

Reading Passage 2

You should spend about 20 minutes on **Questions 14-26**, which are based on **Reading Passage 2**.

How higher education dies

Maybe higher education has reached its peak. Not the Harvards and Yales of the world, but the institutions that make up the rest of the industry—the regional public schools who saw decades of growth and are now facing major budget cuts and the smaller, less-selective private colleges that have exorbitant sticker prices while the number of students enrolling in them declines.

Higher ed is often described as a bubble—and much like the housing market in 2008, the thought goes, it will ultimately burst. But what if it's less of a sudden pop and more of a long, slow slide, and we are already on the way down?

Bryan Alexander started grappling with the idea of “peak higher education” in 2013—inspired by the notion of “peak car,” “peak oil,” and other so-called “peaks.” At the time, there were signs that the industry was already struggling. The number of students enrolled in higher education had dropped by a little over 450,000 after years of booming growth, the proportion of part-time faculty—more commonly referred to as adjuncts—had steadily become a more significant part of the professorship, and there was a general skepticism about the skyrocketing costs of college and concerns over whether a degree was worth it. Taken individually, he said, each sign was troubling enough. But when looked at together, they represented the outlines of a bleak future for higher education. Alexander, a self-described higher-education futurist and a former English professor, came to the conclusion that after nearly a half century of growth, higher education might be as big as it could get. It would, he reasoned, only get smaller from there.

Now, five years on, he says the “depressing” hypothesis is playing out. In the spring of 2013, there were 19,105,651 students enrolled in higher ed; this spring, there were 17,839,330, according to recently released data from the National Center for Education Statistics. That represents a roughly 7-percent decrease—and is driven largely by declining enrollments in the for-profit and community-college sectors, as well as stagnant enrollments among four-year non-profit public and private institutions. And the trend of declining enrollment in higher education is likely to continue, he argues, for a couple of reasons, but most notably, a declining birth rate means that there will be fewer 18-year-olds entering academe, and there are fewer international and immigrant students to fill those seats.

Why is the dip in enrollment such a big deal? Well, quite plainly, the business model for a lot of colleges is dependent on enrollment. If enrollments decline, revenues decline, and colleges have less money for facilities, faculty, and programs. That creates a sort of death spiral in which colleges are getting rid of programs, which in turn makes it harder to attract students, and so on. For non-selective private liberal-arts colleges, this could

mean mergers or closures—something that's already happening in quite a few places, such as at Marylhurst University in Oregon, Wheelock College in Massachusetts, and St. Gregory's University in Oklahoma. And for other institutions, Alexander told me in a recent interview, it could mean a shifting of institutional priorities—particularly in the students they recruit and teach, moving away from a primary focus on 18-to-22-year-olds towards more adult learners, as administrators at the University of Memphis have done in Tennessee.

Declining enrollments could also mean the decline of research faculty, increased workloads, and more rapid adjunctification. And given how colleges have treated adjunct faculty, Alexander says, "it would be a humanitarian disaster"—one of higher education's own doing. "We've done it to ourselves with open eyes since the 1990s. And we know about it, it's kind of an open secret," he says. "The Research I universities keep pumping out Ph.D.s, and they haven't slowed down at all. And they know exactly what that means, you know, that the majority of these Ph.D.s are either going to leave academia or end up with horrible labor conditions."

It's not a difficult future to imagine—largely because most of it is already happening. Some institutions will be shielded from the decline—most obviously the major players and media darlings such as Ivy League institutions and major public institutions like the University of Texas at Austin. But most colleges will not be so fortunate, he says. They will either have to adapt or die out.

Perhaps this is just a blip driven by declines in the for-profit sector that will correct itself, or the consequence of a growing economy in which more people choose jobs over school. More optimistically, maybe higher education as an enterprise finds a way out of this problem. State legislatures could reverse course and shift more funding to higher education. Maybe colleges will wind up taking a proactive approach and innovate their way out, shifting, as some have already, to serve more adult students alongside recent high-school graduates, and moving more of their coursework and programs online to serve a wider audience of students and reduce campus costs.

It's ironic, he says, that "we are living through the greatest time in history to be a learner," with the availability of so many high-quality materials online. But at the same time, the institutions most affiliated with knowledge and learning are facing crisis.

Questions 14 - 20

Do the following statements agree with the information in the text?

Write:

TRUE: if the statement agrees with the information

FALSE: if the statement contradicts the information

NOT GIVEN: if there is no information on this

14. Many educational institutions, such as regional public schools and less selective private colleges, are experiencing decreases in enrolments due to high tuition fees.
15. According to Bryan Alexander, the year 2013 marked the end of a long period of development in the higher education industry.
16. The rising significance of part-time faculty showed that higher education was facing a crisis.
17. The overall decline in enrolments in higher education was the main reason why there was widespread doubt about the value of university degrees.
18. Bryan claimed that although there might be room for development, the higher education industry would only shrink.
19. The total number of students who pursued higher education fell by approximately 7% in half a decade.
20. Bryan argues that the decline in higher education enrollments is associated with a falling birth rate and can be dealt with by increasing the number of overseas students.