Book Review: Is it possible to predict accurately the future of higher education? In *Academia Next: The Futures of Higher Education,* Bryan Alexander sure tries.

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Academia Next: The Futures of Higher Education. By Bryan Alexander. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020. 352pp. $39.95 (hardcover)

Throughout history, our nation has experienced its share of a pandemic, paradigm shifts, and cultural changes. As of right now, our nation is going through an unprecedented event, which our country has not experienced since the great influenza crisis of 1918. Our daily lives, jobs, and schools are being affected by COVID-19. It is amazing how Bryan Alexander's book *Academia Next: The Futures of Higher Education* has, in certain ways, predicted the obstacle we experience in higher education today due to COVID-19. Higher education has seen tough times in the last two to three decades from enrollment, access, academic labor, alternative certification, sexual assault, and the ever-evolving library and the changes it has had to introduce because of technology. Bryan Alexander explores these issues in his book. Reading *Academia Next*, one sees how Alexander explores the future of higher education in America and the devices he uses to come to his conclusions. The main theme of the book is Alexander's predictions for the future of higher education using trends analysis, scenarios, and showing how the past can help predict not only the future of higher education but the present as well. With such a theme, one may wonder about the quality of *Academia Next: The Future of Higher Education* as a source of information for the future of higher education.

The book has three sections with about 2-7 chapters within those sections. The first section examines current economics, demographics, politics, international and policy developments as they relate to higher education. In the first chapter "Objects in the Mirror May Be Closer than they Appear," Alexander describes how he develops his knowledge of higher education he uses forecasting methods, trend analysis, and scenario creation to generate the richest most useful map for the future of higher education. . These methods are the beehives of critical thinking, and an invitation to the reader to see the practical functions and purposes of both deductive and inductive logic. He equally invites the reader to think along with him.

In chapter one, he asks the reader to imagine how his or her role either as a student, trustee, professor, or administrator would change if we encountered a shift and impact due to a specific phenomenon. Alexander uses the scenario of a pandemic like the Great Influenza of 1918. In this example, he discusses the possible outcome for students, professors, trustees, and administrators and how classes and instruction would look. He made an accurate assumption by asking an appropriate question "would distance learning grow rapidly as people fear face-to-face learning because of perceived contagion risk?" (Alexander 23) He then goes on by asking a follow up question, about how we could accomplish a series of tasks if we were struck by a contagion. For example, what

would education look like? Would education be completely virtual? Remember this book was published before this pandemic; at this point in my reading, I am getting interested in what he has to say, seeing that Alexander pulls an example so accurate a year before. To describe him as prophetic would not be wrong.

Chapter two titled "Catching the University in Midtransformation," examines the trends reshaping American Academia that stem from the full range of educational experience and institutional issues regarding policy, enrollment, inter-institutional issues, and staffing. He argues that the issues occur mostly because of reasons that arise from the education systems and, forces from external developments. Each trend appears with an explanation of how it currently functions as well as including examples and considerations of how it may play out. One aspect of chapter two is Alexander discussion of globalization amongst universities around the world by pointing out all the countries American universities have opened campuses in and hold classes. For instance, Yale opened a campus in Singapore in 2013, and he explains the advantages and disadvantages that students face by globalizing American universities in foreign countries.

Alexander acknowledges one of the many advantages of that international academic exchanges can have for scholarships, teaching, and intercultural learning, which can lead to new experiences with new cultures by teaching in a foreign atmosphere and the cultural awareness a

student can have by spending a semester abroad. He also points out a disadvantage of globalizing American universities which is, "how can an American campus dedicated to the free exploration and expression of ideas hold classes in a nation whose policies restrict those activities, as when Singapore welcomed an American undergraduate campus largely provided by Yale but also banned student demonstrations there?"(Alexander 29) Which is an important observation of a blatant disadvantage that is easily overlooked by ambition. How can we as Americans allow a university with American ideology's and goals be allowed to open in countries such as Singapore without taking in all of the cultural differences in law and society that differ from America, before considering opening a branch like Yale? It is obvious that these questions were overlooked or under researched in pursuit of the globalization for Yale University.

Chapter three is titled "The New Age of Fewer Children and More Inequality." Alexander mainly focuses on two large social domains that contain crucial trends for post-secondary education like demographics and macroeconomics. One may need to have a working knowledge of Demography and Macroeconomics to understand the chapter. Alexander ends the chapter by concluding that technology shapes these demographics and macroeconomics transformations as it impacts higher education.

Chapter four titled "The Marriage of Carbon and Silicon" explores a set of technology trends to obtain a clear picture of how the digital domain is changing itself

and transforming the rest of the world. This chapter mainly focuses on a series of trends that either strike directly and significantly on American higher education or reform educations immediate contexts. In the author's final note for this chapter, he quotes William Gibson, who observed that "the future is already here, just unevenly distributed" (Alexander 99). Alexander provides many examples of this quote in chapter four. In addition, he makes several observations in this chapter over three-dimensional printing, Moore's law, digital security threats that are expanding, Social Media, the limits of the web, blockchain, just to name a few.

Chapter five titled "Beyond the Virtual Learning Environment," mainly focuses on the overlap between technology and education. The disappointment I felt while reading chapter four disappeared when I noticed a section titled social media in education. I thought finally some meat on social media and its effects on higher education, but again was meet with information already obtained by watching the news or reading the news. Alexander goes on to discuss gaming in education and automation in education. Automation in education is a growing tool for universities across the world as pointed out with examples throughout this section. The subject of AI appears several times throughout this work. One bite of information that was new to me is that a Chinese team consisting of university and hospital researchers created software that outperformed skilled medical professionals in offering patient diagnoses. Which is interesting considering the fact I have never

understood why humans run E.R.'s at all. I would have liked more information concerning how AI can help at a university level with educating students.

Chapter six titled "Connecting the Dots: Meta Trends," goes over multiple extrapolation exercises. Extrapolation is the action of estimating or concluding something by assuming that existing trends will continue, or a current method will remain applicable. Alexander describes how these trends do not allow for variations within given trend lines, such as their weakening or strengthening, and how. It does not address the synergies between trends when two or more intersect. Alexander explains that it is a first approximation forecast. A different way of understanding multiple trend lines is by combining or synthesizing small groups of them. Apparently, trends can reinforce or cancel each other out.

Chapters seven through thirteen are a series of scenarios for the directions that higher education could develop into. Again, he uses forecasting methods, trend analysis, and scenario creation. "Peak Higher Education," Alexander uses a future scenario in which American higher education is in a state of decline. Academia has reached its peak in 2012 and has gone downhill ever since. Between the years of 1982-2012 college admittance was at its highest ever. The number of colleges and universities has dropped significantly. Tenure-track faculty are a small minority, surrounded by part-time faculty and staff who struggle to maintain budgets that are far smaller than those of the early twenty-first century in its glory days. For this scenario,

the author uses a peak model or metaphor, which describes any process by which a metric rises for some time, reaches an uppermost number or limit (peak), then decreases. This future started with a decline in enrollment. From 2013-2018, the number of students taking classes in American colleges and universities has slipped by 6.7 percent.

This scenario extends this decline a decade. The author describes many reasons for this: people are more interested in making money versus spending time in college to get a degree in certain fields, and high school students are more interested in trade work than college. Declining numbers place enormous pressure on campuses dependent on tuition. The competition between universities for the dwindling numbers of supply of students heats up and makes collaboration between institutions even more difficult. Many universities will risk higher discounts for tuition to attract in-demand students, this challenge also places greater stress on supporting students with the greatest need. Of course, this means that families will try to find the cheapest means of education, that is, finding universities or colleges close to home for their children and thereby eliminating the need for boarding charges all together.

Politics and perception by the public will also contribute to bringing this scenario about. Many factors still hinder university success: the growing number of first-generation students also means that there is a higher need for remedial courses and places for students with learning disabilities to go to for help, as well as a need for financial support more than ever. As such,

since 2012 universities are trying to educate more expensive students than ever before. We could possibly see a drop in graduate and undergraduate population from 17,839,330 in 2018 to 16,768,970 in 2024 to fewer 15,762,832 by 2030. One could argue that the difference in numbers here is not that significant there are plenty of people still going to universities. That is true, but I disagree if society decides to settle on skilled labor versus a college education, we are settling for a middle-class lifestyle and nothing more. I realize that this future may not bother some individuals who have socialist or communist ideologies for most in the free United States such a scenario is dangerous.

What does this future mean for the Americans who view this as a dangerous scenario? It could mean that fewer citizens of the world would be less academically informed. Not to be insensitive but the people in our country might turn into a bad version of the movie *Idiocracy*. Which is not a compliment to the individuals of our country with socialist ideals. What should we do then if this scenario alarms you? Keep going to universities and colleges. Keep educating yourself and our younger children and continue to question the validity of the powers that be. Do not settle for the easy path, which means resist going to trade school for the quicker pay out financially. Yes, going to college will probably mean that you will be broke for about four to six years, depending on how long it takes an individual to gain a degree. It is worth it. Remember this quote by Albert Einstein "never regard study as a duty but as an enviable opportunity to learn to know the liberating influence of beauty in the realm of the spirit for your own personal joy and to the profit of the community to which your later works belong." One should believe in the strength of being educated beyond high school.

Alexander also presents what he calls "Renaissance" scenario. The scenario is unusual in that it offers a retrospective future. This scenario is based on a series of trends reshaping higher education over a generation, but the importance is not clear until after that generation has passed. For this scenario to work the author asks the reader to imagine that the year is 2030 and a group of scholars is engaged in assessing recent history. The framework these scholars are using is the past generation which they want to rename the post web era. The author predisposes that these scholars are rehashing a variety of events and developments that have taken place in the past ten years. The scholars then go on to define exactly what a renaissance era looks like by definition. The author is describing a new generation of digital creativity that has added new media layers to college and university living. In this scenario members of academic communities have digitized analog materials, built websites, crafted games, recorded podcasts, generated interactive exercises, created e-books, shot video, wrote code, and remixed multiple items into a new synthesis. They have shared them across an expanding network of networks, either within closed environments or open for a much broader audience.

In conferences, people may be presenting with more code, simulations, or animations than posters or paper. Of course,

not everybody helped make this future come true since some did not want to partake in this type of future for whatever reason that they may have had. In the end, the professoriate became a multimedia production population than ever before. This creative upsurge grew because it was increasingly democratic. These educational changes were in response to an ever-changing world, as career demands shifted. The renaissance scenario in my opinion offers a very positive future for generations to come after us, and because of that, we will have more flexible than less rigid human beings, who are used to evolving and evolving quickly using technology.

The next question is whether this book *Academia Next: The Future of Higher Education* is a good source for our administrators, trustees, and professors to use or follow for the generations to come to continue higher education for the world. In a sense, it is a very good tool. Nothing is perfect, remember everything in this work is mainly predictions made from forecasting methods using long assessing trend analysis and scenario creations; none of these scenarios matter if the universe or reality has a different plan for us. For that reason, I feel other means of exploration for our future in higher education should be considered along with this type of research. The problem with any type of scientific prediction and forecasting using analysis is that every single person on this planet has their agenda, and most information can be twisted to fit that agenda, which the author dutifully is aware of throughout this whole work. The author answers this in the first chapter by asking his audience to keep their sense of

agency throughout reading this book because some of the information provided may have a sense of inevitability.

For more research on the subject of the future for higher education Dr, Dustin Swanger who wrote *The Future of Higher Education in the U.S: Issues facing colleges and their impacts on campus,* which was published in July of 2018, could be helpful. Dr. Swanger points out some similar observations that Alexander Bryan makes but he delves deeper into the Generation Z and the differences that technology has made on their learning, he also puts the political climate under scrutiny in his work. He also goes into demographics, funding trends, and technology. Dr. Swanger also surmises that because of Generation Z he predicts the death of lectures in turn for more technology as a tool for future learners. Also, there is Roy Y. Chan who wrote *Understanding the Purpose of Higher Education: An analysis of the Economic and Social Benefits for Completing A College Degree.* This work is about forty-one pages and was published in 2016. In this Chan offers eight recommendations for policy makers to consider that address the growing misalignment gap between education providers and undergraduate students. The ultimate goal for him is to develop renovation and a repurposing strategy across competing imperatives and to outline success measures in order to critically define, measure, and evaluate the achievement of specific goals and outcomes in hopes of resolving potential skills that are mismatched in a world going through a massive change. Chan's ideals are more positive towards the need of a college

degree and his findings are less predictive and more grounded in actual facts from the past and taking that in consideration with technology to move the success and change needed for higher education with future generations.

Bryan Alexander lays out a very well written argument, describing how demographics, politics, macroeconomics, forecasting methods, trend analysis, and scenario creation are all helpful tools in making sense of the future of higher education. Although he uses helpful data in proving his predictions or proving to his audience how these predictions could come true, his prophecy still lacks the adequacy one finds with a congregation of scholars on a topic. Perhaps, we need more people to assess the future of higher education with different predictions and scenarios than Alexander has provided. He has opened the door for such study; we shall enter, bearing in mind the questions of diversity, equity, inclusion; we shall also bear in mind the questions of flexibility in the structure of higher education, nature of curriculum, credit-hours, worth of general education; we shall enter to raise anew the question of constitutes academic competency.

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