Will Colleges Survive the 21st Century?

- Ranveer Singh Malik

A recently released report by the US Bureau of Labour Statistics has sparked many questions about the state of American colleges. For the first time in its history, an American college graduate is no more likely to find employment than someone with a mere high school diploma (Cline & Kaymak, 2025).

This comes at a time when the value of a college wage premium has already declined sharply due to the high tuition that graduates bear. Which leads the younger generation to often feel undermined by a labour market reluctant to increase hiring amid a recessionary environment and a looming trade war (Handshake, 2025; NACE, 2025).

When headline numbers such as these steer to the left, a familiar attribution game begins. With criticism often being levelled at colleges. These longstanding institutions are being questioned for their entropy and their failure to keep up with the modern demands of a fast-changing economy. A large number of recent graduates have felt they were not given the up-to-date industry knowledge and skills promised upon successful completion of their courses (Burning Glass Institute & Strada Institute for the Future of Work, 2024; Cengage Group, 2025).

But while there is no doubt that the system of college education is far from perfect, I'd like to point a finger at a new culprit. That is the very pace of technological growth. Which has led the US economy to witness increasing expansion in its burgeoning tech centre, transforming the country. But which may have also acted as a double-edged sword, inadvertently capsizing under the weight of its own progress.

When we go to university, the expectation we all hold is that, through the knowledge we acquire, we will have sufficient expertise to perform a number of skilled tasks. Even if one accounts for the expectation of on-the-ground training through a myriad of formats, ranging from internships to apprenticeships, they still rightly believe that what they are being taught is, at the very least, the best available approach to a problem. But this idea that what we are taught is genuinely up to date with industry practice doesn't always hold sway. In no time past has this been more evident than today, and clinical researchers have tried to measure this decay in accepted knowledge by examining a field where being current is literally a matter of life and death.

Laura Martínez García and colleagues examined the validity of medical advice and found that 1 in 5 recommendations was already outdated within 3 years of issuance (García et al., 2014). They did this by taking recommendations that were considered valid at the time they were written, then reassessing them later using the evidence available at the time of reassessment, rather than judging them by what was known when the recommendations were first made. Another NICE (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence) analysis by Phil Alderson found that median guideline survival is around 5 years, suggesting that by year 7, fewer than half of guidelines remained up to date (Alderson et al., 2014).

This was further elaborated upon by researchers John C. Hall and Cameron Platell, who coined the phrase “half-life of truth” to describe the shelf life of a claim and discover its expiry date in the face of mounting evidence (Hall & Platell, 1997). This proverbial shelf life thus limits the usefulness of a degree's content and, when viewed in isolation, its functionality to a five- to seven-year window.

Even this analysis doesn’t render the full scope of the issue. If the ailment was a mere mismatch between professional expectations and college degrees, then bringing college degrees up to pace with professional expectations would be enough to cure the labour market. However, the key assumption underlying the claim is that colleges can predict professional expectations years in advance. Colleges can adapt, but they cannot reliably forecast which tools, methods, and role requirements will dominate in several years' time. This is especially true when technologies diffuse unevenly across firms and sectors.

As simple as it may seem to judge an event by its future outcome in the future, it is far more informative to judge it from the eyes of a past observer. Knowledge and new ideas take time to prove themselves, and many never do. It is equally absurd for a college to never change its curriculum as it is to impulsively change it at the drop of a hat, or more accurately, the drop of every new headline.

Colleges face radical uncertainty in two ways: not knowing the future and having no way to probabilistically predict it. Colleges operate under genuine uncertainty about which technologies will endure, and which will fizzle out like a flame that burned brightly but died just as fast. Even large-scale technologies like blockchain and cryptocurrency have only recently been accepted by bona fide institutions such as banks, despite surpassing the gross national product of some of the world's largest nations years ago.

Despite the rather pessimistic outlook I have drawn for educational institutions, not all hope is lost for tertiary-level education institutes, with them stuck between two large obstacles. The foundational theory for education raises the key point of absorptive capacity, which is the ability to evaluate and implement new methods as and when information arrives. Maybe the solution was staring us in the face all along. Perhaps the issue was not the level of technological change or the inability of colleges to remain professionally relevant, or even a push towards a new format, but an acceptance that education is a lifelong endeavour, not something one achieves but what one does.

Thus, my final recommendation is that programmes ought to avoid being built on the illusion of everlastingness and instead be built on an acceptance of their mortality and eventual obsolescence. They ought to help students cope with change and prepare them for a world in which they must keep pace. Embedding the foundation for students to cope with change as a guarantee, or risk being left behind. In the words of Sam Manekshaw, being the repository of all knowledge is not a position we reach at a certain date, but a sine qua non of professional knowledge.

Sources:

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