



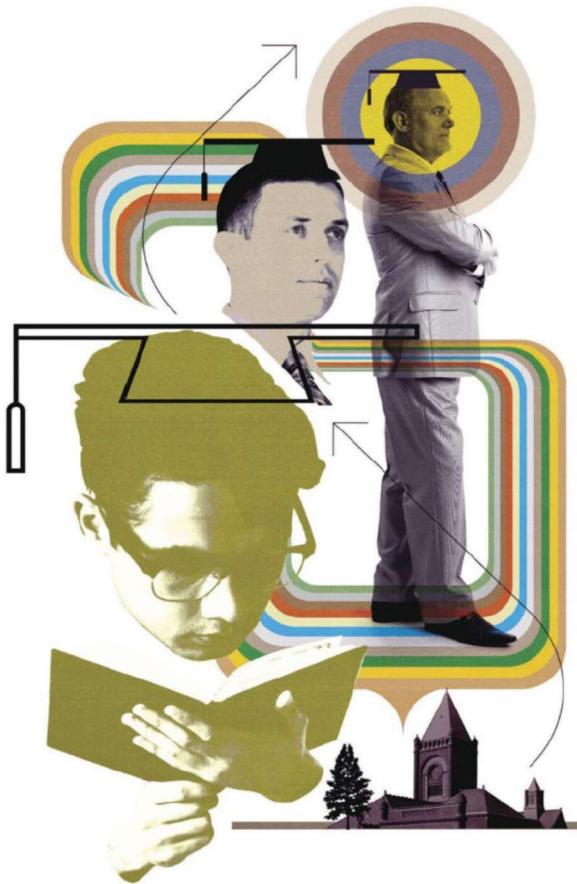
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# Reimagining College as a Lifelong Learning Experience

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STUART BRADFORD FOR THE CHRONICLE



**F**or centuries, our image of higher

education has been tied to time and place. College is a discrete part of life, a fleeting chapter with a defined beginning and end. You travel to a campus and become a student, progress to graduation, and then leave education behind. It's all neatly bounded.

Today, colleges have moved beyond that cloistered idyll, becoming more connected to the world outside their walls. But in undergraduate education, the age-old ties to place and time still hold sway. As access to information has gotten easier and economic demands more intense, many institutions have responded by “unbundling” the college experience.

Reform efforts have centered on making college leaner and quicker, as they should. We must continue to commit ourselves to shortening students' time-to-degree — perhaps the most essential goal for higher education today, and a main contribution of the “student success” movement. Too many undergraduates, especially those of low-income backgrounds, founder on long, confusing, and expensive paths to a degree.

But we should not limit our definition of higher education to the completion of a degree. Instead, we should think of the degree as a milestone in the relationship between the learner, the learning community, and the institution. For if raw knowledge is becoming a commodity, the value of college will be found in the connections and community it fosters. We should embrace that role, aiming for deeper and more lasting ties with graduates.

Right now, commencement marks a sharp cutoff. Students leave an intimate academic community and become alumni, united by LinkedIn groups and hazy memories. A few alums will serve on board or return for football games, but the majority earn a diploma and part ways. The finality of that departure is a waste. Colleges invest time and care in fostering a diverse community of learners and forging connections among them. And at the end of four years, we wave goodbye.

When so many of the civic bonds in our society have fragmented, colleges and universities should be binding agents, convening authorities to bring together people of talent at every stage of life. If higher education is going to thrive in the century ahead, it's time to think of college not as a life stage or a credential, but as a lifelong community for lifelong learners.

At Stanford University's Hasso Plattner Institute of Design, futurists proposed the Open Loop University, where undergraduate study is just the beginning of a long partnership. Through a kind of continuous enrollment, the distinction between student and alum is blurred. Admission would grant access to a lifetime of courses, with students able to return at any point to tackle new challenges and share their experience with peers of all ages. The Stanford proposal suggested six years of residential enrollment, distributed over a lifetime. But with advances in online coursework and distance learning, it's possible to imagine near-continuous access to higher education, a truly "open loop" with no real limits on how much and how long a student could learn and contribute.

Some of that can happen in person, but much of it is now possible remotely. And graduates of all ages would relish a deeper sense of connection.

The Teaching Company (publisher of The Great Courses) and One Day University reap lots of money by rekindling the best of the college experience, selling their wares to an overwhelmingly college-educated audience. Colleges are missing the chance to fill that niche for their own alumni and do so in a way that's more authentic than transactional.

Reimagining alumni as both students and mentors would also make them stronger advocates for higher education. As smart development officers know, asking for advice is the best prelude to asking for support. In an era of growing skepticism from policy makers, colleges can use all the friends they can get. Bringing alumni back into the fold would help.

Our lives do not fit into neat stages, and our capacity for learning even less so. It's time for colleges to embrace lifelong learning as more than a rhetorical trope, building intergenerational hubs of knowledge and community. Technology makes it easier, and a real institutional commitment can make it meaningful.

In his deceptively titled treatise *The End of College*, Kevin Carey called for exactly this kind of visionary change. "To prosper, colleges need to become more like cathedrals," he wrote. "They need to build beautiful places, real and virtual, that learners return to throughout their lives. They need to create authentic human communities and form relationships with people based on the never-ending project of learning."

We have the tools to make that vision real. We can either retrench or reimagine.

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