



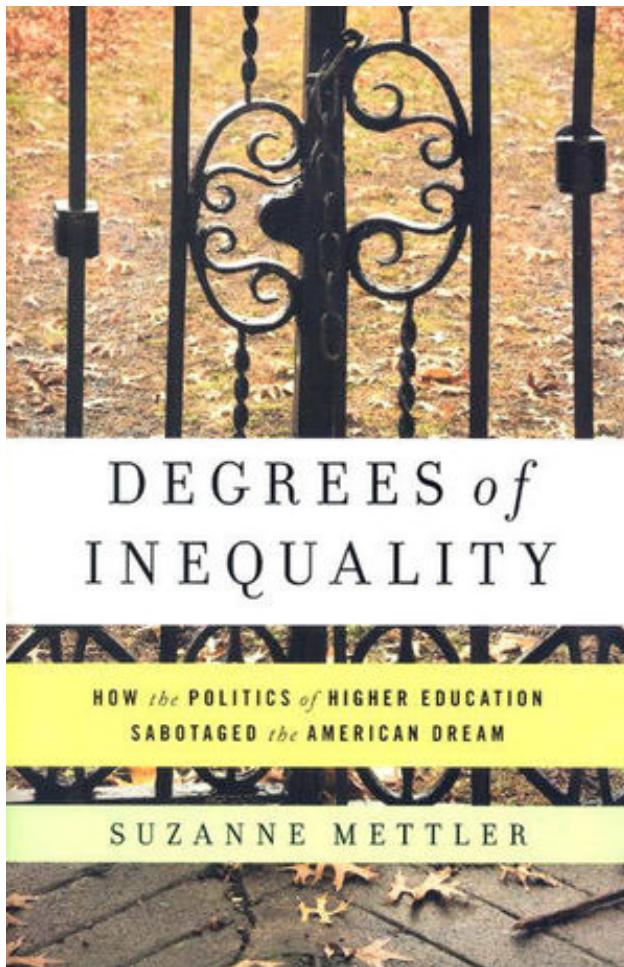
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DAILY NEWS

'Degrees of Inequality' informative and instructional

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"Degrees of Inequality: How the Politics of Higher Education Sabotaged the American Dream" by Suzanne Mettler. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2014. 261 pages, \$27.99.



"Understanding why higher education has gone off course requires us to put American politics front and center," Suzanne Mettler explains in "Creating Degrees of Inequality," the inaugural chapter in her new book, "Degrees of Inequality: How the Politics of Higher Education Sabotaged the American Dream."

"The higher education policies created by earlier generations still endure but require maintenance, updating and rerouting if they are to function effectively," she continues. "Yet the rise of partisan polarization has undermined the capacity of policymakers to engage in these fundamental tasks. And when lawmakers do legislate, they often cater primarily to powerful monied interests and wealthy households. As a result, the nation has failed to maintain its historic legacy of expanding opportunity through higher education."

Mettler's treatise on the current status of American colleges and universities is the latest in a series of scathing critiques on the contemporary academic scene. Although she does look at what is happening in the modern classroom, her focus is more on the deleterious effects of an increasing emphasis on the

economic implications associated with earning a degree. More to the point, she sees the rise of for-profit institutions as a primary culprit in the precipitous decline of the preeminent status the United States has held in the academic world for almost a century.

"The cozy relationship that developed in the late 1990s and early 2000s between Congress, the for-profit college industry, and the U.S. Department of Education resembles the kind of 'iron triangle' that political scientists have long noticed in relationships between industries, agencies, and public officials," she notes in "Unscrupulous Profiteers," the third chapter. "What is unusual is that the industry at the center of this story is a sector of higher education. It is not the manufacturer of goods such as weaponry for the U.S. armed forces, or the provider of services such as transportation or

communication that facilitate commerce. Rather, these political relationships emulate from a service sector that is associated with the provision of a basic right of citizenship: education.”

It’s the classic case of what happens when the regulators are in bed with those they are supposed to be regulating and the overarching priority of everyone involved is enhancing the bottom line. The free market has many positive attributes and is inherently self-correcting, given enough time and sufficient pain. With education, however, the stakes are simply too high to allow the process to run its natural course. Yes, unscrupulous providers who are not genuinely concerned with the quality of the services they deliver will eventually be exposed for what they truly are and appropriately put out of business. In the interim, students who put their trust in those who are supposedly looking out for their best interests are left with mountains of debt and a worthless credential.

Among the features distinguishing Mettler from many of her contemporaries who are grappling with the same subject matter are her indisputable optimism as well as her categorical emphasis on solutions. Instead of merely outlining the extent of the problem – which obviously needs to be done – she spends most of her time defining the path we need to take in order to get the enterprise back on track. She does see hope on the horizon, but she acknowledges that it is going to take a concerted effort on the part of everyone affected by those who do not have the best interests of students in particular or society at large at heart.

“Today we see college degrees as investments that only yield benefits to the individuals who acquire them, enabling them to get ahead and have a wider set of opportunities,” the author stresses in “Restoring the Public Purposes of Higher Education,” the concluding chapter. “But when the United States was founded, public officials promoted higher education because it mattered for the broader public. They strongly believed that by encouraging and subsidizing advanced learning, the nation would foster the knowledge, creativity, dynamism, leadership, and skills that would spur economic growth, technological innovation, and social advances.”

As might be expected given her prior work, “Degrees of Inequality” is extensively researched, with 44 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the introduction and seven chapters that comprise the main text. Mettler is exceptionally meticulous as she lays out her primary thesis; i.e., the only way to revitalize academia is through revisiting its core mission. At the same time, her writing style appeals to a general audience. You don’t have to be associated with higher education to understand the concerns she’s raising or the course of action she’s advocating.

Mettler is a faculty member at Cornell University, where she is the Clinton Rossiter professor of American Institutions. Before assuming her present position, she was a Distinguished professor at Syracuse University in the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs. In addition to being a fellow at the Century Foundation, she is on the board of the Scholars Strategy Network. A frequent contributor to The New York Times and the Chronicle of Higher Education, her books include “The Submerged State: How Invisible Government Policies Undermine American Democracy,” “Dividing Citizens: Gender and Federalism in New Deal Public Policy” and “Soldiers to Citizens: The G.I. Bill and the Making of the Greatest Generation.”

Anyone concerned about the future, either for themselves or their children, will find “Degrees of Inequality” to be informative and instructional. Our system of higher education is still arguably the envy of the world, but there are cracks developing in the infrastructure. Mettler seems to understand this better than most; we’d all do well to heed her wakeup call. I recommend it without reservation.

— *Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.*