The Metropolitan Industrial Park outside Port-au-Prince, Haiti, contains forty-seven nearly identical tin buildings, each the size of an airplane hangar. Most house offices, factories, or non-governmental organizations (NGOs), but one is home to Centre de Formation Technique et Professionnelle, or Haiti Tec, a training center where about a thousand students attend daily sessions to improve their job skills.

One day last spring, a group of about thirty of those students, all professionally dressed and mostly men, gathered in a low-ceilinged, windowless room to watch a video and PowerPoint presentation about a new, all-online college: the University of the People. The president and founder, Shai Reshef, explained that students could enroll at the University of the People but take classes at different locations nearby, potentially even right there at Haiti Tec. And the best part? They could earn an associate's or bachelor's degree, all for free.

Reshef's twenty-minute presentation felt a little like a sales pitch, as might be expected from someone who made his fortune selling education technology to colleges and universities worldwide, but his underlying message was earnest. Reshef, an Israeli-born entrepreneur, launched the University of the People—or UoPeople, as it's called—in 2009 as the world's first open-access, nonprofit, all-online college designed specifically to serve poor students in developing countries. UoPeople, he told me, was his chance to "give back." Based on the radical idea that most poor students don't need—and can't afford—a traditional college education, UoPeople does not try to emulate the infrastructure of traditional institutions. Instead, it provides the lowest-cost, barest-bones degree program possible and, in turn, charges its students little or nothing to attend.

By many measures, UoPeople is already a major success. Since its launch four years ago, it has attracted both accolades and grant money from some of the biggest players in the development and philanthropy worlds, including the JWÂ &Â HM GoodmanÂ Family Foundation, Google Grants, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Intel Foundation, the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, Passport Capital Foundation, and the United Nations (UN). Those grants help to underwrite UoPeople's 1,500 students, who hail from 136 countries, including Nigeria, Mexico, and Indonesia. Most of those students pay no tuition for classes,

contributing only about $100 to take end-of-course exams. An associate's degree ends up costing students about $2,000 total, while a bachelor's is roughly twice that. In Haiti, where the program is subsidized in full by philanthropic organizations including the UN, UNESCO, and the Clinton Global Initiative, a degree costs nothing at all.

In the past couple of years the international development community has showered UoPeople with praise. In 2012, a program officer at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which also funds UoPeople, described it as "part of an emerging set of programs and institutions that is challenging the status quo and effectively meeting non-traditional student needs by leveraging innovative pedagogical and business practices and providing affordable, quality paths to post-secondary credentials."

That same year, the academic journal *Educational Technology & Society* praised the new university for using "promising web 2.0 tools with integrated versioning control, project management, notification and communications tools that are designed to enhance the technical support of student-student interaction." There is a sense, in other words, among those who work in education and development, that by harnessing advanced technology and reinventing education delivery models, UoPeople has the potential to revolutionize secondary education abroad.

The truth is somewhat less spectacular than all that. While UoPeople is indeed a success, its use of technology is very limited (arguably, its most advanced tool is the thumb drive), and it stops somewhat short of reinventing the way in which education is delivered (its model is similar to that of an old-fashioned correspondence course). But UoPeople is indeed revolutionary in a different sort of way. By entirely ignoring—even undermining—orthodox expectations of what a good post-secondary education should be, UoPeople provides a vital service to students in developing countries. It's not high tech. It's not even very good. But UoPeople is exactly what poor students in the developing world actually want.

T

o say that UoPeople offers a no-frills education is a bit of an understatement. There are no textbooks, no office hours, no laboratories or research libraries, and students, upon enrolling, are given just two choices in their course of study. They can earn an associate or bachelor of science

degree in either business administration or computer science. That's it. (Those are growing fields in which people are most likely to get jobs, Reshef explains.)

Based in Pasadena, California, with a public relations staff in New York and an IT department in the West Bank, UoPeople maintains no bricks-and-mortar campuses. It has no classrooms, and employs no full-time faculty. It relies instead on a vast grassroots network of volunteers and partner organizations in the countries where it operates and is therefore able to run on a grand total of about $6 million a year—a fraction of the cost of most universities of its size.

For access to classroom space and computers, Uo-People partners with local schools and community centers, like Haiti Tec, which donate the space, electricity, and computers that UoPeople students use for free. This is no small boon—Haiti Tec costs roughly $30,000 a month to run, according to its technical adviser, Michaelle Saint-Natus—but it comes with some disadvantages. Unlike most online colleges operating in the U.S., UoPeople cannot assume that its students have regular access to a fast Internet connection. As it is, some 25 percent of UoPeople students rely on dial-up connections, and even Internet cafés and full-blown computer labs, like those at Haiti Tec, suffer from electrical outages and Internet interruptions.

As a result, UoPeople students are encouraged to download classes onto a USB thumb drive, study offline, and contribute online when they can. And while American online colleges sometimes require students to participate in live video conferences and Skype sessions, UoPeople's "class discussions" are often limited to static, online message boards. Students react to a question prompted by a reading and contribute ideas over the course of a week, making it about as academically rigorous as the Disqus comment board on a Businessweek.com article.

***Top of the class**: High-achieving English-speaking job applicants in Haiti say that the only thing that sets them apart in the oversaturated job market is a college degree—any college degree.*

For its faculty, UoPeople relies on a team of roughly 3,000 volunteer professors and administrators worldwide. Most have full-time jobs elsewhere at traditional universities, like New York University, the University of Maryland, or California State University at San Bernardino. Dalton Conley, a sociology professor at NYU, serves as UoPeople's dean of

arts and sciences. These volunteers design lesson plans, oversee the university's curricula, and record lectures on video, but they rarely meet or interact with UoPeople students themselves. The task of grading papers, responding to student e-mails, and administering tests falls to volunteer instructors, many of whom do not speak English as a first language. The actual interactions UoPeople students have with their instructors therefore often leave something to be desired. (Twenty-six-year-old Sadrac Saint-Victor, for example, who is enrolled in UoPeople's business administration program, recently received an e-mail from his instructor. "A welcome to the class," it read. "Thank you for your [participation]. You demonstrate a very good explain of the terms. Your discussion corner post was very good. I'm looking forward to read more of your work. I think you will end curious as an excellent recognition for business topics.")

Another factor contributing to the less-than-stellar education offered at UoPeople is simply that the university, by its very mission, is an open-access institution, based in parts of the world where high school-level education is often either severely limited or downright bad. To be admitted, prospective students must only demonstrate a passable knowledge of English—all classes are conducted in English—and produce a translated, notarized copy of a high school diploma (in itself a bureaucratic, bribe-riddled hurdle in many developing nations).

As of December 2013, UoPeople is not formally accredited and students cannot transfer their credits from UoPeople to another institution (or vice versa), although the university recently received a $500,000 grant from the Gates Foundation to advance its application at the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools. Philip Altbach, who heads the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College, calls UoPeople "a nice idea." But, he says, citing a handful of worries, from questionable academic rigor to rampant cheating, "it's a bit half baked at this point."

While these sorts of critiques are important and matter a great deal to pundits and accreditors, particularly in the U.S., the truth is that UoPeople's academic quality doesn't much matter to the students it's designed to serve. After all, UoPeople isn't meant to compete with existing universities. "We are for people who have no alternative," Rashef told me during an interview last year, echoing a sentiment he often repeats. During

a panel discussion at NYU in 2011, he was even blunter. When Anya Kamenetz, the author of *DIY University* and *Generation Debt*, called Reshef the "future of higher ed," Reshef shook his head. "No," he said. "I'm the last resort."

But that's just the thing: for many poor students in the developing world, the last resort is not only good enough—it's potentially revolutionary. That's partly because the majority of UoPeople students are very poor by U.S. standards (in Haiti, the average per capita income is $480 a year) and many are already busy caring for children or members of their extended families, or holding down poorly paid jobs. While these aspiring students might, in a perfect world, prefer to attend Purdue or NYU, that's simply never going to happen.

And it's partly because the job market in many developing countries like Haiti is oversaturated. In the past forty years, vast swaths of the world's poor population, many of whom are poorly educated or illiterate, have abandoned unprofitable subsistence farming and moved to the cities in search of employment. The result is fierce competition over a handful of jobs. In Haiti, for example, where less than 4 percent of Haitian nationals have attended any college, and only 1.4 percent of the country's citizens have university degrees, employers in growing sectors of the economy, like telecommunications and NGOs, have a hard time finding qualified candidates. In order to get noticed, what smart, literate, English-speaking candidates—UoPeople's prime demographic—really need is proof that they possess precisely those skills. And that means a college degree. Any college degree.

"Employers don't even want to look at you unless you have a college degree from somewhere," said Saint-Victor, the UoPeople business student. Like most of his UoPeople peers, Saint-Victor lives in a basic cement house with no electricity or running water, and with what appeared to be his entire extended family. As it is, he can only afford to eat about two meals a day, so an expensive education is simply out of the question. To him, a free degree is a game changer. And a free degree with U.S. bona fides (UoPeople touts the fact that it's based in the United States) is even better. "Getting a diploma from the U.S., it is something very different, and very good for me," he said.

In addition to a bargain-basement degree, UoPeople also provides poor students with a bit more infrastructure than they would otherwise have when navigating the job market. While UoPeople does not yet have job

placement statistics, it sometimes forms partnerships with businesses to help connect students with potential employers. In Haiti, UoPeople has a partnership with Hewlett Packard, as well as the advertising agency Young & Rubicon, where the university places its students in internships and matches them with mentors. Rashef said UoPeople also works to connect graduates to jobs in fields like telecommunications and NGO work, both of which are booming in the country.

The positive, if limited, success of bargain-basement programs like UoPeople suggests that such programs might well—as its supporters and funders suggest—represent the future of education in the developing world. The governments of India, Brazil, and Rwanda are eager to help their citizens obtain more education through online course work, and low-tech technology solutions are also gaining steam in places like El Salvador, Mongolia, and China. In the developed world, pundits often focus on the growth of massive open online courses (MOOCs), the sophisticated, Silicon Valley-developed form of online education. But in most poor countries, the future of higher education is likely to involve the much less sophisticated technologies that are actually within local students' grasp. And that's a good thing. What these students need is an education that will help them get better jobs—and that's exactly what UoPeople attempts to do.

Dany Toussaint, a twenty-seven-year-old UoPeople student, lives in a cave-like warren with thirteen family members, including six children, below the street in the mountains just outside of Port-au-Prince. After the devastating earthquake in 2010, his sister cooked chicken in the street to sell to tourists, a source of income that helped keep the family afloat. For him and his neighbors, a post-secondary education was out of the question, he said, until UoPeople came to town. "It changed my life," he told me. When he graduates, Toussaint hopes to get a good-paying job, then open a clothing store, then leverage that business into something even bigger. He plans, he said, to be "just like Bill Gates." But first he's got to get that degree.