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The State of Higher Education in the United States

Andrew Delbanco. *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012. \$24.95. 240 pages. ISBN: 978-0691130736.

Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa. *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. \$25.00. 272 pages. ISBN: 978-0226028569.

Benjamin Ginsburg. *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. \$29.95. 265 pages. ISBN: 978-0199782444.

Dan Angel and Terry Connelly. *Riptide: The New Normal for Higher Education*. Ashland, Kentucky: The Publishing Place, 2011. \$20.00. 270 Pages. ISBN: 978-0983509523.

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For the last half a century, the American system of higher education has widely been hailed as one of the United States' greatest institutional accomplishments. Offering advanced education to all United States

citizens regardless of ability, fostering diversity and class mobility, and offering students an unprecedented degree of educational choice, the United States system has enabled millions of ordinary Americans to learn new skills, undertake research, and improve their earning power. Even more remarkable, the system has managed to secure this fundamentally populist orientation within a meritocratic structure designed to identify, foster, and reward exceptional ability. Without abandoning their commitment to the common man, American universities have long functioned as intellectual hubs, educating a substantial portion of the world's business and scholarly elite and serving as one of the world's primary loci for technological innovation and scientific discovery.

Since the financial crisis of 2007 and subsequent global recession, however, public discourse in the United States has increasingly come to characterize American higher education as *broken*. A regime of annual increases in tuition costs—frequently at rates five to ten times the rate of inflation—has outraged families and students and priced-out many low-income degree-seekers.¹⁾ Those that do attend leave with record levels of debt (collectively, more than \$1 trillion), a situation that has led some economists and business journalists to worry that the higher education market has become an economic bubble on par with that of the last decade's housing market.²⁾ Much has also

1) For analyses of tuition costs and increases, see Robert Archibald and David Feldman, *Why Does College Cost So Much?* (London: Oxford University Press, 2010); Richard Vedder, *Going Broke By Degree: Why College Costs Too Much* (Washington DC: The American Enterprise Institute Press, 2004); Ronald Ehrenberg, *Why College Costs So Much*, Second Edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002); and Thomas J. Kane, *The Price of Admission: Rethinking How Americans Pay for College* (Washington DC: The Brookings Institute, 1999).

2) Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, "Consumer Financial Protection Bureau

recently been made of how few students America's colleges and universities successfully graduate—currently around fifty percent.³⁾ Citing the much higher college completion rates of other developed countries, politicians and journalists have come to identify the United States' current system of higher education as one of the primary impediments to national economic growth and global competitiveness.⁴⁾

Of course, higher education in America has always had its share of critics. In 1987, University of Chicago professor Allan Bloom,

Releases Financial Aid Comparison Shopper,” Consumer Financial Protection Bureau website, April 11, 2012, <http://www.consumerfinance.gov/pressreleases/consumer-financial-protection-bureau-releases-financial-aid-comparison-shopper/>. For examples of the bubble diagnosis, see “Student Loan Bubble May Provide Next Economic Blow-Up,” *The Wealth Cycle Principle* blog, April 13, 2012, <http://wealthcycles.com/blog/2012/04/13/next-financial-crisis-might-be-due-to-student-loans/>; Elie Mystal, “The Student Loan Bubble: Only Stupid People Will Be Surprised When It Bursts,” *Above the Law* blog, August 18, 2011, <http://abovethelaw.com/2011/08/the-student-loan-bubble-only-stupid-people-will-be-surprised-when-it-bursts/>; Lexington, “Higher Education: Is It Really the Next Bubble?” *The Economist*, April 21, 2011, http://www.economist.com/blogs/lexington/2011/04/higher_education.

- 3) Based on degree-seeking students who completed degrees within 150% of the expected time for their program (i.e., three years for a two-year degree or six years for a four-year degree). Overall completion rates are lower for specific racial and ethnic minority populations. Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data Systems (IPEDS) 2010 Graduation Rate Survey.
- 4) See, for examples, Barack Obama, “Weekly Address: To Win the Future, America Must Win the Global Competition in Education,” transcription, *The Whitehouse* website, February 19, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/02/19/weekly-address-win-future-america-must-win-global-competition-education>; Fred Humphries, “Rebuilding the Foundation of American Competitiveness,” *The Hill's Congress Blog*, April 20, 2012, <http://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/education/222873-rebuilding-the-foundation-of-american-competitiveness>; and Catherine Rampell, “Where the Jobs Are, The Training May Not Be,” *The New York Times*, March 1, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/02/business/dealbook/state-cutbacks-curb-training-in-jobs-critical-to-economy.html>.

prompted a nation-wide debate on the moral and intellectual value of undergraduate education with the publication of his *The Closing of American Mind*, a conservative jeremiad that spent four months on the *New York Times* bestseller list and incited a slew of public affirmations and rejoinders. For the most part, however, complaints about higher education have traditionally been limited to far right politicians and professional policy wonks and have had little currency in mainstream discourse. The negative attention higher education has received over the last half-decade thus constitutes something of a reversal in how the institution is popularly perceived in America. What had previously been celebrated by most of the public as one of the nation's great accomplishments is now viewed by individuals from all points on the political spectrum an institution in need of fundamental reimagining.

Despite the wide variety of criticism being leveled at the U.S. system, however, in practice this variety can be reduced to four basic positions regarding what American higher education is and what it should be doing. I characterize these positions as the liberal humanist, the technocratic/administrative, the academic, and the consumer-oriented. The aim of this review is to provide a general account of these different positions by discussing four recent scholarly works on American higher education: *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be*, by Andrew Delbanco; *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, by Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa; *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters*, by Benjamin Ginsberg; and *Riptide: The New Normal in Higher Education*, by Dan Angel and Terry Connelly. Though hundreds of books have

been published on U.S. higher education in the last couple years-many by professors of education who work entirely on that subject-this review focuses on these four books alone because, together, they provide a fairly comprehensive view of the different ways American higher education has been represented in public discourse. In addition-and unlike many of the other recent scholarly publications-they can legitimately be called examples of public discourse themselves; they address both general and scholarly audiences and direct their attention to the wider phenomenon of higher education in America and not one specific mechanism or problem within it.

College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be

With only a few exceptions, the current discourse on higher education in America is fundamentally ahistorical in outlook. Though some participants do occasionally cite historical facts (often to support claims of decline), virtually no attempts have been made to situate the system's recent problems within a wider national or global history.⁵⁾ Bracketed off from history, the system's problems have tended to be cast not as historically determined processes but as techno-rational failings, their origins a function of organizational inefficiency and bad policy. Such an ahistorical bias is a natural consequence of the lead role politicians and policy-oriented think tanks have played in framing

5) For a history of the rhetoric of "progress" and "decline" in public discourse around American higher education in the twentieth century, see David Tyack and Larry Cuban, *Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996), 12-39.

the conversation; nevertheless, the degree to which history has been excluded from the current discourse is somewhat remarkable. Typically, scholars function to inject historical considerations into public discourse; in this case, however, scholars too have largely approached the topic techno-rationally, substituting longitudinal data sets for deeper engagement with historical processes.

When history does enter into the discourse, it is often in superficial terms that simplify rather than complicate or enrich our vision of the past. The history of American higher education, when discussed at all, is usually reduced to three stages: the colonial and antebellum colleges, the rise of the university (often identified with the two land grant acts of the late nineteenth century), and the post-World-War-II expansion of higher education.⁶⁾ Of these, only the latter features regularly in public discourse and there only by way of reference to The Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944-usually called the G.I. Bill. One of the most celebrated pieces of American legislation in the twentieth century, the G.I. Bill provided tuition benefits for all U.S. citizens who had served in World War II, enabling approximately 2.2 million veterans to attend college during the decade following the War and solidifying the role of undergraduate education as an engine of economic growth.⁷⁾

6) For typical examples, see Josipa Roksa, Eric Grodsky, Richard Arum, and Adam Gamoran, "United States: Changes in Higher Education and Social Stratification," in *Stratification in Higher Education: A Comparative Study*, ed. Yossi Shavit, Richard Arum, and Adam Gamoran (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 165-191 and Robert Zemsky, Gregory R. Wegner, and William F. Massy, *Remaking the American University: Market-Smart and Mission-Centered* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press), 1-4.

7) On the first G.I. Bill see Christopher J. Lucas, *American Higher Education: A History* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994): 232 and Arthur M. Cohen and Carrie B. Kisker, *The Shaping of American Higher Education: Emergence and*

Abstracted from its location in history, the G.I. Bill has functioned in contemporary discourse as a touchstone for educational reform and evidence of the power of government policy. President Obama's description of the G.I. Bill, in a speech introducing his American Graduation Initiative, as having "helped educate a generation and ushered in an era of unprecedented prosperity" is emblematic in this regard, as he uses history not to bring new understanding to the present but to legitimize, symbolically, a prescription for the future.⁸⁾ Though American presidential addresses might fairly be said to be ill-suited to substantive historical analysis, this kind of historical simplification is endemic in the broader public discourse as well.

On the face of it, Andrew Delbanco's *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be* offers a healthy corrective to the ahistorical tenor of the current discourse around higher education. Beginning with a pithy defense of historical research—"in order to comprehend problems of the present, it is helpful to know something about the past"—Delbanco, Director of American Studies at Columbia University, sets forth in his book to provide a comprehensive history of the idea of college and how that idea has been realized since the country's earliest days.⁹⁾ Though historical in orientation, however, *College* does not aim to be a conventional history; rather, it seeks to offer a prescriptive meditation on what the institution of undergraduate education (what

Growth of the Contemporary System, Second Edition, 194-195.

8) Barack Obama, "Remarks by President on the American Graduation Initiative," *The White House* website, July 14, 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-on-the-American-Graduation-Initiative-in-Warren-MI/.

9) Andrew Delbanco, *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), Kindle Edition, no page number (Preface).

Delbanco labels *college*) should be. Or, as Delbanco himself puts it: “it is my unabashed aim in this book to articulate what a college-any college-should seek to do for its students.”¹⁰ Such confessions notwithstanding, Delbanco’s voice adopts the neutral tone of the professional historian throughout. For a work of proselytism and prescription, there is in fact remarkably little offered here in the way of specific plans or agendas.

Look a little closer, however, and *College* reveals itself as the most baldly partisan of the four books reviewed here. Its history is a history not of American higher education as a whole but that of the handful of higher education institutions regularly identified as America’s “elite schools”: Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Columbia, MIT, and a few others. As Delbanco explains by way of apology in the book’s Introduction:

[I]t remains the case that it is these institutions through which the long arc of educational history can best be discerned. And if they have peculiar salience for understanding the past, they wield considerable influence in the present debate of which educational principles should be sustained, adapted, or abandoned in the future.¹¹

These are strong claims that very few in the professional worlds of policy or undergraduate education would support. Though America’s elite schools are also indeed the nation’s oldest and thus might fairly be said to have participated for the greatest length of time in “the long arc of educational history,” they educate only a tiny minority of America’s populace (less than one percent) and have very little influence on how the education offered by other schools is designed

10) *Ibid.*, 8.

11) *Ibid.*, 6.

and conducted. For these reasons, Obama's American Graduation Initiative ignores them, focusing instead on community colleges and the vast portion of students (approximately 75%) who do not attend traditional four-year residential programs.¹²⁾ For these students and thus the majority of college-going America, Delbanco's history is not the history that matters.

Despite all that is wrong with its parameters, however Delbanco's history is, in fact, the history that most adults likely to read his work would associate with the "American college experience." The elitism of his work is thus not merely an error or bias, but a symptom and example of how the discourse around higher education in America is currently being staged. Rooted in middle and upper-class experience, and given imaginary confirmation in television and cinematic representations, the idea of college as an extended adolescence, rite of passage, or period of self-discovery and experimentation resonates deeply with a large number of Americans-and not only those for whom this ideal can actually be realized. College, defined this way, is a kind of myth, but a hallowed one that, like liberty and equality, is too closely associated with the vision of what America stands for to be easily discarded. Delbanco's history might thus more charitably be seen as either a history of this myth or an attempt to use history to prolong the myth's longevity.

Given its ideological limitations then, how successful is Delbanco's history? Unfortunately, not very. Highly cursory and overly dependent upon quotations from college founders, presidents, and famous alumni,

12) Public Agenda, *With Their Whole Lives Ahead of Them* (New York: Public Agenda, no copyright), 4, <http://www.publicagenda.org/files/pdf/theirwholivesaheadofthempdf>.

this is a history of great schools as seen by great men. Absent are any illuminating accounts of how courses were designed and departments governed. Nor is there much rich description of college experience throughout history. For all its pretensions to appeal to a general audience, more specialized works such as Gerald Graff's *Professing Literature* or even Brad Gooch's *City Poet* (which contains a wonderfully evocative account of Harvard student life during the G.I. Bill) cover the same ground with more insight and descriptive flair. Delbanco's use of statistical data presents a different problem, as it often relies upon secondary citations and occasionally bungles its comparisons. For example, during his discussion of the antebellum colleges, he observes that approximately 80 percent of abolitionist leaders "had either been graduated from, or spent some time in, a college-and this at a period when less than 2 percent of the overall population was college educated."¹³) The relevant comparison here, however, is not to the overall population-the majority of whom could not have attended college for reasons of race, sex, or age-but to white men of adult age; that is, those who strictly speaking *could have* attended college. The consequence of such flawed comparisons is to overstate the significance of America's elite colleges to the broader cultural and social movements of American history.

Where *College* is at its best is in its analysis of the cultural forces shaping contemporary college life at elite institutions. Here Delbanco is able to supplement his research with his own firsthand experience, the result being subtle but penetrating analysis in eloquent, often

13) Delbanco, *College*, 70-71.

beautiful prose. His discussion of “meritocracy” and ultimate conclusion that the social benefits it has brought have been partially undercut by the culture of entitlement it has spawned is beautifully argued and persuasive, as is his description of present-day undergraduates and the plurality of desires and influences that drive them.¹⁴⁾ Indeed, the book’s greatest strength is the quality of its prose, which—especially in the book’s final chapter—strives not merely to inform but to *move*. His solutions to the present-day problems of higher education—occupying roughly half of the last chapter—are little more than a laundry list of hackneyed proposals (such as “produce more teachers who care about teaching”), but situated within such a striking defense of the idea of college that their flaws are easy to disregard.¹⁵⁾

Academically Adrift

In contrast to Delbanco’s backward-looking *College*, Arum and Roksa’s *Academically Adrift* and Ginsberg’s *The Fall of the Faculty* are exclusively directed to the present. Both also embrace a more capacious vision of what constitutes American higher education than *College*—although, like *College*, they largely ignore America’s community colleges, proprietary schools, and vocational programs. Beyond these similarities, however, *Academically Adrift* and *The Fall of the Faculty* differ wildly from each other and offer what are, in the end, ideologically antithetical views of what is wrong with higher education

14) For Delbanco’s discussion meritocracy, see *Ibid.*, 130-138.

15) *Ibid.*, 165.

in America: that students are not learning and that faculty are disenfranchised from the process of educating. Though each book offers original evidence to support its diagnosis and relies minimally on previously published research, neither complaint is new; indeed, versions of each figure prominently in the current public discourse around higher education and have found expression in a myriad of publications, broadcast and cable news shows, and political speeches during the last five years.

The argument that American college students are not learning-or are not learning the right things-has always been difficult to pin down ideologically. Though politicians of different political leanings have relied upon it to justify policies that expand federal investment in higher education (such as the National Defense Education Act of 1958) and, more recently, impose increased institutional accountability, it has also been employed for decades by far right conservatives as an argument for *decreased* state investment and legislative restrictions on course content. With the exception of the late 1950s, when the Soviet's launch of Sputnik led to national worry over the quality of American learning in science, the American public has traditionally remained indifferent to worries about student learning.¹⁶⁾ In recent years, however, all segments of the public-including business leaders, parents, teachers, and even students themselves-have begun expressing doubt over the quality of post-secondary education.

For its part, *Academically Adrift* tries to take a neutral position in its investigation of student learning. It is less concerned with the

16) See Lucas, *American Higher Education*, 233.

broader cultural meaning and implications of poor learning outcomes than how such outcomes might be assessed using the data sets and statistical methodologies currently available. A work of quantitative social science, produced by two professors of sociology (Arum at New York University, Roksa at the University of Virginia), *Academically Adrift* is the least accessible of the four books reviewed here, but ultimately also the most simple in argument and conclusion. Using new longitudinal data previously unavailable to education researchers, it demonstrates (or purports to do so) that American undergraduates—regardless of their socioeconomic background or the school they attend—learn little measurable thinking skills during at college.

Arum and Roksa’s data are primarily derived from a single exam: the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), which—for this study—was administered to 2,322 bachelor’s degree-seeking students at a variety of four-years schools during their first semester of study and at the end of the final semester of their second year. Designed to test critical thinking and analytic reasoning skills, the CLA consists of three essay questions, two of which are argumentative and one of which is document-based (what the CLA calls, somewhat oddly, a “performance task”).¹⁷⁾ Arum and Roksa, however, focus solely upon results obtained on the performance task, which they view as the test’s “most well-developed and sophisticated” part due to its synthesis of reading, writing, and argumentative demands.¹⁸⁾ In Arum and Roksa’s study, scores on this single “task” increased only minimally across the

17) Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 21-22.

18) *Ibid.*, 21.

two tests for all students—with the scores of African-American students registering barely any increase at all. Though the researchers' explanation for such "limited learning" is occasionally supplemented by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), a questionnaire that asks students to self-assess their own learning and academic effort, the CLA results provide the meat of the authors' analysis and serve as the basis for most of their conclusions.

Since the argument of *Academically Adrift* depends so heavily on the CLA, it is worth asking how valid the test is as a measurement of student learning. Unfortunately, that question is largely unanswerable, as education researchers have found it virtually impossible to determine whether such tests actually measure the thing they claim to. Arum and Roksa, acknowledging the test's limitations, provide a brief and superficial account of the conceptual problems involved in measuring learning, but they are quick to discount such difficulties. Their justification for using the CLA, in fact, seems to be based not on arguments for the test's validity but rather the superiority of the data set derived from it over that of previous studies. As they note towards the end of the book's first chapter, "[a]lthough there are significant methodological challenges to our project ...; the study generates significant new knowledge to guide future research, policy, and practice."¹⁹⁾

Even setting aside the larger conceptual problems involved with defining what learning is and through what questions or tasks it can best be measured, however, there remain substantial reasons to be

19) *Ibid.*, 26.

skeptical of Arum and Roksa's methodology. For example, it is unclear why the start of the first year and end of the second year have been selected as the proper times of assessment. Though measuring by way of this duration might be convenient for the researchers' publication timetable, most undergraduate college curricula in four-year colleges are designed to introduce more rigorous coursework and advanced research methodologies no sooner than the third year; there is thus good reason to believe that more "learning" might occur between the first and third or even second and third years of undergraduate education than between the first and second (during which time students are widely encouraged to survey content-based introductory courses).²⁰ A more serious problem revolves around the lack of incentives students have to care about their CLA results. The "performance task" is a difficult, involving portion of the CLA that requires of test-takers both sustained attention and the integration of multiple modes of critical engagement—indeed, Arum and Roksa have relied upon it *because* it requires these things. Few would complete such an assignment for fun and even fewer give it their full attention when no repercussions exist for giving it less. Though the authors acknowledge this problem in an appendix, observing that test scores "reflect ... also the degree of investment in the assessment activity," they quickly dismiss it, noting they have controlled for its distorting effects through the use of a questionnaire administered to the students after their freshman-year test asking them to self-assess their own

20) The researchers claim to have data for additional years and have announced plans for a follow-up study examining it. To which a skeptic might reasonably ask: If such data is meaningful, why not delay the publication of *Academically Adrift* so that it could be incorporated?

engagement.²¹⁾ Lest one find it problematic that the questionnaire was not also administered after the second-year test (setting aside the perhaps more pressing question of whether self-assessment is a reliable method of measuring engagement at all), Arum and Roksa observe, “Since the measurement of these scales occurred in 2005 [the year of the first test], we can explore the extent to which they can act as proxies for underlying individual traits around test-taking motivation and can be associated with differential test score performance.”²²⁾ This is quantitative social science at its sloppiest and most disingenuous. Given the methodological problem posed by lack of motivation and the fact that students who did not return for the second test (more than 50% of the original sample) were excluded from the results, one wonders whether the students who learned most during their first two years of college were precisely those who opted out of the study.²³⁾

It is not surprising, of course, that *Academically Adrift* suffers these problems, as these kind of methodological difficulties are common to virtually all attempts to measure student learning beyond basic-level competencies. While it remains questionable whether such problems can ever fully be solved, calls for some form of mandatory testing at the college level have recently become commonplace in the discourse around American higher education.²⁴⁾ Advocates for testing see it as a means of producing data that can serve as the basis for

21) Ibid., 154.

22) Ibid.

23) Arum and Roksa discuss the “retention” rate for participants on Ibid., 146.

24) See, for instance, United States Department of Education, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

some new form of accountability regime, wherein colleges and universities would be punished and/or rewarded (by governments, consumers, or both) for the amount of measurable learning they produce.²⁵⁾ Ideologically, such a goal occupies a somewhat unusual place with America's current political landscape. The call for greater state involvement in the institution of higher education is a traditionally leftist political position, but because such involvement is envisioned as a corrective to poor faculty governance and job performance, it also aligns well with the conservative goal of disempowering college faculty, long perceived as an excessively liberal group who teach politics rather than "actual" skills. Indeed, faculty (regardless of political affiliation) are likely to suffer under a regime of government oversight, as it transfers control over curricular design and assessment (both of students and instructors) from faculty themselves to professional administrators and government bureaucrats.

Though *Academically Adrift* tries to position itself as above or beyond such ideological concerns, the set of recommendations it ultimately advances makes little sense if not as expressions of them. For despite basing their argument about limited learning almost entirely upon the CLA, Arum and Roksa argue in their final chapter *against* mandatory testing and the accountability regime it would enable:

[W]hile the CLA instrument as a measure of learning tracks remarkably well with sociological factors at the aggregate group or institutional level, there are limitations to its precision at the individual level that should

25) Currently, accountability in U.S. higher education is based upon measurable outcomes—such as graduation rates or loan default rates—and applies in direct fashion only to public institutions and for-profit private institutions.

caution policy makers from imposing high-stakes accountability schemes based on it or similar assessment indicators. We find that although from a sociological perspective the CLA appears quite promising and worthy of further research and development, we are simply not at a stage of scientific knowledge where college students' learning outcomes can be measured with sufficient precision to justify embracing a coercive accountability system without significant reservations.²⁶⁾

Such a theoretical *volte face* is remarkable, but, from an ideological perspective, not particularly surprising, as Arum and Roksa—both university faculty—represent precisely that group who would lose the most from a “high-stakes accountability scheme” based upon testing. With testing off the table, however, their proposed correctives amount to the same litany of tired and superficial “fixes” offered by Delbanco: better teaching, better leadership, better student preparation in primary school. The only exception is an odd—and potentially self-serving—recommendation that the federal government provide additional funding to the Department of Education’s Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, a source of relatively small grants to universities for a hodgepodge of research and educational programs.²⁷⁾

Fall of the Faculty

Whereas *College* and *Academically Adrift* can be criticized for ultimately offering little in the way of either explanation for or actionable solutions to America’s higher education problems, the same criticism

26) Arum and Roksa, *Academically Adrift*, 141.

27) *Ibid.*

cannot be leveled at Ginsberg's *Fall of the Faculty*. Indeed, of the four books considered here, *Fall of the Faculty* is the clearest in its assessment of what is wrong with higher education and what ought to be done about it. For Ginsberg, the fundamental problem is, in fact, a simple one: institutions of higher education have been taken over by non-faculty administrators. Perverting the educational and research missions of these institutions, he argues, these administrators have remade America's colleges and universities into bureaucratic enterprises, the main beneficiary of which is neither students nor faculty but the administrators themselves.

This complaint-or some version of it-has been a part of the public discourse around higher education for at least the last couple decades. In recent years, however, professors and liberal humanists have sounded it with renewed outrage, as faculty have found themselves increasingly marginalized from the operation of their own institutions. Though largely a liberal complaint, it points to a demonstrable shift in the way colleges and universities are organized that few on either side of the political spectrum would dispute. According to data compiled from *Academe* and the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), between 1975 and 2005 the number of full-time faculty employed by American schools increased by 51%, while the number of administrators and other professional staff increased by 85% and 240% respectively.²⁸⁾ Though such growth in administrative staff need not necessarily entail a loss of organizational power by faculty, it does raise questions as to what these administrators are doing and why they are needed.

28) Benjamin Ginsburg, *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 25.

Most of *The Fall of the Faculty* is devoted to answering these two questions-and to doing so in as vituperative a manner as possible. Blaming administrators for the marginalization of faculty and the creation of “make-work activities that siphon off resources from potentially more productive uses,” Ginsberg, a professor of political science at The Johns Hopkins University, casts his criticism in such a wry, excoriating tone that the result is often wickedly funny.²⁹⁾ In a chapter addressing what higher education administrators do, Ginsberg argues that, generally speaking, they do only two things: hold meetings-the majority of which are devoted to scheduling future meetings and reviewing past meetings-and go on retreats. Lest the reader think he is merely being funny, Ginsberg marshals a host of empirical data-including actual meeting agendas-to support his claim.

Indeed, for all of the book’s humor, it is Ginsberg’s collection of data that readers will appreciate most about *Fall of the Faculty*. Sourced primarily from news stories, informal interviews, institutional communication (both internal and external), and personal experience, the book’s data, taken as a whole, paint a picture of how higher education organizations are managed that is largely unmatched in vividness and detail. Whereas other books on this topic, such as Derek Bok’s *Universities in the Marketplace*, offer abstract portraits of how institutions are *meant* to work and the general *kind* of problems limiting management’s effectiveness, *Fall of the Faculty* hews closer to the ground, offering up detailed examples of how institutions actually work in practice. Though the unscientific method by which

29) *Ibid.*, 39.

Ginsberg collected his data is disappointing (he seems simply to have sought out examples that support his arguments), the data themselves appear legitimate and frequently touch upon subjects that more scientific works of education scholarship have tended to ignore. For example, on the subject of administrative fraud—a phenomenon that has been almost entirely ignored by scholars of higher education—Ginsberg supplies a catalogue of its occurrences so long and detailed that fraud appears less an aberration from or exception to what administrators are *supposed to be* doing than a general flaw within the design of higher education administration itself.

Despite the richness of its data, however, *Fall of the Faculty* can only with many qualifications be considered a work of scholarship. Rather, it is fundamentally a work of invective, designed to condemn and belittle administrators and not to fairly represent or understand them or their emergence in colleges and universities. In focusing only on examples of administrative maleficence and incompetence, Ginsburg provides an incomplete picture of the very phenomenon he is analyzing. Not only does this effectively foreclose any kind of cost-benefit analysis, it also limits his investigation to a very narrow purview, bracketing off the phenomenon of higher education administration from larger social, economic, and historical processes. *Fall of the Faculty* thus makes no effort to link growth in higher education administration to the more general rise of administration and management science after World War II; nor does it situate higher education administrators within the broader class of managers and office-workers that Harold Perkin has influentially named “professional society.” Even stranger than the book’s lack of historical thinking, however, is its

silence on what is currently the most frequently voiced justification for the existence of non-faculty administrators: that faculty, left to themselves, do a poor job running their institutions. Indeed, the call for greater administrative (and governmental) involvement has typically been associated with the perception that faculty as a class are either unable or unwilling to compromise their own professional interests for those of their students, the general public, or even their home institutions and employers. Whether such a perception is accurate is beside the point; had *Fall of the Faculty* addressed it—even if only to disprove it—the result would have been a stronger and ultimately more persuasive work of analysis.

Judging by popular discourse, the area of American higher education that most strongly supports Ginsburg's warnings about the evils of non-faculty administration is for-profit education. Run as businesses designed to maximize returns to investors, America's for-profit schools are the perfect test cases for how education works when faculty are deprived of tenure, academic freedom, and the traditional trappings of self-governance. And, at first glance, it does not seem to work well. Over the last two years, such schools have become the object of widespread condemnation on account of their heavy reliance upon public funding via loans, the abnormally high loan-default rates of their graduates, and what appear to be unethical (or even illegal) recruitment activities. Though such schools are perhaps the closest examples of what Ginsburg names "the all-administrative university," *Fall of the Faculty* ignores them. Focusing exclusively upon institutions resembling Ginsburg's own (Johns Hopkins), *Fall of the Faculty* offers little insight into how new administrative practices and concerns are

currently working to transform the practice of higher education for the majority of Americans.

Riptide: The New Normal for Higher Education

In fact, of the four books reviewed here, only Angel and Connelly's *Riptide* demonstrates any interest in what higher education is and will yet be for students not attending a four-year residential college or university. Such students, conventionally labeled "non-traditional" (despite constituting the majority of college-going Americans), are at the center of *Riptide*'s concerns. Not only does *Riptide* include these students in its account of American higher education-unusual in itself for a general-audience work on this topic-it also singles them out as the primary drivers of innovation. In designing programs and policies that respond to these students' diverse needs in as cost-effective a manner as possible, Angel and Connelly argue, the schools that serve these students have produced new models of educational delivery-such as block scheduling, flexible calendars, and online classes-that hold the key to reforming American higher education so that it is affordable, accessible, and economically productive for all.

Riptide, it should be said from the start, is not a perfect book. Dan Angel, the President of Golden Gate University, and Terry Connelly, Dean Emeritus for Golden Gate's business school (and former investment banker), write in a breathless, over-excited tone that indulges too often in business journalism's penchant for flashy, simplistic comparisons. The introduction offers a new metaphor for higher education on

every page, some amusing and insightful (higher education as Ford's model T), others simply bizarre (higher education as the business of golf).³⁰ Even more troublesome is the book's lack of traditional citations.³¹ Not only is their absence frustrating-for the statistical data on offer are often interesting-it contributes to the impression that *Riptide* is more of a jaunty, book-length opinion piece than a serious contribution to the current scholarship.

Although *Riptide* is the least scholarly-sounding of the four books reviewed here, it is also, ultimately, the most compelling and broadly informative. It provides a comprehensive picture of how education works (or fails to work) for non-traditional students-precisely the topic most readers will know the least about-and establishes a consumer-oriented framework for understanding and assessing innovations in this area. By examining the viability of these innovations to the educational system in its entirety, it also resists the tendency of educational scholarship to treat traditional and non-traditional education as separate, mutually exclusive systems. In doing so, it provides a model for scholars, administrators, and policymakers of how the benefits of institutional diversity can be used to support and encourage broader, system-wide coherence.

Angel's analysis of for-profit colleges is exemplary in this regard, for though he is highly critical of how they have been run and devotes substantial time to detailing the wrongs they have committed

30) Dan Angel and Terry Connelly, *Riptide: The New Normal for Higher Education* (Ashland, Kentucky: The Publishing Place, 2011), Kindle Edition, 17, 16.

31) *Riptide* does include a bibliography, organized by chapter, but because the chapters themselves lack basic citation information, it is extremely difficult to determine from which item in the bibliography any given piece of information was drawn.

against students and taxpayers, he also offers an insightful analysis of what they have done right. Not only have such schools helped meet demand for degrees and certificates (many public two- and four-year colleges have more applicants than they do places), they have literally helped produce demand by designing a variety of scheduling models that better enable students with families and jobs to attend. Such models include flexible academic calendars, condensed semesters, single-course semesters, and online classes. Angel calls the logic underlying these models “customer-centric” and notes that such a logic is anathema to the culture of non-profit educational institutions, which treat “‘students’ as a special category of consumer who need to be *protected* by those who know best what is good for them.”³²⁾

Drawing upon the for-profit’s customer-centric paradigm, Angel and Connelly offer the most detailed and practicable suggestions for higher education reform of any of the books considered here. Rather than regurgitate the traditional laundry-list of unworkable ideas (better teaching, more funding, stronger primary schools), *Riptide* proffers explicit policies, such as offering credit for ‘experiential learning,’ expanding non-traditional course scheduling, increasing the quantity of online course offerings, and reducing the length of bachelors degree programs from four to three years. These are not perfect solutions; besides paying virtually no attention to how the labor market for teaching within a customer-centric paradigm will work (for-profits currently rely on low-paid part-time and adjunct labor), they are based too strongly on a notion of students as knowledgeable, rational consumers.

32) Ibid., 84.

But *Riptide* nevertheless goes a long way towards identifying the kind of concrete practices that higher education institutions will need to pursue if they are to remain accessible and effective.

Although the four books discussed in this review differ significantly on such basic questions as what American higher education is, what is wrong with it, and how it can best be fixed, they are in agreement on the more fundamental point that American higher education is in fact broken and in need of repair. Each book is an original contribution to the current debate on higher education and each reflects the unique concerns, training, and ideological position of its author or authors. As I have tried to demonstrate in this review, however, each is also widely representative of one of the main positions or voices that currently make up the public discourse on higher education in the United States. We might call these voice-admitting the highly reductionist nature of such labels—the liberal humanist (Delbanco’s *College*), the technocratic/administrative (Arum and Josipa’s *Academically Adrift*), the academic (Ginsburg’s *Fall of the Faculty*), and the consumer-centric (Angel and Connelly’s *Riptide*). None of these voices, of course, are monosemous; each evinces multiple (not always compatible) ideological projects and political sympathies. And each voice tends to morph into or borrow from another—a quality that the act of labeling should not obscure. But each is nevertheless broadly distinct in the way it frames the problem of higher education and, ultimately, in the kind of solution it offers.

From a sociological or historical perspective, it is ultimately less interesting which of these positions is the “right” one (though certainly

some seem more defensible than others) than how these four positions work to determine and delimit the discourse around higher education in America today. By defining the reality of higher education in America, they create opportunities for certain kinds of assessment and action while ruling out others. From a political perspective, each of these positions is thus in competition to define the range of alternatives from which policymakers and their lobbyists are likely to draw in crafting the rhetoric needed to rally opinion around favored solutions. Taken as a whole, however, these four positions also demonstrate that the range of possible solutions available does not vary as widely as that of the ideological positions from which they derive. Though collectively these authors advance a plethora of definitions of the problem, most of their solutions are broadly similar and, in the final analysis, largely unactionable. Which may lead one to wonder: If America's system of higher education cannot be fixed, perhaps this is because it is not truly broken? Or, as a more historical and internationally comparative accounting might suggest, might the system of higher education merely be changing in tandem with other social and economic changes in the U.S. and the world at large- reflecting, for better or worse, a changing and globalizing nation?