Book Review

Declining by Degrees: Higher Education at Risk

By Richard H. Hersh and John Merrow; Foreword by Tom Wolfe, Palgrave Macmillan, June 2005; ISBN: 1-4039-6921-3; 237 pp; \$24.95

International Journal of Educational Advancement (2006) 6, 177–179.
doi:10.1057/palgrave.ijea.2150012

Richard Hersh and John Merrow, editors of *Declining by Degrees*, utilize the perspective of multiple authors to describe the challenges facing higher education today. Hersh and Merrow use a collection of capable authors: journalists (Frank Deford—*Sports Illustrated*, James Fallows—*Atlantic Monthly*, and Jay Matthews—*Washington Post*); a novelist (Tom Wolfe); college presidents (Leon Botstein of Bard College and Vartan Gregorian, former president of Brown University); professors (Howard Gardner—Harvard, David Kirp—UC Berkeley, Arthur Levine and Gene Maeroff—Columbia, Murray Sperber—Indiana University, and Heather Wathington—University of Virginia); and foundation officers (Richard Fry and Roberto Suro of the Pew Hispanic Center, Julie Johnson Kidd of the Johnson Endeavor Foundation, Carol Geary Schneider of AAC&U, and Deborah Wadsworth of Public Agenda). The collection of essays prepared by this group is well

written and provides a comprehensive summary of some of the most important issues facing higher education. However, the essays lack a cohesive message and they do not raise any new issues. The book attempts to reveal how students are being short-changed by lowered academic standards, why many universities focus on research instead of teaching, and how administrations are more obsessed with rankings than with the quality of learning.

Objective

The objective of the book, according to the editors, is to “...sound an alert and encourage a national conversation about higher education. No longer can our colleges and universities be allowed to drift in a sea of mediocrity.” The basic question being raised by the book is what happens, or should happen, after a student enrolls and begins their undergraduate experience? Parents and students place so much emphasis on getting into a

good school today that once the application and acceptance process is complete and a college is chosen, the next discussion is about graduation and the professional career that follows. In his forward, Tom Wolfe asks, “do parents—does anybody—have any idea what happens in college?” Parents do not inquire about the content or quality of their child’s undergraduate experience. Traditional age college students maximize the time invested in fun activities outside the classroom. “Extracurriculars” such as sports and drinking “suffocate” intellectual life for students (Bolstein). Faculty members minimize the time necessary for student instruction and interaction in order to maximize the time for research and publication within their discipline.

Content

Vartan Gregorian, former president of Brown University and current president of Carnegie Corporation of New York, authors a chapter describing what he believes to be six of the main challenges facing higher education: information glut, curriculum crisis, commercialization of research, two tier faculty (full-time and part-time), quality, and e-learning. Gregorian believes that T.S. Eliot could have been describing aspects of the twenty-first century when he wrote to the effect “that hell is a place where nothing connects with nothing.” We live in an age of “extraordinary specialization and fragmentation of knowledge,” according to Gregorian. His description of external market influences and what needs to be done are similar to those described by Gumpert and Sporn (*Institutional*

Adaptation: Demands for Management Reform and University Administration, 1998). The focus of other chapters includes learning, access and affordability, admissions and curriculum, quality, and research. (1) *Learning*: Faculty members are not creating learning communities and an engaging intellectual experience for the students (Sperber). The broader aims of liberal education have been “downsized” to focus on workforce development and specialized programs of study (Schneider and Kidd). (2) *Access and affordability*: Higher education in the US is becoming more essential to the middle class but less affordable (Wadsworth). Tuition prices continue to outpace inflation. Federal grant programs for students have not kept pace with inflation and students are required to borrow more funds through federal and private loans. Many state financial aid programs have placed a greater emphasis on merit-based student aid instead of need-based aid in an effort to keep some of their most talented students in their home states (Levine). (3) *Admissions and curriculum*: Jim Fallows of the *Atlantic Monthly* authors one of the more objective chapters found in *Declining by Degrees*. He summarizes the increasing level of attention being given to ranking systems like the *US News & World Report*. Fallows, like Ehrenberg (*Reaching for the Brass Ring*, 2002), believes that too much focus is being given to marketing efforts to enhance prestige and not enough effort is being invested to enhance learning. Higher education needs to find more objective ways to measure educational quality rather than using admission selectivity and other institutional prestige

measures. Jay Matthews of the *Washington Post* emphasizes the “hollow core” and the failure of the general education curriculum in higher education. Matthews, like Delucchi (“*Liberal Arts*” *Colleges and the Myth of Uniqueness*, 1997) found conflicting information when reading mission statements and comparing core courses required by many colleges and universities. Princeton, for example, speaks of requirements for graduation that “transcend the boundaries of specialization and provide all students with a common language and common skills.” However, Princeton does not require basic courses in literature, biology, chemistry, geology, physics, and economics. (4) *Quality*: Carol Schneider, president of the American Association of American Colleges and Universities, authors a chapter entitled “Liberal Education: Slip-Sliding Away.” She believes that the broader aims of liberal education, such as civic engagement, ethical reasoning, and integrative learning have been “downsized” in higher education. Professional degree programs are ignoring the essential courses that are needed to develop basic analytical, communication, and problem-solving abilities. (5) *Research focus*: Murray

Sperber’s chapter entitled How Undergraduate Education Became College Lite—A Personal Apology was one of the more interesting chapters in the book. Sperber, a professor emeritus of English and American studies, believes that the pursuit of research funding changed higher education for the worse. Some of his recommendations to improve higher education is to (1) establish separate research institutions; (2) hire, promote, and reward faculty for research and teaching; and (3) to abolish teaching methods where undergraduates are passive.

Conclusions

The lamenting tone of most of the authors will not motivate a nationwide conversation about the problems in higher education (Zemsky 2005). The literature is not new to higher education professionals. However, the articles are informative. Higher education students, faculty, and general audiences interested in higher education should read *Declining by Degrees*.

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