

## Book Review / Compte rendu

**Keeling, Richard P. & Hersh, Richard, H. (2012). *We're losing our minds: Rethinking American higher education*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan. Pages: 205. Price: \$26.00 USD (paper). ISBN 978-0-230339-83-5**

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Authors Richard Keeling and Richard Hersh do not mince words in their book, *We're losing our minds: Rethinking American higher education*. They are resolute that higher education is undergoing a serious crisis: colleges are churning out students who are not ready for the workforce. Furthermore, they ask, is there any evidence that students have actually *learned* anything during their time in college? Only a complete reconception and reorganization of the goals and priorities of institutions of higher education will make a significant change, and they maintain it is a necessary change that would be for the betterment of students, educational administrators, employers, family, and the country as a whole.

Though this might seem a touch extreme, Keeling and Hersh do present a well-researched and thoughtful summary of the current state of higher education, one that explores how people learn, what colleges are currently doing and, crucially, what needs to be done in order to make institutions a domain of learning. This, they maintain, must be the first and most important priority, supplanting new buildings or athletic centres, and the culture of the school needs to shift in order to make learning substantial. How can this be done?

The authors lay out, chapter by chapter, what higher education is now and their vision of what it could be. Chapter 1 deals with an overview of the current climate, whereby success should not be judged by magazine rankings but by student learning. This learning, the authors suggest, should be cross-disciplinary and transformative, rather than the “banking” method of education that is found in classrooms and the notion of the student as consumer and a degree as commodity. Chapter 2 explores college quality, how today's undergraduate is scraping by without doing much at all, with employers bemoaning that new graduates are not “workplace ready.” A culture focused on learning could change this, but currently neither college rankings nor grades provide evidence of learning, and there is not enough formative assessment since many professors mainly use summative assessment methods.

Chapters 3 and 4 take a detailed look into learning by focusing on development and neuroscience. As “society can no longer assume that a college graduate will be broadly educated, trustworthy, and ready for a life of learning and civic and global engagement” (p. 67) and as colleges lose up to half of their freshman class by senior year, Keeling and Hersh detail the enormous importance of holistic, relevant, challenging learning and the importance of the quality and quantity of interactions with other students, professors, academic advisers, and others in the university community. Furthermore, since learning makes changes in the composition and structure of the brain, a multitude of experiences and interactions with others and the environment are crucial to creating unique knowledge. The “crisis” in education is that these things are simply not happening often enough and it is leading to a weak higher educational system, not to mention shortchanging graduates the opportunity to engage with and create knowledge.

So what can be done? The authors recommend a strategic plan in chapters 5, 6, and 7, which outline the attributes as well as the principles needed to develop a strong culture of higher learning. First, as timely and informative assessment is fundamental, aspects such as transparency in expectations, standards-based assessment, cross-disciplinary learning outcomes, application to real-world issues, and benchmarking should be addressed. And faculty should be rewarded for time spent on teaching-related issues. Second, the focus should be on improving the quality of learning in and out of the classroom, such as incorporating first-year seminars, common reading experiences and community service learning. Transferrable skills would be highlighted as part of a relevant, challenging, but meaningful curriculum. Students would spend more time engaging with academic concepts with full-time faculty, who would adopt mentoring relationships. If high expectations are anticipated, Keeling and Hersh believe that students will rise to this challenge.

What is truly radical about the technique laid out in this book is that the principles and plan to create and maintain high standards for learning must be taken and implemented as a whole, instead of a pick-and-choose approach. The methods of assessment, engagement with tenured faculty, and holistic and cumulative learning that are outlined need to be “practiced together and applied intentionally and rigorously” (p. 131) in order to have any lasting effect. This will most certainly disrupt any compliancy in today’s academy; no longer will a degree be considered an “entitlement.”

Keeling and Hersh take a seemingly simple question, “How do we improve learning?” and instead of giving it lip service, they strive to create a focused, achievable plan. I found the book quite straightforward and intelligibly laid out, but as with all plans there are some caveats. First, this book is a re-imagining of the focus, scope, and purpose of the academy. Certainly there will be very real and strong resistance to implementation, which is touched upon as a given, but not allowed due consideration in proposing how that hurdle will be jumped over (or at least walked around). The scope of these changes would necessitate co-operation with every level within university structure (and in the community as well). Although it is noted that specific implementation will vary according to institution, other than providing some general suggestions the authors do not explore further how this may occur. How can the plan be implemented when division ultimately occurs? Second, there are massive costs associated with this new focus, involving realignment of current priorities and exploration of new options. If funds are diverted from other projects (such as new centres, as the book suggests) is the plan realistic in the

long term? And how will funding issues be addressed if (inevitably) not everyone is on board with this new focus?

Also, the student voice is missing. The authors do well making student learning one of the foci of their book (and indeed, give consideration to those generally overlooked in studies: mature and non-traditional students). However, except for a few experiences of immersion, and examples of developmental learning, the voices of those the students who this approach is intended to benefit are eerily absent from the discussion. We know that employers lament that “lack” – the unpreparedness of new graduates. At times professors bemoan that students “haven’t learned anything” in their classes, but what do students say they need in order to support their learning? What are their thoughts on the learning process? How can they participate in this conversation in order to explain and explore their needs?

Overall though, this book tackles the crucial issues of what students are learning, how they learn, and how to improve learning directly. Keeling and Hersh provide creative but straightforward solutions and urge the academy, government, and community to make this a priority. I commend the authors on taking an action-based approach instead of merely theorizing about this subject. I believe this plan could effect change, though just when these changes will actually occur and how much of their approach will be implemented and accepted by the academy remains to be seen. ♣