

## Book Review / Compte rendu

**Blumenstyk, G. (2014). *American Higher Education in Crisis?: What Everyone Needs to Know*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. Pages: 192. Price: 16.95 USD (paper). ISBN 978-0-19-937408-3 (paper); 978-0-19-937409-0 (cloth)**

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In this book, Goldie Blumenstyk, a senior writer at *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, provides a comprehensive picture of the higher education scene in the United States. Written in a lucid question-and-answer format, it is geared towards all segments of the population, including policymakers, administrators, students, and professors of higher education. Blumenstyk surveys the lay of the land, expounding upon the challenges and issues facing higher education. Her basic premise is that American higher education is in crisis, with rising student debt and technological advancements reshaping universities' and colleges' delivery model, leading people to question the value of postsecondary education. But she emphatically asserts that despite all the doom and gloom, the sector is in for exciting times, with myriad changes and evolutionary forces that are likely to drastically alter the higher education landscape.

Blumenstyk details the debate around the worthiness of postsecondary education in America, burgeoning tuition and education costs, deeply increasing racial and economic disparities, and financial transparency. She contends that the current postsecondary system amplifies pre-existing racial and economic inequalities and then projects that inequity onto the labour market and society. She goes on to highlight how higher education has been seized by a corporate style of functioning and how adjunct and part-time professors have been quietly replacing tenure-track and tenured faculty. She lists several reasons for escalating education costs, some of which include mission creep (e.g., primarily undergraduate institutions adding graduate programs), reduction in faculty teaching loads, “buy-downs” of faculty time for research, deferred maintenance costs, and augmentation of infrastructure due to “lazy rivers” and the amenities race to stay competitive. According to Blumenstyk, one of many factors in the rising cost of higher education is the number of

non-academic employees—what she refers to as “administrative bloat”—which has multiplied in recent years relative to the academic faculty. But she reasons that this is inevitable owing to various factors, including but not limited to the enlargement of student services, the increased sophistication of research, and the growing use of technological tools and applications.

Blumenstyk mentions some interesting trends that are likely to bring disruptive innovation to educational institutions: data analytics, online education, and personalized education. There is an overwhelming urge and rallying cry among critics to adopt distance education and other non-traditional approaches for their greater convenience and low-cost models. The author elaborates upon how massive open online courses, or MOOCs, have already started to gain popularity among students, albeit with limited success. Regarding the hype claiming that online education could make campuses obsolete, she suggests that physical campuses are likely here to stay because they contribute to the social and economic fabrics of their local communities. She goes on to argue that technology has made it possible for school administrators to dabble in data analytics and predictive technologies that have huge potential to offer more personalized services, ultimately improving student learning and driving down costs. Blumenstyk also alludes to other radical advances, including the advent of community colleges that offer affordable and job-oriented degrees, and the prospect of increasing enrolment through a mix of online and hybrid-format classes that best utilizes the benefits of both traditional and distance education.

Despite such growing concerns, Blumenstyk points out that universities and colleges are responding by altering previous academic and business models, amid pressures from different regulatory bodies (including government) to enhance affordability, diversity, and academic integrity. She outlines some of the exciting developments happening in educational institutions: the badges and stackable credentials that showcase the personal educational portfolios of students beyond their immediate achievements; competency-based programs that reflect students’ mastering of material; German-style apprenticeships in factories. All of these, cumulatively, are likely to influence how education is administered and offered. Finally, she makes the case for educational institutions to shift gears and move away from what she defines as cruise-control management, to greater engagement and budgetary accountability.

Much of what Blumenstyk describes closely parallels the threats higher education faces outside of the United States as well, including in Canada. This book has a few key lessons and pointers for decision makers in higher education to contextualize some of the complexities Canada shares with the United States. Although the value of well-rounded postsecondary education is obvious, students in Canada are accumulating debt at a rate reaching historic proportions. The gamut of issues and challenges she addresses in the context of US higher education mirrors what Canada is witnessing, with the marginalization of Aboriginal, first-generation immigrant, and other minority students in the education sector. Similar to America, Canada will see its students become poorer, older, and dominated by the racial and ethnic minorities who are turning into majorities on campuses. In the midst of widespread budget cuts by provincial and federal governments, Canadian institutions are relying more and more on donations and grants from foundations and corporations, sometimes risking being swayed by donors’ agendas.

This book is an easy read, has some interesting statistics, and provides ample food for thought. Blumenstyk sounds optimistic and has several pointers for students, parents, and followers of higher education. She makes a compelling argument that, given all the challenges and issues surrounding postsecondary education today, it faces a moment of truth: it must adapt and change in response to a new and complex environment. Yet, while the book offers a glimpse into the state of higher education, it omits many other issues that might be of interest to some stakeholders—for example, the threat of science funding, academic scandals, and graduate underemployment. Moreover, on a few topics she dons her journalistic hat and refrains from weighing in on either side of the debate. The book could have benefited from including policy recommendations on future directions for higher education and on what the discipline needs to do going forward. ♣