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## Book Review

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# Book Review

McCluskey, F. B., & Winter, M. L. (2012).

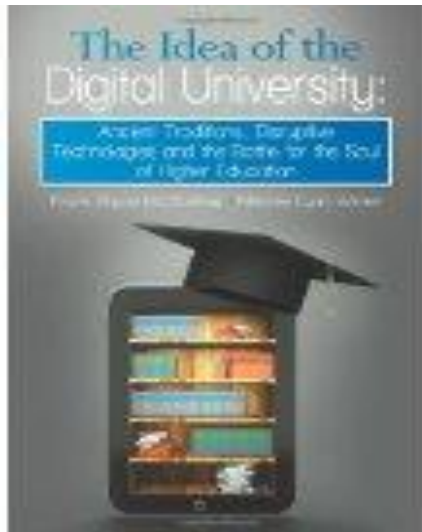
*The idea of the digital university:*

*Ancient traditions, disruptive technologies, and the battle for the soul of higher education.* Washington, DC: Westphalia Press. 230 pages.

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## Introduction



Running across *The Idea of the Digital University: Ancient Traditions, Disruptive Technologies, and the Battle for the Soul of Higher Education* by F. F. McCluskey and M. L. Winter (2012) was a happy accident. Excerpts from the book were quoted by the dean at one of our college meetings and their messages resonated with me almost instantaneously. I ordered the book and found its content particularly relevant to my craft as a university professor.

Most of my educational experiences, until very recently, have been tied to the traditional university. I still retain a fair amount of skepticism about the quality of distance education and often feel reluctant to teach fully online courses. On the other hand, I am acutely aware of the current realities marked by the advancements in new technologies—the “digital revolution”—and their subsequent effects on our lives. McCluskey and Winter offer an in-depth analysis of the effects of the digital revolution on higher education at the backdrop of the debate around “what it means to be an institution of higher learning” (p. 1). Every aspect of *The Idea of the Digital University* reflects the changes that our institution has been going through for the past few years, for example, on-going restructuring and adjustment to new and more efficient digital ways of storing and processing information and conducting daily business, and closing failing programs and curtailing full-time staff. Additionally, we are developing more courses with online and blended learning modalities in order to keep up with a highly competitive technology-driven market, remain financially viable, and meet the needs of modern students. To some, the digitization of university affairs may seem like a sign of crisis. McCluskey and Winter argue to the contrary:

We posit that there is not a crisis in higher education [...]. The patient here is not going to die, but the python is half-way through the process of shedding its skin [...]. For those of us who have paid attention to the digital revolution, what has happened in the past quarter

century should be not be unexpected or a surprise. The university will not die. But something new has been born. (pp. 31-32)

Thus, McCluskey and Winter herald the birth of a new, “digital” university.

### ***The Idea of the Digital University: Issues in Focus***

Frank McCluskey and Melanie Winter have dedicated over 30 years each to higher education as scholars, practitioners, and leaders. Stemming from their extensive experience and genuine concerns for the current state of higher education is this 230-page book that speaks to broad audiences of students, faculty, staff, and administrators at for- and non-profit institutions of higher learning. The content of the book is aptly organized into five parts and eighteen chapters and makes for an easy-to-follow read.

Within a relatively limited space, the authors accomplish a great deal. They first provide an extensive historic overview of the changing trends in higher education (Parts I and II). They also capture the essence of a variety of issues confronting today’s colleges and universities: the digital age and its impact on institutional accreditation, academic freedom, and governance (Part III); ways in which technologies replace and impact data processing and analysis in relation to student learning; the changes in the registrar’s work and roles and duties of librarians that have been “reoriented” due to the digital revolution (Part IV); and the vision, curriculum, and economics of higher education affected by the digital revolution at non-profit and for-profit institutions (Part V).

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From the onset, McCluskey and Winter propose a “simple” thesis: “The digital university is a fundamentally different institution from the traditional university” (p. 3). The birth of this “new kind” of institution is due to the “digital revolution” defined by the authors as a “second Industrial Revolution, where the increasing power and intelligence of digital technologies have incurred unprecedented influences, affecting all sectors of business and society” (p. 2).

The advent of the digital revolution can be marked by the development of the transistor at Bell Labs in 1947 and the ensuing “dropping cost and increasing deployment of microchips across all sectors of society” (p. 18). McCluskey and Winter state:

The digital revolution has touched and transformed every aspect of human experience. It has changed the way we travel, keep track of our children, keep our receipts, take pictures, date, marry, and stay in touch with old friends. The digital revolution has wreaked havoc on almost all institutions in our society [...]. It has impacted the post office, the local library, the local bookstore, and countless other institutions and industries. (p. 23)

To juxtapose the notion of the digital university and its traditional counterpart, McCluskey and Winter take us back in time to 19<sup>th</sup> century England, where the debate on the very nature of

higher education was raging between Cardinal Newman's (1801-1890) position on education for its own sake and its leading Utilitarian opponents Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). In fact, McCluskey and Winter symbolically fashion the title of their book after Cardinal Newman's book entitled *The Idea of the University*, which, according to the authors, "lays out some of the key concepts that still animate today's discourse about higher education" (p. 4).

Cardinal Newman believed that education for its own sake results in a citizen who is also a "critical thinker, ethical actor, and someone who [understands] science and [has] a certain store of classical cultural ideas" (p. 4). McCluskey and Winter claim that Cardinal Newman's ideas still remain influential in contemporary higher educational discourse, and that the modern university still retains its essential nature, or "heart": "While much has changed in universities in recent decades, there are elements that need to remain the same for the university to maintain its 'heart'" (p. 3). This argument becomes a common thread in the debates and polemic over numerous issues discussed in the book.

Even though this book appeals to broad audiences and not all of its content may be of interest to each and every reader, it is hard not to follow it chapter by chapter precisely because of the intensity of narration and the text elicits.

present a compelling and the effects of the digital focus of the chapter is on sciences and humanities, professorship, the role of core curriculum, or

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the overall curiosity that McCluskey and Winter informative account of revolution, whether the the debate between the decentralization of the registrars and librarians, academic freedom and

faculty governance. Each chapter skillfully encapsulates the essence of the issues discussed and provokes the reader's thinking through elaborate arguments underlying the digitization of higher education, which altogether makes the authors' points of view hard to challenge.

Another common thread in McCluskey and Winter's discussions on the effects of the digital revolution in higher education is its double-sword nature: "While the digital revolution has devastated the university, at the same time, it has opened up new possibilities that we could only dream of" (p. 215). The possibilities that the authors are referring to are "new ways of preparing students" and the "web and other digital tools" that can "give us the power to educate more citizens in a more economical way" (p. 201). As McCluskey and Winter conclude, "What has been seen as a crisis in higher education can well be looked at as the golden dawn of a new era" (p. 201).

An important consideration of McCluskey and Winter's idea of the digital university is that one size does not fit all. The authors emphasize that the university has never been and never will be a "monolithic institution driven by a single vision" (p. 138). Instead, it is the place where different groups pursue different goals. The authors take a side with Clark Kerr, former president of the University of California, who defined the modern institution of higher learning as "multiversity," the place that allows us to "make sense of all of the various activities going on in and around [it]" (p. 138).

It is worth noting that, throughout the text, McCluskey and Winter portray the consequences of the digital revolution for higher education in a relatively balanced way by sharing both their criticism of the digital revolution as well as its wholesale effects:

The digital revolution has wreaked havoc on the university. The university made its business on the storage, transmission, and creation of information. The digital revolution changed how information is stored, transmitted, and created. In some ways, it cheapened what was once mysterious. In another way, it democratized the ability to access information. The digital revolution has thrown people out of work, displaced families, and made whole neighborhoods and cities like Detroit into ghost towns. It has also given us new tools to measure what was once mysterious. (p. 228)

The authors' arguments, no matter how balanced and well supported, will undoubtedly find their ardent opponents. At times, McCluskey and Winter sound too prescriptive and perhaps overly certain in expressing their points of view. Overall, I find their ideas in support of the digital university as a new kind of modern institution of higher learning that maintains the essences of the traditional university both persuasive and well grounded in contemporary realities. Their advocacy for the power of faculty is especially appealing to me. McCluskey and Winter position faculty as “the heart and soul” of the digital university.

Finally, the authors bring us back to a perennial debate on the nature of higher education and conclude that the two sides of it—education for its own sake and its pragmatic purpose of career preparation—can be peacefully reconciled within the walls of a new digital university: “We can do both at the same time. An educated citizen today has an understanding of clear thinking, values, the scientific method and the tools needed to succeed in the digital age” (p. 219).

### Conclusion

Out of a hundred books that I keep on the shelves, there are only a few that I am compelled to re-read from time to time. *The Idea of the Digital University* by McCluskey and Winter is one of them. Beyond the fact that the book invigorates my intellectual curiosity, it grounds me in the current realities that signal inevitable changes in the essence and role of higher education. It also makes me more aware of my nostalgic efforts to cling to the practices of the traditional university, thereby consciously or unconsciously resisting change.

Digital revolution is the fact of the day. As the authors state, “We cannot fight it, but we can adapt to it and preserve what is noble and good in our colleges and universities” (p. 230). Put differently, we need both “high-tech” and “high-touch.” To echo McCluskey and Winter, I contend that “the digital university should retain the heart of a traditional university. The great texts are still great. The changing populations of our colleges have also brought with them new tastes, new literature, and new values. There is room for both in the digital university” (p. 228).

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## References

McCluskey, F. B., & Winter, M. L. (2012). *The idea of digital university: Ancient traditions, disruptive technologies, and the battle for the soul of higher education*. Washington, DC: Westphalia Press.