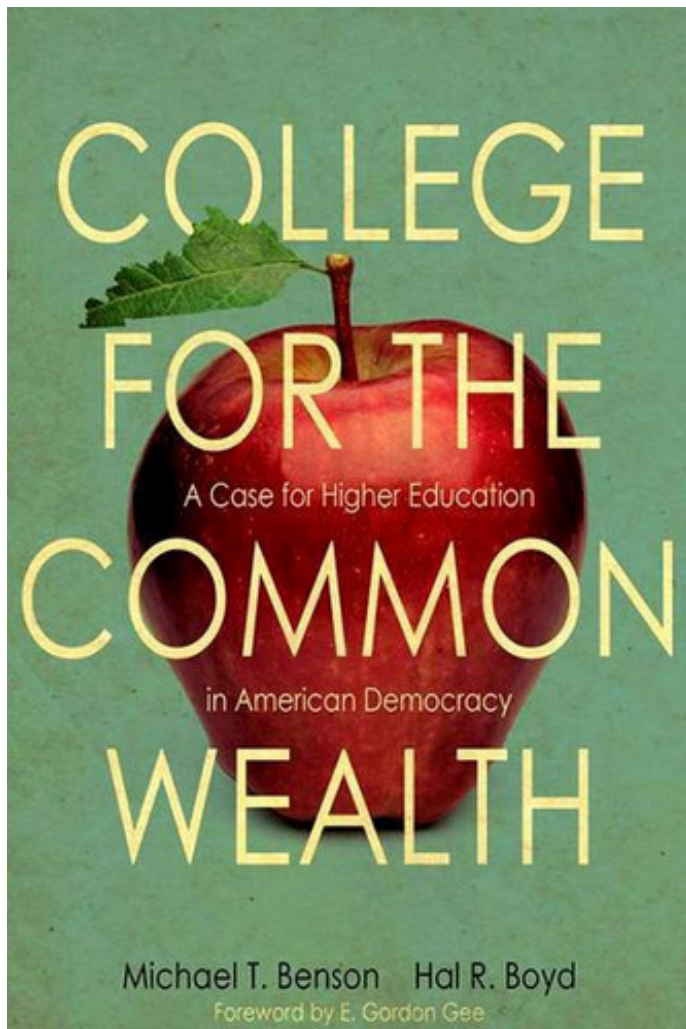


Authors tackle daunting challenges for higher ed

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“College for the Commonwealth: A Case for Higher Education in American Democracy” by Michael T. Benson and Hal R. Boyd. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2018, 156 pages, \$35 (hardcover).



“While the race to educate an innovative workforce surges, Kentucky is sustaining some of the nation’s largest per-student cuts to higher education,” Michael T. Benson and Hal R. Boyd note in the introduction to “College for the Commonwealth: A Case for Higher Education in American Democracy,” their recently-released status report and prognosis for colleges and universities in Kentucky.

“In short, public higher education in Kentucky could receive nearly \$200 million less in 2018 than it did in 2008 (a 30 percent reduction),” they continue. “We make the case here that education, and higher education in particular, remains vital for the commonwealth. Even with the rising cost of tuition, a college degree is still a very sound personal financial investment.”

As someone who is directly affected by many of the trends meticulously explained and dissected in this insightful and engaging primer on our collective future, I found Benson and Boyd’s analysis and critique of a vital sector of our society to be remarkably articulate and thought-provoking – so much so that I plan to make it required reading in one of my graduate classes next semester. At its core, the authors are attempting to facilitate a much-needed

dialogue and debate over a widely-discussed yet often misunderstood institution critical to maintaining an acceptable standard of living for both individuals and the communities in which they are embedded. In large measure, I feel they succeed in this quest on many levels.

One of the features I always look for in this kind of book involves whether the narrative includes both description as well as prescription; i.e., is the focus primarily on describing the nature of the challenges we are facing (including a historical perspective), or is the main emphasis on how we can best move forward given the reality of our present circumstances? I am happy to report that “Commonwealth” succeeds on both fronts: The reader is provided with both a concise yet solidly evidence-based explanation of how we arrived at this moment as well as a roadmap for navigating our way through the treacherous terrain into which we are quickly submerging ourselves.

Perhaps the best examples of what I mean here can be found in “Dynamic Challenges and Solutions in Higher Education,” the eighth chapter and one of the most incisive. Here, Benson and Boyd show how

the innovative approach at Toyota, which essentially revitalized an entire industry, has enormous implications for higher education. Reflect on the following:

“Though universities are not about profits, and educating an individual is vastly different than making a car, the current models for increasing graduation rates are not that far off from the principles at work in the Toyota Production System. Society relies on universities to produce students with certain abilities; Toyota’s customers expect high quality products. The analogy is imperfect; universities are not production plants. However, similar principles are necessary for success in both arenas. Schools such as Ball State, Georgia State and Southern New Hampshire University serve as examples, as these very different universities strive to implement new technology and intervention plans to help keep students while also trying to maintain high academic standards.”

As might be expected given the subject matter, the manuscript is extensively researched, with 28 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the introduction, seven relatively succinct chapters and conclusion that form the main text. And even though their treatment of the subject matter is decidedly academic in nature, I found Benson and Boyd’s prose to be exceptionally accessible to a wide audience, including those who may be unfamiliar with the scholarly aura that tends to characterize these kinds of efforts.

A past president of Snow College and Southern Utah University, Benson is president of Eastern Kentucky University and serves on the Council of Presidents of the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges. He also served as chair of the NCAA Honors Committee as well as co-chair of the Higher Education Consortium for Bluegrass Tomorrow. He holds rank in the Department of Government and Economics at EKU. His previous books include “Harry S. Truman and the Founding of Israel” and “Warships of the USSR in World War II: Technology and Weapons of World Wars.”

Boyd, who teaches part time at Brigham Young University, is a graduate of Yale Law School. He has written for The Atlantic, National Review and the Weekly Standard and has contributed to The Oxford Handbook series. Previously, he collaborated with David L. Paulsen on “Are Christians Mormon?”

Ultimately, the authors are guardedly optimistic that higher education will overcome the daunting challenges it currently faces – particularly in Kentucky – and emerge an even stronger force for good than it has been in the past. The authors make it abundantly clear how the commonwealth got into such a paralyzing economic bind and, more importantly, what we now need to do to remedy the situation. Certainly, they (especially Benson) have the qualifications to serve as credible tour guides for the journey that lies just ahead.

“Whether in aviation, rural health care, international education experiences or providing low-income students with a high-income education, the colleges and universities in the commonwealth have evolved to serve an important prosocial function with the state and community,” Benson and Boyd explain near the end of the book. “They fill gaps in services often missed by the state or passed over by the market. These entities and their services act as essential instructional anchors in the broad mix of civil society institutions that help support a well-functioning republic.”

Even if you have never set foot on a college campus, if you live in Kentucky your future is inexorably tied to the viability of the higher education opportunities we make available to the citizens of our great state. “Commonwealth” makes a very convincing, data-driven case that we truly are all in this together. Highly recommended.

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