

'Higher Education?' looks at challenges facing universities

Colleges should be helping to build the next generation's future, not mortgaging it."

So assert Andrew Hacker and Claudia Dreifus in their recent best-seller, "Higher Education?: How Colleges Are Wasting Our Money and Failing Our Kids And What We Can Do About It." Those who make their living in the academic world should be able to instantly relate to the central thesis of the book, while those less familiar with what currently goes on at most institutions will be simultaneously enlightened and outraged. The authors do not paint a very flattering portrait of the contemporary college campus.

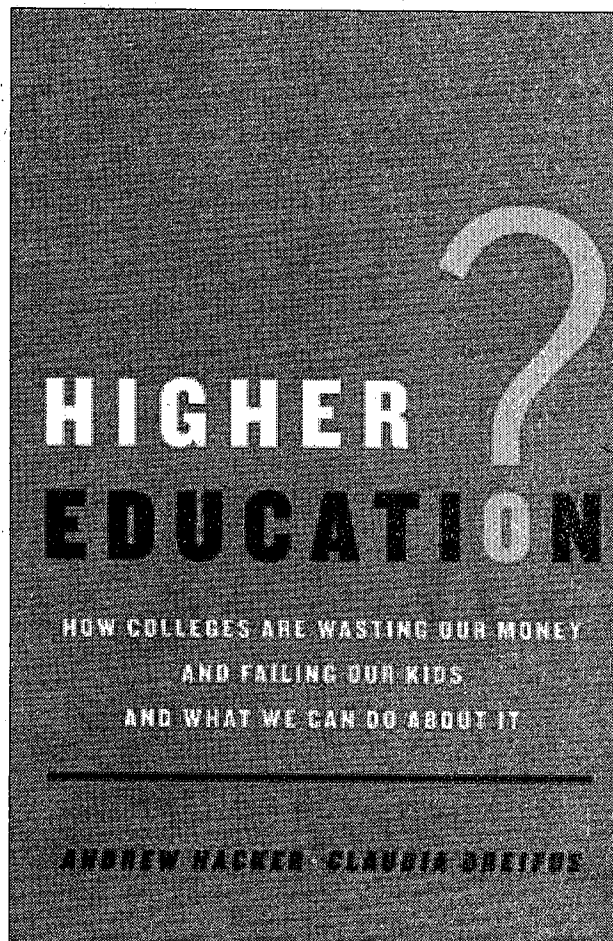
Hacker is a professor at Queens College; he is the author of several previous books, including "Two Nations: Black & White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal," and "Money: Who Has How Much and Why." His career spans some 50 years; he has taught for more than 100 consecutive semesters. Dreifus is an adjunct associate professor at Columbia University; she is the editor of "Seizing Our Bodies: The Politics of Women's Health" and is a regular contributor to the Science Times section of the New York Times. In addition to being co-authors on this project, Hacker and Dreifus are also self-described life partners.

"Higher Education?" is extensively researched using a variety of credible sources — including several in-depth interviews with administrators, faculty and students at a variety of different institutions. The authors provide a fairly detailed historical context for their work, but they do focus much more extensively on the future than the past. Their basic premise revolves around the notion that colleges and universities have strayed from their core mission as it has been traditionally defined and, as such, are in danger of becoming marginalized as a cultural force.

Hacker and Dreifus are particularly critical of the escalating priority assigned to research at many schools — especially those that do not have the resources available to support it. "All universities, and increasing numbers of colleges, now expect their faculties to discover and create new knowledge," the authors explain. "Research is the first test for preferment and promotions." But contrary to the customary justification typically given for this highly questionable trend, they vehemently disagree with the assertion by many administrators that a greater emphasis on research tends to precipitate better classroom instruction.

As support for their position, they describe in some detail the 2007 annual conference of the American Sociological Association, at which 3,015 scholarly papers were presented. "Is all this research truly necessary?" they ask. "Most of what is now being done under the guise of academic research really isn't that. The time and energy and resources spent on all these papers and articles and books can and should be devoted to better classroom teaching. If anything, there's an inverse correlation between good teaching and academic research."

Employing a narrative style



"Higher Education?: How Colleges Are Wasting Our Money and Failing Our Kids And What We Can Do About It," by Andrew Hacker and Claudia Dreifus. New York: Time Books, 2010, 271 pages, \$26.00 (cloth).

that effortlessly promotes interest in the subject matter while at the same time encouraging critical thinking, Hacker and Dreifus manage to touch on virtually every topic germane to an informed critique of the academy's present incarnation. Many faculty members will no doubt find themselves shaking their heads in agreement with more than a few of their observations. "Whether we were in Berkeley or Boston, the talk was similar: the students are semiliterate; the school's president is anti-intellectual; the new parking rules are inequitable; and there's this boorish colleague who filibusters at meetings," they write. "There is a general consensus within the professoriate that administrators are a kind of class enemy and a danger."

The book also delves into the enormous cost associated with attending a college or university today. They divide the blame for the astronomical increase in price tag over the last 30 years more or less equally between faculty who continue to demand more for their services and students who increasingly see themselves more as customers than scholars. "Schools respond to an amenities arms race, aimed at 17-year-olds who are thought to base their college decision more on hot tubs than classes," the authors note. "Students expect and get suites, private bathrooms, and food courts with specialized stations. So it should be no surprise that charges for room and board have also doubled in after-inflation dollars."

Many Kentuckians will no

doubt find Chapter 13, "Schools We Like — Our Top Ten List," especially interesting. Here, Hacker and Dreifus identify the institutions they feel are still true to their primary charge as centers of teaching and learning. Not surprisingly, Berea College made the cut. "For those fortunate enough to win admission, a first-rate education is proffered," they note with respect to Berea. "The student ratio is 10-to-1 with no graduate assistants substituting for real professors. Most of its 1,500 scholars come from the top 20 percent of their high schools and from families where the annual income is under \$50,000 a year."

The authors conclude the book with a list of recommendations for returning colleges and universities to their former glory — all of which have a common goal going back to the overriding importance of educating undergraduates. Among several other suggestions, their proposals include abolishing tenure, providing fewer sabbaticals, requiring less research, relying less on student loans, getting rid of medical schools and research centers, and ending the exploitation of adjuncts.

As collaborators, Hacker and Dreifus seem to make a good team. If you only want to read one book about the challenges currently facing higher education in this country, you could do a lot worse than "Higher Education?" Personally, I look forward to their next project.

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

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