

Episode #49: Fast, Cheap and Out of Control: Selling Short Cuts in American Education

Americans are big believers in the power of education. But they are also a national of hustlers. Have You Heard explores the intersection of the two with Bob Hampel, author of *Fast and Curious: a History of Short Cuts in American Education*.

Jennifer Berkshire: Welcome to Have you Heard. I'm Jennifer Berkshire.

Jack Schneider: And I'm Jack Schneider.

Berkshire: And Jack, our episode today begins with a stroll down memory lane.

Schneider: Are we going back to our first podcast together, Jennifer?

Berkshire: No, we're going back to the year in 1983.

Schneider: Oh - we're going to talk about when I learned to ride a bike.

Berkshire: Well, not exactly. Here, why don't I set the stage with a little period specific music.

[One of Jennifer's fave songs from the 80's]

Berkshire: So as you can hear, we're back in the eighties and a high school student named Jenny Berkshire is working on an essay about *The Great Gatsby*. And in her essay, the symbol of the green lantern figures very prominently. Do you know why?

Schneider: You know, I would've been about three years old at this time. And so the green lantern would have only meant comic books to me at the time. I was a very precocious comic book reader.

Berkshire: Well, Jenny, like almost all of the students in her high school English class put great emphasis on the green lantern because it was mentioned in the Cliff Notes.

Schneider: This is something that I would have become familiar with about 10 years later— the best way to figure out what the symbols and metaphors are in any classic work of literature being taught in America's schools.

Berkshire: Well, when Jenny went to White Oaks Mall to the Hallmark Store to pick up her Cliff Notes for the *Great Gatsby*, she had no idea that she was participating in a great American tradition, which would be the search for shortcuts in education.

Schneider: And this would be what Bob Hampel would refer to as a shorter and easier cut rather than the shorter and harder where you're simply doing more in less time because I'm

guessing that young Jenny was not speed reading through *The Great Gatsby* and doing Cliff Notes on top of that. You're smiling the smile of the guilty right now. Nobody can see this, but I can.

Berkshire: That is true. And as Jack just indicated our guest today is Bob Hampel. He's the author of *Fast and Furious: a History of Shortcuts in American Education*, and he'll be joining us in a short minute. But Jack, when I tell people that my co-host for this podcast isn't education historian, I typically get a response like this" [yawning sound]. That was a yawn.

Schneider: Oh, I thought maybe it was the far away sound of joy and wonderment.

Berkshire: Well, this book by Bob Hampel, I think, makes the best case that I've ever seen that education history turns out to be absolutely essential in understanding what makes this country tick.

Schneider: Yeah. Bob's an educational historian at the University of Delaware and he's done some very cool work over the years in terms of looking at the roots and origins of what may seem entirely normal, that this in fact is one of the core purposes of history is to help us understand the water that we swim in and to understand that things were not always this way and didn't have to turn out this way.

Berkshire: Well, what we're going to learn is that the tradition of cashing in on the aspirations of Americans and their desire to to get a credential and to learn something with perhaps slightly less effort than it actually takes, goes back really far. In fact, what's so amazing about Bob's book is it you won't believe that he's talking about fraud and sort of 'edvertising,' as we've talked about before, that dates back a century plus. You'll think he's talking about today.

Schneider: Yeah. Without mentioning badges or I'm not sure that we'll talk about online learning, Bob can talk the same critique that people are making currently and draw on examples that, as you said, are in many cases a century old, that we've been here before in many senses.

Berkshire: Well, we've got Bob Hampel standing by, but first, how about just a little more of that great music from the eighties?

[More great music from the 80's]

Berkshire: Dr. Hampel: Welcome to Have You Heard. Your book *Fast and Curious* chronicles the long search for shortcuts in American education and the rich tradition of cashing in on that search. It's a fast and fascinating read and it really gets to something essential about America: how often it is that our aspirational natures and our hucksterist natures intersect.

Bob Hampel: Several people have told me that. They said that shortcuts are uniquely American, and if I had another 10 years I would study them around the world. But we do seem to see education as an investment where we want a good deal and if we can get it for less effort and time, well that's great.

Berkshire: I want to start where the book starts with correspondence schools. By the 19 20's, half a million students were signing up each year and just like we see today, these schools really took off during a time of great technological change. I told Jack at the start of the show that I think your book really makes the best case I've seen for why education history is so important. Basically, people who don't know their education history are condemned to repeat it, although perhaps make a little more money the second time around.

Hampel: That's a great point. You know, with distance education today, technology is obviously central and you can turn on your laptop and start studying. Well in the late 19th century with better and better postal service and free delivery in rural areas, people suddenly said, 'we have access now through the mail to what before was out of reach.' Of course, a well known example. this is the Sears Roebuck catalog that sold everything under the sun. Well correspondence. schools made the same pitch, that if you're willing to spend a few dollars, you can get lessons in the mail and they proved enormously popular at a time when high school and college enrollments were rising.

So for people who, for whatever reason, had dropped out, they now sensed that they could get back in, that if others were going to college, well maybe they couldn't quit their job to study, but they could sign up for some correspondence courses and often it was in hopes of finding a white collar job after working as a blue collar worker for many years. So it really played on people's ambition and most of the correspondence school courses were not about the liberal arts and great books, but were about career mobility, about getting ahead, which of course traditional education also emphasized. But the correspondence schools did it more incessantly and in fact, often they misrepresented the great things that could happen, but they knew that people wanted to get their hopes up and dream of a better life after taking a few correspondence courses.

Berkshire: Well you include some skeptical voices in your account. You know, the woman who wonders 'can I really learned to play the piano by mail?' 'Will my personality really become more magnetic?' And what's so interesting is that as the technology changes and people's aspirations begin to grow, that's where the real hucksterism comes in. And the parallels with today I thought were just were just astounding.

Hampel: It's so true. Frequently there was that fine line between enthusiasm for education and out and out misrepresentation, if not fraud. At the end of the chapter I mention briefly Trump University and the same promises that anyone who's ambitious can become a success very quickly. You know, there was a side of the correspondence schools that was amazingly democratic, that claimed that all you have to show is some motivation and ambition and

remarkable things can happen. And, you know, Trump called it innocent exaggeration, but you know, it often crossed the line into being misleading and distorting what it took to be successful.

Schneider: One of the things that we've talked about before on the show is how completely unregulated educational advertising is. That whereas you are limited in what you can say about, let's say pharmaceuticals or, you know, other things that you're advertising as products for sale, with education, you can make all sorts of a ludicrous promises. And it seems that, you know, there's a kind of story here about what happens to education when it is left to the free market.

We see the kinds of promises that are made and how clearly they diverge from the product that is delivered. And the promises become more and more oriented around people's station in life—their social standing, their economic productivity, that the fundamentals of their lives are going to be completely transformed—while you have the rewards being ramped up higher and higher, the work that is required is diminished more and more in these pitches. You know, all you need to do is take a six week correspondence course and you know, you'll double your pay. And I'm wondering if you see any story here about the need for regulation and for public governance in education given these pressures that lead to a kind of distorting of what many people think the mission of education is.

Hampel: What often happened was the government would only step in after there had been flagrant abuses. For example, the Federal Trade Commission tried hard to sanction fraudulent claims and misleading advertisements, but it usually was too little, too late. And many firms said, 'well, we'll just keep doing it. And if we get a slap on the wrist, well that's price we're willing to pay.' Sometimes the most effective criticism came not from the government, but from individuals, when say the famous journalist Jessica Mitford wrote a scathing expose of the famous Writer's School, and if it hadn't been for that article, they might have continued year after year with their hyperbolic advertisements and over-inflated claims.

Berkshire: One of the other parallels that so striking is that what we find out through the work of Jessica Mitford and others is that the students were ending up saddled with big debt because very few of them finished. And I thought that was really interesting. If you think about the debate that's happening right now about the DeVos Administration and the role that the feds will or will not play as far as providing oversight to the for-profit college sector and the kinds of claims they can make, basically they're saying 'too bad, so sad.'

Hampel: Exactly. Most of the correspondence schools had their students sign a legally binding contract to pay the entire tuition, even if they dropped out early on. Some students were able to get out of those contracts, but often they had borrowed the tuition from a bank and the banks often insisted that they repay. So there is a very strong parallel to student loans today and how difficult it is to escape years and years of repayment for something you barely used.

Schneider: Bob: one of the things that you talk about in the book is the fact that people see education oftentimes is something that does not necessarily possess intrinsic value, right? That,

as you just said, it's an investment and so they shop around for the best value. They're doing a kind of cost benefit analysis. I'm wondering if you can talk through at all how you think that this has shaped the K-12 system or higher education. You've got a lot of cases of shortcuts, but I'm wondering about just sort of macro trends in terms of the evolution of American education. How has this shopping for value had an impact?

Hampel: Well, certainly the importance of credentials over the last century has increased. That for various jobs, as we all know you, you absolutely must have a certain diploma and that matters more than how you got it or how much you remember of what you learned. So for some people it's the outcome that matters far more than the process. I think those of us in academia think the process should be critical, that it should be intrinsically satisfying, but for many people it's not. It's a means to an end and that's what they want.

Schneider: Hearing you talk about that reminds me of your section on Cliff Notes and in my show notes here, I've just got a question: "What do Cliff Notes teach us about America?" And then I, you know, I framed it in a bunch of different ways, but I kind of like that open-ended question, and I'm wondering if you'd be willing to take it on its face. What *do* Cliff Notes teach us about America?

Hampel: Well, it's a part of the book I I enjoyed very much and I was able to talk with the daughter and son-in-law of the founder of Cliff Notes who incidentally did not think that they should be a shortcut. He saw them as a study aid over and above reading the original works and I think in his mind it helped students understand how to write and talk about great literature. I mean it's one thing to read Macbeth, but it's another thing to know how to write a term paper about Macbeth and he thought he was giving students some of those skills.

We all know that a lot of students just decided not to read Macbeth and said, 'I'm just going to read the Cliff Notes, especially if my teacher is giving a short answer, multiple choice exam.' But I think for many students there was a sense that Cliff Notes were their ally, that this is somebody who understood what it meant to be a busy student who is struggling with literature and over time the Cliff Notes became a little more playful, a little wittier. This is true of Sparknotes and the most recent version of them called Shmoop—this sense that education doesn't have to be an ordeal. And I think that's what many of the short cutters tried to emphasize, that not only can education be the pursuit of a useful credential, but there are ways to make it a little more enjoyable rather than just a chore that they had to do.

Berkshire: We're talking to Bob Hampel, author of *Fast and Curious: a History of Shortcuts in American Education*. Desperate as I am to pivot away from the topic of Cliff Notes and how students did or did not use them, I want to take us back to the future. There are many parallels between the rise of the correspondence school industry and today's career education business, and this whole idea that workers are constantly having to recredential themselves, a process that they also have to pay for. Take us back to the height of what you call postal education.

Hampel: The largest school was the International Correspondent School based in Scranton, Pennsylvania, which at its peak signed up 100,000 people a year, offered dozens of courses to prepare you for very specific trades and vocations and they ranged all the way from white collar career such as accounting, which until the 1920's did not require college as a prerequisite to taking, say, a state licensing exam. Lots and lots of specific trades that were expanding—say if you wanted to learn how to be a construction manager, if you wanted to learn drafting—in other words, it was offering people some career mobility in the sectors of the economy that we're expanding rapidly. And those sold much better than courses in, say music, although those were popular. How to play an instrument, bodybuilding, I mean, Charles Atlas made a fortune with a correspondence school on physical fitness.

But specific careers had the biggest appeal. And again, this is often before there were thorough state licensing requirements for various occupations and careers. That really did restrict the market for some of the correspondence schools. Another example would be law. At one time there were several dozen schools that promised to get you ready for the state bar exam, but then by the 1920's and 1930's, most states had added the requirement that you had to have gone to law school and so it became harder and then impossible to take the bar exam after finishing a correspondence course.

Schneider: One of the things that comes to mind as you're talking about passing the bar exam for instance, or, you know, thinking about Cliff Notes and the connection there between the rise of Cliff Notes and the kinds of multiple choice tests that teachers were giving that Cliff Notes were really good at preparing you for, one of the things that comes to mind is the challenge of assessment, because our ability to assess students is pretty limited in many cases. Or our willingness to assess them is pretty limited. Our tests tend to focus on things other than what they actually know and can do that. There are all of these ingenious ways to sidestep actual learning in terms of passing whatever the relevant test is.

Hampel: Correspondence schools themselves struggled with this question of 'how do we assess what our students can do?' But they also knew that there was a market for helping students get ready to take tests. It's surprising in a way that correspondence schools did not try hard to coach students for the SAT and the ACT. That was one of sort of market that they did not try to exploit. But often they said, 'you know, the real talent is inside yourself and we're just going to help you develop your innate ability, that you don't need to go back for two or four years, or you don't need to take a test.'

And you know, often they had this very ambivalent view of traditional education that it was a waste of time: It was too expensive; students spent too much time in sports and partying. But they also had a certain respect for education. After all, they knew that many of their students regretted the fact that they had dropped out. And so they were trying hard to sort of play both sides of that, be a little critical of traditional education including exams, but also respectful toward toward education. For example, some correspondence schools would issue a diplomas, little pins, a yearbooks even.

Berkshire: I think that people who think competency based education is a trendy new concept will also be very surprised to learn that this is also a very old idea and you even had the same sort of debate about what people need to learn and what competency actually means, especially in a time of rapid technological change.

Hampel: In one chapter I talk about the University of Chicago which stands out because it's one of the few places that tried hard to say that you can earn a diploma, your bachelor's degree if you pass a series of tests. We don't care about credit hours, you don't have to go to class, you just have to do well on a series of tests. And it lasted for about 20 years. And even there it took a tremendous amount of effort to construct these exams. And it also required the endorsement of the president, Robert Hutchinson. After he left, the exams didn't survive very long. Competency based education sounds so attractive, but to figure out what type of exam is fair and what level of proficiency you should expect is pretty tough.

Schneider: One of the things that stands out to me in the book is that it really is an illustration of how hard learning is and how intense a process education is. That, you know, efforts like the University of Chicago's competency based diploma program actually demanded that students learn a great deal. They were still just being measured by a test, but you know, they had to work really hard in order to do that as opposed to, you know, Cliff Notes succeeded because they actually allowed you, whether they were designed to do this or not, they allowed you to pass the test without reading the book.

Hampel: Well, you're absolutely right, Jack. The second half of the book I called 'faster and harder.' In other words, you can save time but you have to exert yourself. For example, it's often possible to get your medical degree, your MD, in six years. Do a combined BA/MD, but you're going to be racing the whole time. Cornell at one time, tried a six year, BA/PhD degree— incredibly strenuous. Harvard, for a long time, thought it would make sense for all of its undergraduates to finish in three years. Or another example, if you want to learn shorthand, a pretty useful skill for anyone who has to take a lot of notes, you've got to devote some serious time and energy to learning it first in order to get the long-term payoff. So many of those shortcuts were legitimate. They weren't bogus, they weren't over advertised. But a lot of people said, 'I don't want to sprint. I'd rather walk. I'm comfortable with the regular pace of education. Four years in college is just fine, even if I'd save money by getting through in three.' So those options have been up there for a long time, but it's surprising that more people haven't made use of them.

Berkshire: Your book ends with a chapter on brain power and I'm sure you're aware that our Secretary of Education is a big believer in brainpower. In fact, she's a major investor in a chain of brain retraining centers.

Hampel: Yes, yes, Neurocore, I believe they're called. She's very keen on that. And I came across a number of examples of brain science, all these great claims now that with the right pills

and food and drink that we're going to be able to do all sorts of things with what's inside our head. I think, you know, in a country that's so sold on pharmaceutical solutions to our problems that in a way this is understandable, but you're also getting a lot of hype. I came across some amazing ads that had, you know, pictures of MRI brain scans as if that's all they needed to convince people to send their money in right away.

Berkshire: Well, what's so interesting about it is that if you look at the chain that she's such an investor in, there's no peer reviewed research at all. But what there is is a very clear payment plan.

Hampel: There was another one that was fined \$2 million dollars several years ago for claiming that they could train your mind to do certain tasks that would supposedly sharpen your concentration and speed. They called it brain training and yeah, you can do better on those tasks, but there was no evidence that it transferred to other tasks. And again, the hype, the overselling people, hoping that, you know, 'gosh, I really want this to work.' And then realizing that it often really doesn't do it.

Berkshire: That was education historian Bob Hampel. He's the author of *Fast and Curious: a History of Shortcuts in American Education*, and a professor in the School of Education at the University of Delaware. And I'll be right back with another education historian to wrap things up.

[Music]

Berkshire: So, Jack, I just love that book and I really hope that people read it because it's so relevant to understanding some of the very current debates we're having.

Schneider: I think people will definitely read it because there's a very illustrious educational historian who blurbed it on the back. And so I think people will flip over and see the back cover and then just snatch it up and pay whatever they have to for it.

Berkshire: Is there such a thing as an illustrious education historian?

Schneider: Touché. So I think that this is such an interesting story about the market that, you know, we learn quite a bit about ourselves by looking at these efforts to create educational shortcuts over the years. But I think what we really learn about here is what happens when you turn education over to the free market. Because of course there are two kinds of impulses we have when we are educating ourselves in this country. One is the citizens' impulse where we are educating ourselves to actually learn something and to become contributing members to our communities as well as to fulfill our own promise. But then we're also educating ourselves as consumers, right? That we're consuming education because there is return on investment, because the credentials that we can acquire will allow us to be more marketable either socially or economically. And that when we take away the democratically controlled function of education and we allow it to be a service that is provided by free-market, third-party providers,

what ends up happening is that they cater to our lowest common denominator, that what we end up striving for is the easily purchased credential that may be costly in terms of dollars but not in terms of time. That return on investment really ends up being something that dumbs down education and allows us to get ahead without necessarily learning anything.

Berkshire: One of the topics that Hampel discusses in the book that we didn't get to today is that this whole idea of rating teachers turns out to have a very long backstory and it really fits into what you were just talking about regarding the sort of free marketization of education. And I thought that in our capitulation to the free market, we could discuss this topic for our extended play episode that we offer to our Patreon subscribers.

Schneider: This is like when I search for something online and it shows me like the first couple lines and I excitedly click on it, and it says 'you must be a subscriber to get beyond this and I get really upset when that happens. I clearly need to not get upset in such cases since I'm a part of the problem.

Berkshire: Now you are part of the problem! And if you are not already one of our Patreon subscribers, all you have to do is go to [Patreon.com](https://www.patreon.com) and search for Have You Heard and make a small donation. You'll get access to our extended play episodes and help us keep the podcast going.

Schneider: And for those of you who believe in the sharing economy, you can share the podcast with friends and neighbors and you can also send your love to us by giving us a rating and preferably a five star rating wherever you are getting your podcasts.

Berkshire: And what if people want to give you a chili pepper rating like they have with Rate My Professor?

Schneider: They have that option for me. They will have to create a profile for you.

Berkshire: Until next time, I'm Jennifer Berkshire.

Schneider: And I'm Jack Schneider.

Berkshire: This is Have You Heard.

