

# Class Matters

*Change.edu: Rebooting for the New Talent Economy*

by Andrew S. Rosen

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All good executives know that markets aren't found in nature—people aren't born wanting a Mercedes or the stuff they buy at Walmart. Desire and demand must be created and nurtured in the media, through government lobbying, and with big advertising budgets. And of course the best advertising is always that which doesn't seem like advertising at all.

Such is the case with Andrew S. Rosen's book, *Change.edu: Rebooting for the new talent economy* and the echo chamber of reviews and discussion surrounding it, including a *Washington Post* puff piece by Bill Gates, Jr. The book is a well-written but pretty orthodox manifestation of the well-funded web of foundations, think tanks, and task forces whose job it is to demonize public colleges and universities and expand the for-profit higher education market. But it masquerades as a judicious discussion of the current moribund state of higher education and a bold prediction of a transformed future where the sound management practices of for-profit education companies like Kaplan, Phoenix, and Strayer have liberated students from the tyranny of Harvard, Berkeley, and Macomb Community College.

Mr. Rosen is the chairman and CEO of Kaplan, Inc., one of the world's largest for-profit education companies, and a graduate of Duke and Yale universities. In his book he describes what he sees as problems with such traditional universities, but fortunately he seems to have overcome the limitations of the stodgy institutions he attended with his ability to write glib pseudo-scholarly prose intact. *Change.edu* weaves a series of anecdotes and carefully selected data into a compelling populist narrative of higher education in which today's for-profit edu-com-

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panies stand in the tradition of the Morrill Land Grant Act in 1862 and the G.I. Bill in the mid-20th century, bringing education to the masses and raising the hackles of the hidebound education establishment. In Rosen's view, for-profit education companies, armed with the shiniest new management strategies and education technology innovations, have arrived just in time to increase U.S. educational attainment, rescue the new talent economy and, most nobly, help the poor and working classes get a no-nonsense grip on their own bootstraps while at the same time saving them from the snotty professors and administrators who look down their noses from the ivory tower.

The sides and the arguments in the debates about faculty productivity, assessment, online learning, the knowledge economy, and students-as-customers are so familiar by now that Rosen is able to spend a fair amount of the book anticipating and responding to objections to his positions. To be fair, while many of his characterizations of the other side are the well-polished caricatures created by the educational industrial complex, when Rosen actually gets down to cases, some of his critiques of traditional academic arrangements are trenchant. Within the context he deftly creates, his points about things like access and graduation rates make sense. But much more interesting than his specific arguments are the ways those arguments are framed. The most revealing parts of *Change.edu* are the things it takes for granted and the things it leaves out.

Perhaps the scariest thing that the book takes for granted is the current deplorable rate of state funding for public higher education. Rosen treats our wildly regressive tax policies and ever-declining public funds as though they are ineluctable facts rather than political and moral choices. And while he points out that state subsidized university education is primarily a 20th-century phenomenon, he fails to mention how successful it was or how much it has been gutted in the last 40 years. The tremendous growth of U.S. democracy, industry, and class mobility during what we have come to call the "American Century" was fueled by a system that allowed large numbers of regular people to go to college in places like Berkeley, Austin, Charlottesville, Madison, and Seattle and get access to the same world class curriculum, faculty, and facilities that rich kids in the Ivy League took for granted.

Since the mid-1970s, public support for public universities has steadily eroded (along with a lot of the rest of our public infrastructure), which has led to the problems that Rosen describes as "Harvard Envy" and "Club College." As state support has gone down, tuition has necessarily had to go up, leading public universities to behave more like private universities by trying to attract affluent students with both expensive academic prestige (Harvard Envy) and well-equipped rec centers and fancy dorms (Club College). Rosen chalks up what he sees as the transmogrification of public universities into academically snobby resorts to the venal attitudes of university faculty and administrators, making no mention of the last four decades of budget and policy choices. He also fails to point out the role that those same budget and policy choices have played in creating the market

opportunity for edu-companies like his, or the role that for-profit education lobbyists played in those choices.

Another naturalized assumption that *Change.edu* is built on but about which Rosen says next to nothing is the notion that higher education should serve strictly utilitarian and vocational ends. To be fair, Rosen certainly isn't alone in this assumption. These days it's a pretty quixotic quest to go looking for a state legislator or a business leader or even a college administrator who will give you anything but lip service when you suggest that higher education should do more than train employees in the categories and quantities that businesses need. As Rosen puts it in an interview: "a liberal arts education is expensive and time consuming, and there are many people for whom the best education may be a more practical, directed program that provides specific, career-oriented skills." And here is where the slip beneath the working-class-hero dress begins to show. Replacing state subsidized public universities with for-profit "universities" doesn't just change the funding model, it fundamentally changes the nature of the education. In Rosen's "new talent economy," the liberal arts education that Thomas Jefferson imagined as the underpinning of a democratic society is available only to people with money and time, while everybody else gets stripped down job training at prices that pad the Kaplan profit margin.

And it is on the subject of profit that Rosen is at his most disingenuous. With a sunniness that would make Horatio Alger blush, Rosen dismisses the recruiting and loan abuses that spawned congressional hearings as the work of a couple of bad actors and goes on to tell us that the profit motive actually forces private sector colleges to do everything possible to meet the needs of their customers (kind of the way, one presumes, that health insurance providers and cable TV companies work so hard to serve their customers so well). Rosen tells us that "[a]n attack on profit-seeking institutions is an ironic one" when "[t]he food we eat" is "produced by for-profit companies" and "most Americans are born in private-sector hospitals." What is ironic is that Rosen can keep a straight face as he cites the privatization of food and health care as a brief for the privatization of education. This commodification of basic human needs has created a world of abundance where people starve, a world where a person's pain can be exploited for profit.

Privatizing education is producing the same hierarchies that the privatization of health care did a generation ago. It is eliminating one of the few remaining checks on capitalist exploitation and immiseration. As publicly funded public universities and colleges continue to disappear, the wealthy continue to have access to the best education in the world, while everyone else gets something that continues to fall further and further below the standards of most other industrialized countries in the world. When all of their faux-populist rhetorical smoke clears, we can see that education profiteers like Andrew Rosen understand this all too well. It's why they keep sending their kids to the same legitimate universities they went to. [nea](#)

