

BOOK REVIEW

CAPITALIZING ON COLLEGE: HOW HIGHER EDUCATION WENT FROM MISSION DRIVEN TO MARGIN OBSESSED

REVIEWED BY:

DANIEL W. LANG
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

Brown, Joshua (2025) *Capitalizing on College: How Higher Education Went from Mission Driven to Margin Obsessed*. Oxford University Press: Pp 304. Price: CDN 51.00 (paper)'

In some respects – in fact, most -- *Capitalizing on College: How Higher Education Went from Mission Driven to Margin Obsessed* says little of relevance to higher education in Canada. But in those few respects that do have a bearing on the Canadian experience, the book can be a thought-provoking read.

First, it is important to understand that the book's title is an over-statement. It is not about higher education at large. It is about higher education in the United States and, more particularly, about a single sector: religious colleges. Religious colleges constitute a large sector of higher education in the United States, even larger when measured in terms of undergraduate education. By that definition there are only a few Canadian counterparts for example, Redeemer, Tyndale, and Trinity-Western, all sectarian institutions offering secular degrees. Professor Brown's explanation of this focus is that a broader focus would have been methodologically unmanageable. There is practical truth to that: the book's research relies entirely on 150 confidential in-person interviews at eight colleges, each identified by a pseudonym. These are in turn organized into four "strategies" that were adopted from previous studies of for-profit colleges, an interesting methodological choice that deserves explanation.

The four strategies are:

Traditional, emulating existing practices at elite – "ivies, little ivies, seven sisters" – universities which emphasize mission, reputation, residential study, and endowments that rely on alumni support.

Pioneer, openly breaking tradition, recruiting non-traditional, non-sectarian students, delivering existing programs in varied off-campus locations on schedules that suit life-styles (jobs, families, part-time).

Network, breaking tradition further by offering new programs, new methods of delivery, at new locations while the "home" campus remains traditional.

Accelerated, following a frank venture capitalist model, borrowing to make the on-campus experience more attractive by expanding and adding new facilities. Above instructional cost fees replace fund-raising and endowments.

As the reader progresses from *traditional* to *accelerated* the language of interviewees becomes more corporate and top-down with fewer references to traditional university governance.

Some readers at this point might recall Burton Clark's *The Distinctive College* which is also an application of organizational theory to a similar question of institutional innovation to survive applied to three colleges--Reed, Antioch and Swarthmore –all at the time facing financial hardship, two with strong religious identities. Here the typologies were:'

Revolutionary: initiation, embodiment, persistence: everything is new and “blank slate” different, administratively and academically. A new tradition, openly not the elite “ivies” tradition. (Reed)

Re-invention: transformation, embodiment, adjustment: work-study reaffirmed and modified (four years in five), faculty more specialized, self-identification as “special.” (Antioch)

Evolutionary: foundations, transformation, conservation: re-affirmation of existing foundations, acceptance of program specialization in faculty recruitment and research, willingness to compete with the “ivies” for students. (Swarthmore)

Is the past prologue? There are few substantive differences between “traditional” and “evolutionary”. The definition of the academic program: four-years of full-time study on campus is the same. Recruitment is in existing markets. Fund-raising is alumni-based and applied to reducing fees. A case can be made that Reed and Antioch were “pioneering” and were openly willing to be seen as such. We could say at this point that history tells us that the “traditional” and “pioneer” strategies have a chance of working, perhaps in Canada for similar reasons, most notably satellite campuses offering “home” campus programs.

Network and *Accelerate* are new models that place organizational survival first. Defining those models Professor Brown makes two economic observations that, on the one hand, have little relevance to Canada but, on the other hand, might in the future. The first is that, in the absence of endowments, tuition fees are more the product of government student aid programs than of institutional strategy, even for private colleges. There is some, but very little, recognition of this in Canada (Hicks, 2014). In other words, the government defines the market. Private return on investment, the classical economic belief that investments in higher education will generate returns greater than cost will justify increased college spending, nominally in the name of quality, no longer holds. This is evidence of an imperfect market, including higher education, as described by Michael Spence in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech two decades ago (Spence, 2001).

If Professor Brown’s first observation is correct, the second follows: the economics of college have shifted, for some colleges anyway, from capitalism to mercantilism. The economic pie will no longer grow at a pace that matches the cost of college to either students or government. Universities will compete zero sum for larger pieces of a fixed fiscal pie. This explains the last two “strategies” and to some degree the second. The higher education market in Canada is no less imperfect than the American market described by Professor Brown, perhaps even more so given governments’ disposition to act as proxies for the market. So, Professor Brown got the title of his book just right.

None of the colleges in the study expressed any belief that expansion of research could resolve their fiscal problems. This might seem excessively “pioneering” in Canada, where in the absence of serious system differentiation, every university can claim to a research role, the fiscal collapse of Laurentian University notwithstanding.

Another major difference is the posture towards accreditation and quality assurance. Some interviewees, especially in the *network* and *accelerated* groups, complained about a too literal application of some standards. In Canada, where there is accreditation, it operates at the program level without any connection to overall institutional performance.

A final reason to read this book: it ends with an entire chapter – called a “methodological index” – that describes in detail how the eight college sample was created, how interviews were conducted, and how the results worked into the final narrative. It is a useful guide for any mixed methods research.

REFERENCES

- Clark, B. R. (1992). *The Distinctive College: Antioch, Reed, and Swarthmore*. Routledge.
- Hicks, M. (2014). Ontarians Still Do Not Pay the Sticker Price, HEQCO.
- Spence, M. (2001). Nobel Prize Lecture, The Nobel Foundation.