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My Valuable, Cheap College Degree

By ARTHUR C. BROOKS

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MUCH is being written about the preposterously high cost of college. The median inflation-adjusted household income fell by **7 percent** between 2006 and 2011, while the average real tuition at public four-year colleges increased over that period by over **18 percent**. Meanwhile, the average tuition for just one year at a four-year private university in 2011 was almost **\$33,000**, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. College tuition has **increased** at twice the rate of health care costs over the past 25 years.

Ballooning student loan debt, an impending college bubble, and a return on the bachelor's degree that is **flat** or **falling**: all these things scream out for entrepreneurial solutions.

One idea gaining currency is the \$10,000 college degree — the so-called 10K-B.A. — which apparently was inspired by a **challenge** to educators from Bill Gates, and has recently led to **efforts** to make it a reality by governors in Texas, Florida and Wisconsin, as well as by a state assemblyman in California.

Most 10K-B.A. proposals rethink the costliest part of higher education — the traditional classroom teaching. Predictably, this means a reliance on online and distance-learning alternatives. And just as predictably, this has stimulated antibodies to unconventional modes of learning. Some critics see it as an invitation to charlatans and diploma mills. Even supporters often suggest that this is just an idea to give poor people marginally better life opportunities.

As Darryl Tippens, the provost of Pepperdine University, recently **put** it, “No PowerPoint presentation or elegant online lecture can make up for the surprise, the frisson, the spontaneous give-and-take of a spirited, open-ended dialogue with another person.” And what happens when you excise those frissons? In the **words** of the president of one university faculty association, “You’re going to be awarding degrees that are worthless to people.”

I disagree. I possess a 10K-B.A., which I got way back in 1994. And it was the most important intellectual and career move I ever made.

After high school, I spent an unedifying year in college. The year culminated in money problems, considerably less than a year of credits, and a joint decision with the school that I should pursue

my happiness elsewhere. Next came what my parents affectionately called my “gap decade,” during which time I made my living as a musician. By my late 20s I was ready to return to school. But I was living in Spain, had a thin bank account, and no desire to start my family with a mountain of student loans.

Fortunately, there was a solution — an institution called Thomas Edison State College in Trenton, N.J. This is a virtual college with no residence requirements. It banks credits acquired through inexpensive correspondence courses from any accredited college or university in America.

I took classes by mail from the University of Washington, the University of Wyoming, and other schools with the lowest-priced correspondence courses I could find. My degree required the same number of credits and type of classes that any student at a traditional university would take. I took the same exams (proctored at local libraries and graded by graduate students) as in-person students. But I never met a teacher, never sat in a classroom, and to this day have never laid eyes on my beloved alma mater.

And the whole degree, including the third-hand books and a sticker for the car, cost me about \$10,000 in today’s dollars.

Now living back in the United States, I followed the 10K-B.A. with a 5K-M.A. at a local university while working full time, and then endured the standard penury of being a full-time doctoral fellow in a residential Ph.D. program. The final tally for a guy in his 30s supporting a family: three degrees, zero debt.

Did I earn a worthless degree? Hardly. My undergraduate years may have been bereft of frissons, but I wound up with a career as a tenured professor at Syracuse University, a traditional university. I am now the president of a Washington research organization.

Not surprisingly, my college experience has occasionally been the target of ridicule. It is true that I am no Harvard Man. But I can say with full confidence that my 10K-B.A. is what made higher education possible for me, and it changed the course of my life. More people should have this opportunity, in a society that is suffering from falling economic and social mobility.

The 10K-B.A. is exactly the kind of innovation we would expect in an industry that is showing every indication of a bubble that is about to burst, as Thomas K. Lindsay of the Texas Public Policy Foundation [shows](#) in a new report titled, “Anatomy of a Revolution? The Rise of the \$10,000 Bachelor’s Degree.” When tuition skyrockets and returns on education stagnate, we can expect a flight to value, especially by people who can least afford to ride the bubble, and who have no choice but to make a cost-effective college investment.

In the end, however, the case for the 10K-B.A. is primarily moral, not financial. The entrepreneurs who see a way for millions to go to college affordably are the ones who understand the American dream. That dream is the opportunity to build a life through earned success. That starts with education.

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