

Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

Côté, James E., & Allahar, Anton L. (2011). *Lowering Higher Education: The Rise of Corporate Universities and the Fall of Liberal Education*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. Pages: 243. Price: 24.95 CDN (paper).

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As anticipated, Côté and Allahar deliver another insightful and sobering account of the contemporary issues facing Canadian universities. Expanding on ideas explored in the widely discussed *Ivory Tower Blues: A University System in Crisis*, this sequel to that edition takes the reader on a journey through the changing landscape of liberal education, which, the authors argue, is becoming increasingly blurred with what they call pseudo-vocationalism. The authors seek to bring to light the declining quality of higher education as universities become ever more corporatized—from the below par provision of services and instruction, to the lowering of academic standards as a cause and/or consequence of the disengagement of students and teachers. I believe that, for the most part, the authors are successful in doing so.

Côté and Allahar highlight how the distancing of key stakeholders, including educational administrators and policy-makers from the classroom or more broadly what they call the higher educational forum, may contribute to what they consider to be a failing of the university system. Although presenting a less than optimistic view of higher education in Canada, the authors do offer recommendations they see as having the potential to transform the landscape back into a more familiar and recognizable form. Drawing on secondary evidence gleaned from extant literature and open discussions, as well as a primary source (an analysis of data from the Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research), the authors do a thorough and effective job of situating the current Canadian higher education system in a historical and comparative context.

In the introduction, the authors note the book's goals of encouraging further discussion on the role of the university system as it continues to undergo change

that threatens its core academic values; in particular, they point to how students should be taught and evaluated, and offer suggestions for how to best attempt to fix the system.

The book is divided into three parts. Part one is entitled "The Rise of Pseudo-Vocationalism" and comprises two chapters. The first chapter takes a look at the university from a historical perspective, charting its drift toward vocationalism and corporatization and its current state of disrepair. Chapter 2 tackles the roles played by, and competing interests of, the key stakeholders in the educational forum, stressing the need to start with those closest to the classroom, while acknowledging the distance of policy-makers and those in power from the classroom as a contributing factor in the misconceptions about, and in some cases outright denial of, the systemic crisis that universities now face.

Part two, "Issues Associated With the Drift to Pseudo-Vocationalism" consists of four chapters that explore the challenges and characteristics of the current university system, described as a ship off course, that are working to steer it into uncharted waters, and with increased momentum. In chapter 3, slipping standards are addressed through an exploration of grade inflation, academic disengagement, and lack of readiness as roadblocks on the path to the preservation, if not enhancement, of the scholarship of teaching and learning. The emergence of a two-tiered system is discussed, with an emphasis on the practice of classifying undergraduate education into "elite" and "BA-lite" streams.

In chapter 4, the authors move on to examine problems at the institutional level, exposing the crisis as students experience it; namely, they describe the oversupply of university graduates in relation to the demand for them and a decreasing level of working conditions in the academy for faculty. The resulting effect is a mixed system with contradictory missions of liberal education and vocational training. The authors contrast this academics-for-all model with the educational system in Finland, an interesting alternative to be considered. The chapter concludes with an effective dismissal of common reactions to criticisms of the educational system that are used to refute claims of a crisis.

Chapter 5 delves deeper into a discussion of student disengagement, questioning its inevitability by drawing upon international comparisons, historical considerations, and statements of denial on the issue, leaving the reader to mull over several possible reasons for its widespread occurrence. Chapter 6 exposes the ongoing debate on the role of technology in the classroom, presenting the claims being put forward in this forum, and offering mixed evidence of the utility and effects of three recent technologies: laptops, clickers, and podcasts.

Part three, "The Way Forward Into the New Millennium," consists of a final chapter that provides recommendations and conclusions for what the authors call the stewardship of the system. While the concluding remarks are quite pessimistic, Côté and Allahar do preface them by offering some insight into what to do and what not to do. Their recommendations focus on efforts to adjust funding practices to better enable faculty-student interaction; system-wide standardization of

grading and the introduction of entrance and exit exams; the adjustment of teaching evaluations to reflect engagement, intellectual transformation, and learning outcomes; promoting and making more accessible the liberal arts and sciences; a discussion and debate among key stakeholders; and finally, a return of senior administrators to the classroom. Recommendations and educational outcomes identified by the Association of American Colleges and Universities are also highlighted, though Côté and Allahar do not provide a guideline for how these can be implemented in such a way as to produce the desired effects. In their warnings of what not to do, the authors rely on past and current debates to build a case study of approaches that have been implemented in other systems, and offer a critique of recommendations for Canada with regards to the massification of the university system. A brief argument against elitism is also put forward.

While Côté and Allahar do not dwell on the academic and social implications of declining standards at the undergraduate level for current and potential students, it is certainly easy to imagine, and perhaps safe to speculate, that these effects are profound and becoming increasingly harder to ignore. A concern that readily comes to mind is increasing enrolments at the graduate level, and the question of how the quality of such programs will fare in the long run in the face of such irrefutable systemic change. Indeed, it is hard to remain hopeful after a rigorous discussion of the deficiencies and dysfunctions that plague the current university structure has clouded the landscape with a sense of impending doom.

Predictably, the book doesn't stray far from the topic proclaimed by the title. With *Lowering Higher Education*, Côté and Allahar make a significant contribution to the Canadian literature on higher education and the issues permeating the university scene. It is certainly an invaluable resource and recommended read for policy-makers and administrative leaders with a vested interest in Canada's future economy and the role of post-secondary institutions in educating and training a new generation of skilled workers, professionals, and scholars. Professors and students looking to understand the factors and improve the conditions shaping their institutions will also benefit from engaging in the dialogue prompted by the issues identified in this book. ♣

REFERENCE

Côté, J. E., & Allahar, A. L. (2007). *Ivory Tower Blues: A University System in Crisis*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.