

College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University

DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU

Administration Publications

Administration

9-1-2014

The Atlantic asks, “is college doomed?” Answer: no. Next question?

Michael Hemesath

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, mhemesath@csbsju.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/admin_pubs



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hemesath M. 2014 Sep 1. The Atlantic asks, “is college doomed?” Answer: no. Next question? [blog]. Quad 136. [Accessed 2017 June 7]. <http://blogs.csbsju.edu/mhemesath/2014/09/01/the-atlantic-asks-is-college-doomed-answer-no-next-question/>.

This Blog Post is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Administration Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csbsju.edu.

Quad 136

Answer: No. Next Question?

[◻ Previous](#) [Next ◻](#)

The Atlantic Asks, “Is College Doomed?” Answer: No. Next Question?



Another month, another story of the imminent demise of higher education in the United States. The September issue of *The Atlantic* has a **cover story** that asks if college is doomed. The article features the Minerva Project and profiles its founder and CEO “the 39-year-old entrepreneur Ben Nelson,

[who] aims to replace (or, when he is feeling less aggressive, ‘reform’) the modern liberal-arts college.”

Minerva has a different business model than many other online options like Coursera or Udacity or Capella. It acknowledges the benefits of having some kind of residential experience as Minerva has “administrative offices and a dorm in San Francisco, and it plans to open locations in at least six other major world cities.” But, “Nelson thinks he can reinvent higher education by stripping it down to its essence, eliminating lectures and tenure along with football games, ivy-covered buildings, and research libraries.” Like many of the other online experiments, Nelson and his team think that technology will fundamentally change the nature of the undergraduate experience.

A few observations:

1. **Cost.** The current cost for a year at Minerva is \$28,000, which includes room and board. While this is significantly lower than the sticker price of the Ivies and the selective liberal arts colleges that Minerva hopes to compete with, it may not be lower once financial aid is considered, and it is certainly not lower than the average price of many institutions, like Saint John’s and Saint Ben’s, who are not in the most selective tier. The average comprehensive fee (tuition and room and board) paid at CSB and SJU is about \$27,000-\$28,000. Many state schools are less than this. So Minerva does not have one of the purported benefits (possibly the main one) of online education: significantly lower costs, unless your next best alternative happens to be an Ivie and you are a full pay student.
2. **Student Body.** Nelson expects about 90% of Minerva’s students to be international in the long run. This seems to be an

open admission that this model does not plan to be competitive in the US market. So for all the talk of competing with the most selective US schools, Minerva does not really believe that a student with a choice between William or Brown or Minerva will choose Minerva. (This expected outcome appears to run counter to Minerva's "overtly elitist and selective" ethos.) The market niche that Minerva seems to be targeting is the growing middle and upper middle class populations of places like China, South Korea and Brazil who want a US education for their children. It remains to be seen whether these parents will view Minerva as a close substitute for more traditional schools. This will probably turn on how well Minerva students do in the job market, which means that it will depend on how employers view Minerva—the same challenge that currently faces all online models.

3. **Alums.** The article notes a number of ways in which Minerva will not be like traditional institutions. The author takes a slap at alumni connections (a bit ironic for a Harvard grad). "One possibility is that Minerva will fail because a college degree, for all the high-minded talk of liberal education— of lighting fires and raising thoughtful citizens—is really just a credential, or an entry point to an old-boys network that gets you your first job and your first lunch with the machers at your alumni club." This narrow view of alumni connections ignores the significant role of community at colleges and universities and the importance of signaling. Alumni often provide those first jobs because they know something about the educational experiences their fellow alumni had at their alma mater. This is an under-appreciated competitive advantage for traditional institutions that even the most successful online models will have a hard time replicating within a generation. (This also ignores the very important philanthropic benefits provided by alumni.)

4. **The lecture strawman.** The author argues that "the key to Minerva, what sets it apart most jarringly from traditional universities, is a proprietary online platform developed to apply pedagogical practices that have been studied and vetted by" the professionals hired by Minerva. Nelson tells other academic leaders, "Your cash cow is the lecture, and the lecture is over. The lecture model ... will be obliterated." The only problem is that every academic institution worthy of the name already uses blended pedagogies that may use some lectures but incorporate lots of other techniques that have been developed by educational psychologists. Even the Ohio States and University of Minnesotas offer students a range of classroom experiences, and the small liberal arts schools make personalized learning and close relationships with faculty one of their primary selling points. So if Minerva thinks that their online model, with faculty teaching from off-site, is going to somehow become their competitive advantage, I suspect they are sorely mistaken.

5. **Administration and other evils.** The primary argument for online education is economic. If you get something approximating the academic quality of the traditional model, the lost extra-curriculars don't matter much, and it all comes at a significantly lower cost. While dumping most of the extra-curricular activities (no athletics, no arts, no debating societies), Minerva seems to acknowledge the benefits of the residential experience. They are bringing students together to live in a dorm setting. There are obvious benefits from this model, as traditional institutions know, but there are significant costs too, which explains why education is such an expensive proposition. Nowhere in the article is there any reference to these costs. Minerva will need a dean of students, people living in the residence hall, administrators to handle visas, counselors to handle student academic and mental health issues. They will need someone to handle discipline and the inevitable sexual assault cases. And what about career services? All this will make Minerva much more like traditional institutions than Mr. Nelson and his academic deans might like to admit, and the administrative needs will add to the costs. The economics begin to resemble those of the rest of higher ed, even without the ivy covered walls or the football team.

According to the article, "Nelson's long-term goal for Minerva is to radically remake one of the most sclerotic sectors of the U.S. economy, one so shielded from the need for improvement that its biggest innovation in the past 30 years has been to double its costs and hire more administrators at higher salaries." He wants to "lead" American universities into a new era. "Nelson sometimes tells his competitors, 'Our goal is not to put you out of business; it is to lead you. It is to show you that there is a better way to do what you are doing, and for you to follow us'."

We will see what the future brings. There may well be a niche in the diverse world of higher education for Minerva, but I think

those of us in the residential, liberal arts world will be comfortable navigating the future without Mr. Nelson’s guidance.

By [Michael Hemesath](#) | September 1st, 2014 | Categories: [Higher Education](#) | [1 Comment](#)

About the Author: [Michael Hemesath](#)



Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).