do not take full advantage of the technology—they are mainly "talking head" lectures with few or no visual aids—and are not even world-class teaching, they have generated a tremendous amount of interest. At present, the lectures are being purchased mainly by adults who want to refresh some material they took in college or pick up a course they missed, but there is no reason (other than the unavailability of university credits) why this kind of video course couldn't take the place of many on-site courses.

* Several universities, such as the University of Phoenix, now offer entire degree programs through online courses and assignments. Students interact with professors and other students via

their computer keyboards.

* Many businesses are now offering "distance learning" programs to their employees. One such program provider, National Technological University in Colorado, issues more continuing education and advanced engineering degrees than any other American institution.

* The need to retrain for new careers, or keep current with new technology, is leading increasing numbers of adults to some form of distance learning.

* Online communications are becoming easier to master. You can plug in a modem, install America Online software, and be reading e-mail messages, joining online forums, and downloading information, all within a few minutes. The graphically oriented interface makes finding your way around the online service merely a matter of double-clicking on the right labeled pictures.

pending on the edition.)

When you can turn on your VCR and watch your pick of the best teachers, who needs to settle for Philosophy 101 at the community college? When you can interact with classmates from around the world, how much more multicultural can education get?

The only thing holding back this flood of educational material is a thin piece of parchment. If you could get college credits as easily for reading your way through the *Library of the Future* as for taking "From Hemingway to Mailer: A Survey," fewer people would be willing to pay the exorbitant price, in time and money, of an on-site degree. Even better, if degrees no longer existed, students could simply offer employers a transcript (or portfolio) of work completed, from whatever institution.

If the content of high-tech learning stinks, who cares if it sings and dances? On the other hand, much of current higher learning stinks, and it doesn't

even sing and dance. Plenty of opportunity here for those with something to teach and a willingness to get a keyboard or video-editing console under their fingers. As Dr. Ray Steele, a board member of the U.S. Distance Learning Association and director of Ball State University's Center for Information and Communication Science, says, "A world of broadband on demand is just around the corner," and it doesn't require a huge campus and multimillion-dollar faculty to jump in.

The higher education monopoly is on its way out, folks. If you are the president of a college with a nice campus but bad courses, look out. Get a clue from Dr. Murray Turoff, coauthor of *Learning Networks* (M.I.T. Press, 1994) and professor of computer science at New Jersey Institute of Technology. He points out, "What this technology does is break down all the prior geographical monopolies. So the ones who are really going to be in trouble are the local colleges that

We are poised on the edge of a flood of training material, much of which will be superior to the typical lecture-to-hundreds graded-by-foreign-grad-student fare cranked out by today's universities. What homeschooling has done for K-12 resources, the new technology will do for college and post-graduate resources.

As the author of a homeschooling resource book, I was able a few years ago to review single-handedly virtually every product available. Today, as the publisher of a homeschooling magazine, I have a dozen reviewers and am still hard-pressed to keep up with it all. That's what will happen in higher education. Mountains of software. Stacks of video tapes. Thousands of local seminars (traveling professors). Tens of thousands of online courses.

Think it over—when you can put the entire contents of hundreds of the greatest books in the Western world on a single CD-ROM, who needs university libraries? Especially when the CD-ROM comes with a search engine that allows you to find everything Aristotle ever wrote on the subject of liberty, compare it to everything Tom Paine had to say on the same subject, and dump the quotations you select straight into your word processor. (That product is here, by the way. It's called the *Library of the Future* and costs between \$49 and \$495, de-

Landing

by Gloria Whelan

No sooner are we wingless earthlings closed
into the miracle of tool-kit flight
when looking out we see a cross composed
upon the clouds: the shadow of the plane
is waiting just ahead.

Our life out of our hands and traveling where
in childhood's upward faith we housed our God
last things are in our head. Hived off our sphere
we castaways thick packed within our pod
are each a solitaire.

We sooth ourselves with thoughts of some far street
that leads to castles rich and lands sublime,
a country rare: a Buru or Tibet.
Yet even as we dream we near the time
when plane and shadow meet.