

Eyes on the quest

‘Higher Education in Crisis?’ is wide-ranging

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“*American Higher Education in Crisis? What Everyone Needs to Know*” by Goldie Blumenstyk. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015, 198 pages, \$16.95.



AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION IN CRISIS?

WHAT EVERYONE NEEDS TO KNOW®

GOLDIE BLUMENSTYK

“Over the past 30 years, the price of college has gone up faster than prices of almost all other goods and services,” Goldie Blumenstyk explains in the introduction to “*American Higher Education in Crisis? What Everyone Needs to Know*,” her new treatise on the immense challenges facing the academic world. “Student debt is at an all-time high of \$1.2 trillion. Doubts about the value of college are on the rise. State support for the public-college sector, which educates seven of 10 students, has yet to (and may never) return to the generous levels of the early 2000s.”

“Demands for career-focused training are growing, even as experts argue that the skills of a liberal arts education are becoming increasingly important,” she continues. “And a restless reform movement, inspired by the promise of new technology and backed by powerful political and financial might, is growing more insistent that the enterprise spend less, show better results, and become more open to new kinds of educational providers.”

As someone who is intimately acquainted with the concerns Blumenstyk articulates so cogently in this thought-provoking book, I was

mesmerized by her realistic perspective on what we are confronting in academia as well as her accurate description of our prospects for resolving the core problems in a timely and efficient manner.

Sometimes she can be rather bleak in her overall prognosis, although at the end of the day her outlook is astonishingly optimistic. The more I read, the more I realized Blumenstyk is taking us on a journey; in order to see the light at the end of the tunnel, she first must make us painfully aware of the consequences that lie ahead if we fail in our quest to keep the institution responsive to the ever-evolving needs of the society that perpetuates its existence.

Blumenstyk began her career at the Orlando Sentinel, where she covered government issues. Since 1988, she has written for the Chronicle of Higher Education, holding a number of editorial positions.

She completed her undergraduate work in history from Colgate University before earning a master's degree from the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. The author is widely respected for her expertise on for-profit higher education, college finances and the commercialization of academic research. Blumenstyk's honors include a first prize award from the Education Writers Association in 2011 for her reporting on the business of higher education. She is a frequent speaker at conferences, seminars and other professional meetings. This is her first book.

"American Higher Education in Crisis?" is exceptionally well-researched, with 22 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the introduction, four major chapters and conclusion that comprise the main text. Each of the four chapters consists of numerous shorter vignettes devoted to answering a particular question, such as "How many students come to college prepared to do college-level work?" and "Do projected changes in the population of the country pose a threat to colleges' financial health?"

The chapter I found most intriguing was "Part Two: Costs, Spending, and Debt," principally because this is one of the more controversial aspects of higher education, especially in the modern era. As the author makes abundantly clear, the reason for the intense scrutiny is justified. In many circles, higher education is judged almost solely by its ability to yield a significant return on investment, even though the metrics involved in making such a determination are admittedly murky and do not translate well from other sectors of the economy.

"It is hard to find a higher education topic that evokes more passion than the for-profit colleges industry," Blumenstyk writes in "Do for-profit colleges pose a competitive threat to traditional colleges and universities?" – one of the key questions posed in the second chapter. "As for-profit college enrollments swelled, so too did their share of federal student aid and other federal funding. But critics of the sector contend that it has thrived by taking advantage of unsophisticated students, leaving them with worthless degrees and student loan debts they cannot afford to pay off."

In the final analysis, I found Blumenstyk's take on the contemporary status of higher education to be one of the more accessible resources I have run across in recent years. Her writing style is both succinct as well as surprisingly wide-ranging. It would be challenging to identify an issue associated with higher education in the 21st century that she does not address in one way or another. In fact, I plan to use "American Higher Education in Crisis?" in one of my graduate classes next spring semester – so if any of my students are reading this review, they should go ahead and purchase a copy now.

"Pundits often analogize higher education to industries that have disappeared from the business landscape, but that comparison may not give colleges enough credit for some of their built-in advantages: the centuries of tradition and experience from which to draw upon and the very smart people on their payrolls," Blumenstyk concludes near the end of the book. "For the most part, campuses are enduring – and in much the same way, it is safe to say, so, too, is higher education."

"Cruise-control leadership at colleges just won't cut it, and institutions where presidents and trustees act otherwise will learn that lesson the hard way," she adds. "Philanthropy will matter more than ever, particularly for costs like financial aid. And even in the Internet era, the campus will matter, too."

As anyone who knows anything about Western Kentucky University can attest, "complacent" does not describe our leadership philosophy in any way, shape or form. Call it self-serving if you want, but I tend to agree with Blumenstyk's overall assessment of our prospects – especially at the institution where I work. I recommend this one highly.

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