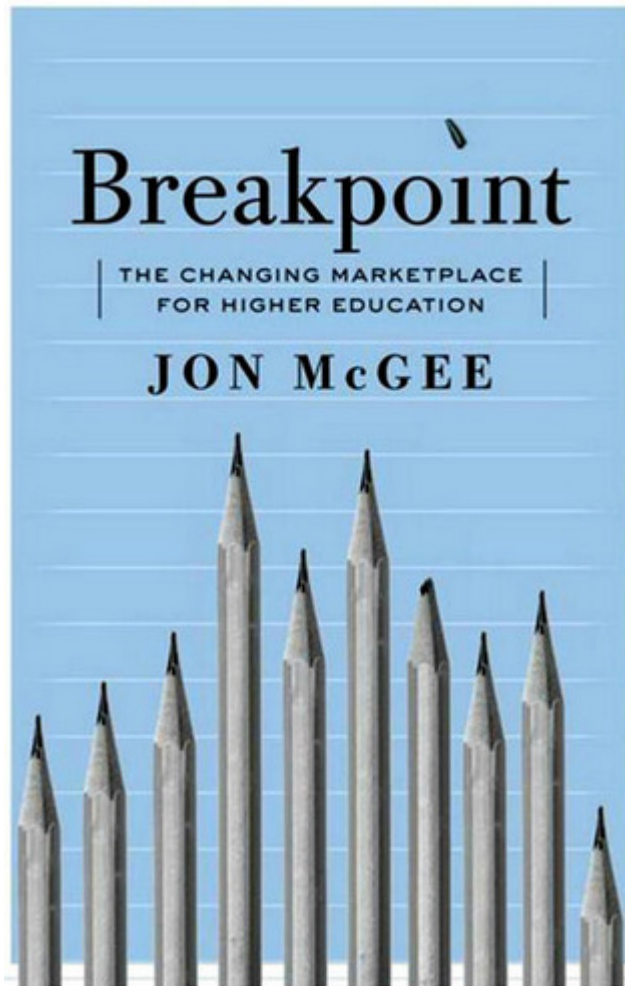


# ‘Breakpoint’ looks at higher ed

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*“Breakpoint: The Changing Marketplace for Higher Education,” by Jon McGee. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015, 169 pages, \$26.95.*



“Disrupted by long-predicted demographic shifts, jarring economic change and changing cultural values about college, higher education today finds itself in its own liminal moment,” Jon McGee explains near the beginning of “Breakpoint: The Changing Marketplace for Higher Education,” his treatise on the future of academia. “The Great Recession of 2008 seamlessly morphed into an agonizingly slow and lengthy economic recovery.”

“Assumptions colleges and universities may have held as truths about their students, their families and themselves have been continuously and uncomfortably challenged in recent years,” he continues. “What we surely hoped or expected to be temporary following the historic economic downturn has instead resulted in something more lasting.”

Unless you have been living under a rock for the past few years, you are acutely aware of the seismic shift we are currently in the midst of with respect to a variety of societal values and mores. Front and center in the ongoing debate regarding the efficacy of many of our pivotal institutions is higher education. Once reserved for the intellectually elite, college is now being

touted by many as the only viable route to a higher standard of living for most citizens who were not born into affluence. At the same time, and especially as the costs associated with attending college have continued to skyrocket, the critics have never been more passionate or determined; college is a privilege and not a right, they assert vociferously.

It is into this volatile and polarizing atmosphere that McGee extends a ray of hope for the future of the enterprise. It is obvious from the first page of this exquisite and surprisingly intuitive volume that McGee knows his subject matter intimately. From his vantage point as a senior administrator who is heavily invested in exploring the increasingly relevant relationship between financial resources and return-on-investment in higher education, he represents a voice of reason in a sea of diverse perspectives ranging from unbridled optimism to utter hopelessness.

As far as credentials go, McGee is vice president for planning and public affairs at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University in Minnesota. He has a master's degree from the University of Minnesota and worked in the Minnesota Department of Finance before serving as vice president for research and policy development at the Minnesota Private College Council for seven years. He also sits on the College Board Midwest Regional Council and is chair-elect of the College Scholarship Service Assembly Council. "Breakpoint," his first book, is extensively researched, with 14 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the nine chapters comprising the main text.

I found his take on the well-publicized challenges facing academia in the new millennium, as well as his recommendations for a more cogent future, to be both refreshing as well as inspiring. In contrast to many of his contemporaries who seem more obsessed with quick fixes than actually solving problems, McGee understands implicitly that the issues are complex and there are no easy answers. Consider what he has to say about the most controversial feature of attending college in 2016; i.e., the price tag: "The rising cost of the traditional college experience – reflected in rising prices for students and rising expenses for colleges and universities – will fuel demand for more online education," McGee notes in the fifth chapter. "The next several years promise fascinating change and experimentation. We don't yet know how it will play out or who will win and who will lose, but college and university leaders do need to pay close attention. Even if we individually choose to stay the current course, we can be assured that the world around us will continue to change."

He discusses the fiscal implications of this evolution later in the narrative: "The constraints imposed by slowly rising net tuition revenue, coupled with fundraising realities and, for public institutions, reduced taxpayer support, will require most colleges and universities to turn more assertively to the expense side of the budget ledger to manage their fiscal equilibrium," the author writes in the concluding chapter and one I found particularly enlightening. "Colleges and universities almost always find expense-side management difficult. It too frequently gets reduced to headline terms like 'just reduce administration' or 'eliminate the frills' or 'become more efficient.' But those overly simplified and highly valenced demands mean vastly different things to different people."

Apparently many taxpayers – and more than a few legislators – believe the exploding cost of attending college has more to do with inefficiency and waste than economic forces of which inflation is more a symptom than a cause. As McGee makes abundantly clear, however, the idea that all the financial difficulties colleges and universities are grappling with can be solved by belt tightening on a previously unprecedented scale is overly simplistic and just plain naïve.

"Distinction and difference are prerequisites for success in competitive and disruptive markets," McGee writes in the eighth chapter. "But a strong commitment to distinction will not, by itself, be sufficient to navigate disruptive market change. The changing demographic and economic characteristics of the traditional-age college population in America also demand careful thinking about how to best serve the next generation of students, whose needs and expectations may be quite different from those who preceded them."

In the final analysis, McGee's guarded but undeniable optimism is perhaps the most endearing feature of "Breakpoint." If you are interested in, or affected by, the future of higher education in this country, this is one you definitely need to add to your personal collection.

*Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.*