



## ‘Alternative Universities’

Author discusses his new book on "speculative" alternatives for higher education.

By [Scott Jaschik](#)

March 12, 2019



What if every college student had to major in three subjects, unrelated to one another? What if colleges built degrees around a series of global experiences? These are among the speculative considerations of *Alternative Universities: Speculative Design for Innovation in Higher Education* (Johns Hopkins University Press). The author of the book, David J. Staley, sets forth a series of possible models for higher education, not restricting himself to those immediately possible or practical. Staley, director of the Humanities Institute and an associate professor of history at Ohio State University, sees

lessons for higher education in these various speculations. Via email, Staley answered questions about his book.

**Q: Many people in higher education look at the MOOC hype of a few years ago and think that most predictions of radical change in academe are just that -- hype. Do you think higher ed could in fact change in more dramatic ways than it has in the past?**

**A:** I do, yes, but not necessarily at the level of every specific individual institution. There have been several historical moments when radically new ideas of the university were introduced. The land-grants, the German research university, the community college, [Black Mountain College](#). That said, it has been historically difficult for any single institution to change and transform into something radically different. Usually such a radical institution must be built from scratch. When the idea of the research university was introduced into the United States after the Civil War, most were developed as new institutions, such as Johns Hopkins University and the University of Chicago. A very few -- like the colonial colleges, Harvard and Yale [Universities] -- transformed themselves into research universities, but these were the exceptions rather than the rule. Those institutions that do transform tend to change into pre-existing forms of the university, as when a commuter campus transforms into a research university with a Division I football program. This is not innovation as much as changing to emulate another institution. Even this kind of transformation is quite difficult to achieve.

I think that part of the reason why it is difficult to radically innovate is that many institutions are risk averse, meaning that they do not wish to risk deviating from the norm. Each has the same offerings, each has the same goals, and their mission statements read very much the same. The expectations for accreditation and other kinds of regulation means that it is

difficult for institutions to deviate from expected forms, leading to a kind of standardization of higher education. There are many challenges facing higher education today, and I don't mean to diminish the problems of adjunctification, student debt loads, access and affordability. But I do think that lack of differentiation is an affliction for many colleges and universities. Indeed, higher education is quickly become commoditized, meaning that institutions appear so similar to each other that they can only compete on price. In such an environment, innovation that seeks to create a radical new form of the university appears risky and quixotic.

**Q: What led you to go with the thought experiments of "speculative design" and come up with truly radical ideas for change?**

**A:** A number of sources. I have spent a portion of my professional life working in strategic foresight and have worked with organizations in diverse industries on identifying and considering the implications of various future trends, especially for purposes of strategic planning. About a decade ago, I started to turn my attention toward the future of higher education, and looking especially at the trends that would impact colleges and universities. Here at Ohio State, I convened a group of faculty and graduate students into a working group on the future of the university, and *Alternative Universities* benefited greatly from the insights of these colleagues.

I've also developed a fascination with the biographies of founders of new, innovative universities, such as John Andrew Rice at Black Mountain, Abraham Flexner and the Institute for Advanced Study, even John Spering, the founder of the University of Phoenix. I wondered what a Rice or Flexner would be imagining today if they had the opportunity to create a new university.

I've also been influenced by the work of the philosopher of higher education Ronald Barnett. Barnett has written that our ideas about innovation in higher education --- about what the university can become -- are "hopelessly impoverished," that our ideas are too limited and unimaginative. Today's innovators can only imagine a "technological university" or a market-driven university. He has challenged university leaders to expand their imaginations, to explore a wide range of ideas about the future university, and I have taken up his challenge. What we need to practice today is the audacity of imagination about what universities can become.

**Q: Could you describe why one or two of your designs are your personal favorites?**

**A:** "Interface University" is, I think, the most necessary and pressing organizational form of the future university. This scenario is based on how I believe the ubiquitous growth of artificial intelligence will impact higher education. While there is a credible scenario that AI will eliminate a wide swath of jobs and professions, I think it more likely that AI will augment human intelligence, and that in fact we will find ourselves partnering with/cooperating with AI to engage in a range of cognitive tasks. Interface University would be the institution where human and artificial intelligence learns to think together, to achieve the state of interface. Interface University would be the institution that generates the knowledge produced by the interaction and human and artificial intelligence. Joseph Aoun is one university leader who has been [thinking about these issues](#).

I also rather like the idea of "Polymath University." In this model, as a condition for graduation, students must major in three disparate disciplines. So, a student could not major in history, English and philosophy, or accounting, finance and business administration. Instead, a student would be

required to major in, say, philosophy, sociology and finance, or accounting, history and design. There is some interesting literature on students who double major in such nonadjacent subjects, and the kinds of creative, innovative thinkers they become. A student who triple majors in widely divergent subjects would develop a supple and complex mind.

**Q: If a president or dean reads your book and thinks, "Some great ideas, but not anything I could do here," are there ways to apply some of your ideas without turning the entire institution into one of your models? Is there an example you might offer?**

**A:** In 1927, Alexander Meiklejohn was invited to the University of Wisconsin to create and lead the Experimental College, a Great Books college that operated within U of W. Like my alternative universities, the experimental college began as a design written by Meiklejohn that he then turned into a working model within an existing institution. Many colleges initiated laboratory schools modeled after John Dewey's at Chicago. Today a university might also develop a "laboratory university." An existing institution could organize smaller versions of the universities I propose, maybe with only 100 students and a small group of faculty. Many universities today have built technology commercialization incubators near their campuses, where faculty ideas are nurtured and brought together with venture capital and turned into businesses. I can envision an enterprising university establishing an incubator for innovative universities. This would be an institute that would research and develop ideas for innovative academic forms like my alternative universities. Then selected models would be identified to be constructed as working models. Say, for instance, that such an institute were to build Interface University as a working model. A smaller version of this alternative university would be established; the incubator would then assign faculty and would then begin to attract students. If the model proves successful, the experimental

college might grow in size, perhaps even reaching the stage where this university-as-start-up is spun off into its own separate entity. Universities themselves could establish incubators for innovative universities.

Allison Dulin Salisbury and Terah Crews [describe the kinds of university incubators I have in mind as “moon-shot labs.”](#) “This kind of approach requires visionary leadership, both from the institution’s president and from the person leading the innovation lab,” they write.

“It also requires a high tolerance for risk and patience to wait an extended period to see returns on investment and impact. You will both need to be comfortable with ideas that look very different from business as usual and be willing to invest substantial resources without knowing exactly where it will lead.”

Some universities are establishing academic innovation labs, but this isn’t exactly what I am imagining, as these tend to be centers that implement incremental changes, usually around pedagogy or new program development. The idea of a university incubator would be mission level, creating new forms of the university.

**Q: Are there colleges today that you think are particularly adept at radical innovation? Which ones and why?**

**A:** I think that Western Governors University is such a radical innovation. WGU is based on a competency-based model, meaning that students work at their own pace under faculty guidance. The U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Inspector General found that WGU did not meet federal requirements for the level of interaction between faculty members and students. In other words, the very model that makes WGU distinctive and innovate ran afoul of

federal guidelines and regulations. [The Education Department has subsequently reversed those findings.] But this episode again points to the challenges with trying to enact radical innovation in higher education. Southern New Hampshire University's College for America is an example of an experimental college developed within an existing institution. And although they do not explore mission-level innovation, [the Red House at Georgetown University](#) is innovating around curricula and degree programs, and is an excellent example of a campus innovation lab.

[https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/03/12/author-discusses-his-new-book-speculating-alternative-models-higher-education?utm\\_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm\\_campaign=a431fd9ef3-DNU\\_2019\\_COPY\\_01&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_1fcbc04421-a431fd9ef3-198467257&mc\\_cid=a431fd9ef3&mc\\_eid=0c2028f1a2](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/03/12/author-discusses-his-new-book-speculating-alternative-models-higher-education?utm_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm_campaign=a431fd9ef3-DNU_2019_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1fcbc04421-a431fd9ef3-198467257&mc_cid=a431fd9ef3&mc_eid=0c2028f1a2)