**ARE UNIVERSITIES WORTH THE COSTS?**

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Universities are under attack. Of course, they have been under attack many times before, but this time the assaults may bring spoils of victory for the detractors because the criticisms are gaining traction. More importantly, criticisms in the past did not stir potential students and their parents to action for they did not want to digest these arguments or spend time evaluating them. As long as jobs existed after graduation, universities easily could wither such attacks. But with fewer good jobs, many are asking whether universities are worth the costs.

Some recent books illustrate the challenges. In *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa ask whether undergraduates are learning anything once on campus and answer “no” for many students. They rely on a number of surveys and other empirical data, but their most important evidence comes from the Collegiate Learning Assessment. This instrument was administered to incoming freshmen, then again two years later. Almost half of the students showed no significant change in their abilities. At the end of the senior year, another test showed one-third knew no more than when they began college. On the other hand, the authors do notice learning by students in some areas, such as math and science.

Andrew Hacker and Claudia Dreifus wrote *Higher Education? How Colleges are Wasting Our Money and Failing Our Kids—And What We Can Do About It*. They argue that the costs of a college degree far exceed the benefits the graduates receive. Rising tuition costs rise and declining job opportunities imbue this assertion with much power. Hacker and Dreifus offer a variety of suggestions, including reducing sports programs, eliminating tenure and sabbaticals, and making research institutions and medical schools independent entities.

A third text is *Crisis on Campus: A Bold Plan for Reforming Our Colleges and Universities* by Mark Taylor. He too questions tenure and the emphasis on research, but Taylor also criticizes overspecialization and the splintering of the university into many small turfs with chieftains who feel compelled to defend their turfs from all attacks. His solution rests in various implementations of online learning, including partnering among universities, libraries, museums, and other think tanks.

The last book we look at is *The Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal*, authored by Parker Palmer, Arthur Zajonc, and Megan Scribner. These authors believe that present-day education overemphasizes the cognitive and instead should focus on the total human being—mind, heart, and soul. They suggest a holistic approach to education by integrating topics across disciplines and by integrating theory and analysis and action.

While other criticisms and suggestions exist, these four books adequately summarize the frequent and numerous complaints against the university and many of the common proposals for improvement. However, most of the recommended fixes are insufficient or unworkable. We instead encourage concentration on the two big issues that will prove durable.

The proposal to reduce or eliminate sports is a non-starter. As college fund-raising is positively correlated with achievements by the collegiate teams, sports clearly is a sacred cow. Let’s not waste our breath on this one.

We find the discussion about holistic education interesting, but wonder what it really means and whether it produces as much in returns as its advocates assert. We suggest some private schools adopt this education philosophy; once we see the results, society will be in a better position to evaluate this approach.

Sabbaticals might not be necessary, though faculty members are often recharged by them. At any rate, the elimination of sabbaticals has a second-order effect at most, so the suggestion is not that important to us.

We are against eliminating tenure; indeed, this column is possible only because of the protection we have from business executives and major accounting firm partners who complain to our deans and presidents. Yes, tenure has protected some incompetent or “retired” faculty members, but we think the number is small.

Online teaching and greater use of teleconferencing may be an important component in future education, but we doubt that it can completely replace face-to-face interaction. If it could, music and ice skating instructors could teach their pupils online. Online education is well suited for basic content delivery similar to how correspondence courses functioned in the past, which would allow instructors to focus on the application and critical thinking when face-to-face meetings occur. One big problem needs to be fixed for online education to become more viable, and that is ensuring that the student is really who he or she claims to be. At present you do not know who the test taker or the report writer is—you only know who they claim to be.

This brings us to the knock on research. There are some valid points against research activities, but also some fallacious censures. Universities need to recognize that research cannot and will never replace the teaching mission; accordingly, university administrators must insist that research not take away from this charge. Also, it is not clear that we need as many researchers as exist; most of what passes for research is mere tinkering of previous studies. In addition, of what value is the research? How well did accounting and auditing research prevent and protect us from the likes of the dotcoms, Enron, WorldCom, and the financial crisis of 2008? State governments might fund only a few of its public schools to have a dual research-teaching mission and then fund others only for teaching activities.

Lack of learning is the ugliest but most accurate disparagement against universities. We know about too many classes and too many professors that just go through the motions. For example, we know of several classes in which the professor promises a “B” for good attendance. Perhaps the university is located near Lake Wobegon so that all students are above average. Some other classes have the students do all the discussing and “there are no wrong answers.” With so little incentive to study and no risk of failure, it is no wonder that recent studies report that today’s collegiate studies less than half as long as students from yesteryear. Unfortunately, this censure is subject to much debate and has no easy fix.

The last criticism is the one with the most traction: is college worth it anymore? Clearly, a college education has some value as seen in the differential unemployment rates, which are higher for those with less education. We also find it interesting that various technical sectors are begging for workers, but cannot find people with sufficient skills to hire. On the other hand, college has become much more expensive than it used to be, and these investment costs erase some, if not all, of the advantages that used to exist for college graduates. Moreover, with society’s need for good carpenters, electricians, plumbers, and technicians, clearly everybody does not need a college education.

So, is college worth it? For some majors, the answer is yes and we think accounting might be one of those fields, particularly for students enrolled at state universities who are not burdened by huge student loans after graduation. But there are many other majors in which the student would likely earn as much from waitressing as to what a college education could produce. What employer wants to hire somebody majoring in gender studies? What skills does such a student offer to the firm?

Come to think of it, the last two items seem related. Maybe there aren’t as many good paying jobs for college graduates because there is little learning going on. Universities could fix that, but probably will wait until enrollments drop precipitously.

*This essay reflects the opinion of the authors and not necessarily the opinions of The Pennsylvania State University, The American College, or Villanova University.*