

Book Reviews / Comptes Rendus

Sid Gilbert, Judy Chapman, Peter Kietsche, Paul Grayson, & John Gardner. (1997). *From best intentions to best practices: The first-year experience in Canadian postsecondary education*. University of South Carolina: Monograph Series Number 22, National Resource Center for the Freshman Year Experience and Students in Transition.

Reviewed by Neil Guppy, Faculty of Arts, The University of British Columbia

Two Beginnings

1.1 With the accelerating pace of change and the growing diversity in modern societies, transitions across time and space take on heightened significance. Rites of passage have always been traumatic, often by design. Recently, however, the advantages of easing newcomers into expected customs and practices have been stressed. Examples of programs designed to smooth transitions abound — for new immigrants, workers new to a firm, or first-time parents. Educators were relatively early converts to this view, as witnessed by pre-kindergarten opportunities, middle schools, and student teachers.

The postsecondary system has been a laggard, however. The sink or swim philosophy of many in higher education underlies a belief that here lies a proving ground where only the strong will survive. This sorting and selecting function of higher education has long swamped any view of institutional responsibility for teaching swimming, especially anything remotely connected with remedial swimming. Only the fittest minds needed honing – wasting resources on those too weak to fathom the currents of higher education was inefficient. More recently this view

has been supplanted, in most institutional spheres (including universities), with a more caring and compassionate approach to both entrance and exit transitions. This is a book about what Canadian colleges and universities have been doing to enhance the entrance transition and subsequent success of new students.

1.2 “The Freshman Year Experience® and The First-Year Experience® are service marks of the University of South Carolina. A license may be granted upon written request to use the terms, The Freshman Year Experience and The First-Year Experience” (unnumbered front page). This quotation illustrates many things that are disquieting about this book. Why should others be beholding to South Carolina for something many have come to appreciate without ever hearing of the “The Freshman Year Experience?” Why, in a community of institutions, should anyone be required to pay homage for using a commonplace phrasing? How healthy are these images of incorporation and exclusive warrant emblematic of corporate culture? What is the ethos of accountability here, that only by insistence will others recognize the good work of South Carolina? What is presumed that a foreign institution still stuck on Freshman can insist on how Canadians phrase their slogans? This book is discomfiting with its slick sales, customer relations, and diverted educational missions.

These two beginnings mark very different vantage points from which this book can be read. One is helping, caring, nurturing — providing conditions for success. The other reading is more cynical, fearful of endless process with little substance, much helping but with little intellectual content.

Ideas

2.1 Institutions of higher learning have been keen to take credit for student success, but prone to blaming students themselves for failures. As outsiders (e.g., governments, parents) look for institutional accountability, postsecondary schools have begun to recognize that first year, the focus of this book, is a critical stage. Over one-third of all reporting institutions in Canada offer a University 101 type of course, and while this proportion is growing the figure still lags behind the US. The book’s title would suggest that readers will learn about “best practices” but sadly the evidence is still lacking. “Practice” is stressed, but the grounds for claiming any practice as “best” are not provided. The book is well-intentioned but if

you were devising a first-year experience program you will find examples, but little evidence, to convince your colleagues.

2.2 The survey of colleges and universities used to develop a profile of what practices are in place, clearly shows that institutions have begun shifting away from blaming the students for failure (unpreparedness) to taking responsibility for enhancing the learning environment. The idea of colleges and universities as learning communities is central. The idea of sharing extant practices is helpful and the book provides useful description in this regard.

2.3 Evaluating initiatives designed to ease transitions is an important process, but in this book it has a very “more research required” echo. Careful evaluation is rarely an afterthought anymore — most people think of it, but like many good intentions most people do not do it.

Readers will draw differing conclusions.

3.1 Goals. Some will lament an attempt to broaden the focus of the postsecondary mission. Here the cry will be that these best practices expand a social welfare function that is robbing colleges and universities of their role in invigorating the mind and honing talent. The diffusion of, or misdirection of, focus will be a strong lament.

3.2 Responsibility: Others will applaud an attempt at shifting scarce institutional resources toward helping students succeed. By highlighting learning communities an emphasis on integration shifts the onus from students as solely responsible for their own success or failure to institutions who share collectively in the responsibility for success and failure. This centering of the student learner will be strongly applauded.



Jacqueline Stalker & Susan Prentice (Eds). (1998). *The illusion of inclusion: Women in postsecondary education*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing.
Reviewed by Ruth Rees, Faculty of Education, Queen's University

This book is a must-read for anyone working, teaching and learning in postsecondary education in Canada. It is about the illusion of equity for women, as students and faculty, in postsecondary education.

This collection of essays demonstrates that exclusionary practices [toward women] are still flourishing, despite formal