

# How Technology Can Save Education

**Author Glenn Harlan Reynolds discusses how the information age could benefit American schools.**

By [Michael Morella](#) March 6, 2014 |

About 7 in 10 recent college graduates carry student loan debt, with the average alum owing close to \$30,000. In “The New School: How the Information Age Will Save American Education From Itself,” Glenn Harlan Reynolds discusses the “disturbing” impact of this rising debt, dated school models and other challenges facing K-12 and higher education, as well as how to address them. Reynolds, a professor of law at the University of Tennessee and founder of [Instapundit.com](#), recently spoke with U.S. News about how technology might have a transformative impact and what parents and student can do. Excerpts:



## **What’s most alarming about the U.S. education system?**

The problem from K-12 all the way to graduate school is that every year things cost more, but the performance remains stagnant or even gets worse. That’s pretty obviously unsustainable. But I think the thing that struck me the most is how many people are having their lives really burdened by student loan debt. The formula is generally that you shouldn’t owe more in loan debt than your first-year salary when you are out of school. I cite in the book a Federal Reserve study that said that student loan debt is really dampening the rate at which people in their 20s and 30s get married and buy houses and buy cars – do all the stuff that we generally rely on that generation to do to keep the economy going.

## **What are the best ways to fix the problems?**

I don’t think there is a big answer. I think there are probably a lot of smaller answers that are different for different situations. I think the most exciting thing that’s going on right now is not so much any particular experiment, but just the fact that we’re seeing the kind of experimentation that we haven’t really seen in 100 years. I like the online stuff you’re seeing from some of the big university MOOCs [massive open online courses]. For example, one that strikes me as really interesting is Georgia Tech’s online master’s in computer science. You get a master’s degree that’s as good as any Georgia Tech degree, and it costs [about] \$7,000. The important thing is that people are trying new things. Technology isn’t some

sort of magic solution, but what it does do is let you try a lot of different approaches that wouldn't have been practical without it.

### **On the K-12 front, what are your thoughts on the Common Core State Standards?**

It's really hard to say. Opposition seems to transcend ideologies that we have – and I see this even on my own Facebook Timeline – [with] people from the left and people from the right both not liking Common Core oddly often for a lot of the same reasons. On a larger scale, I think Common Core sort of goes in the wrong direction. I think the future of education is going to be diversity, and I think Common Core seems to be built more around an idea of uniformity. What I would rather see, honestly, is less emphasis on uniformity in curricula and more emphasis on certifications of skills and abilities and such on the back end when people graduate.

### **How should the education community address all of these challenges?**

Cutting costs is probably easier than improving the quality of education, although they're both important. One suggestion I make is to put hard limits on the ratio of administrators to teaching faculty at schools because one of the trends over the last several decades has been that teaching faculty have actually stayed fairly flat while administrators have grown substantially in number and expense. One thing, in fact, that U.S. News could do: In its rankings, I think it should reward schools with more faculty in relation to the administrators. There's a fair amount of research that says that the biggest single reason for tuition increases is administrative bloat, and I think that needs to be brought under control.

### **What should parents and students do?**

My advice to people is fundamentally just don't go into debt, or at least don't go into very much debt. Even if you think that you're in a major like industrial engineering, say, where your starting salary could be \$100,000 when you graduate ... it may be that, in fact, the job market will change and industrial engineering won't turn out to be such a good deal in four or five years as it looks now. You'll still be stuck with the debt. It may be that you'll get halfway through the program and you'll flunk out. You'll still have that student debt. All kinds of things can go wrong, but the constant in the debt is it stays, and I think people just underestimate the burden that that represents on their lives.

### **What's the alternative strategy?**

You want to find a way to get what you need to get as inexpensively as possible. Look at cheaper state university programs. Also things like doing your first two years at community college or doing some stuff online – all of that matters. Ultimately you just have to pay a lot more attention to cost than people traditionally have.