

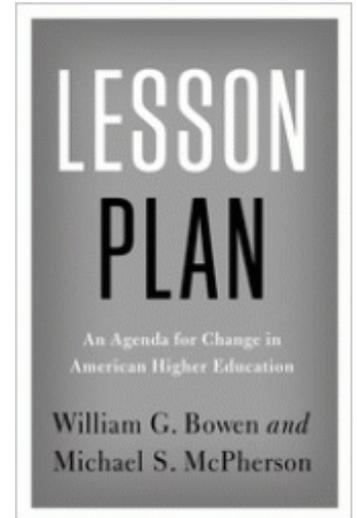
Authors discuss new book on higher education's problems, real and imagined

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'Lesson Plan'

Two former college presidents, both longtime scholars of higher education, discuss their new book on the problems - real and imagined -- facing academe.

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By

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Bachelor's degrees should be completed in three years. MOOCs should replace general education. Coding boot camps are the game changer. College should be free. Internships are more important than instruction. Eliminate administrative bloat and higher education will be prosperous.

Pick your quick fix for higher education, but it won't be endorsed in [Lesson Plan](#) (Princeton University Press), a new book by William G. Bowen and Michael S. McPherson. They make clear early in the book that while higher education has serious problems, they find most punditry and political proposals for higher education to be wrong. In a short volume (140 pages), they try to explain what everyone is getting wrong and to offer an agenda for change. They argue that much more focus should be placed on academic rigor and graduation rates than on the numerous ideas that receive widespread attention for reforming higher education.

Both Bowen and McPherson have experience as college presidents, foundation leaders and scholars of academe. Bowen is president emeritus of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and Princeton University. McPherson, president of the Spencer Foundation, is former president of Macalester College. They responded jointly to questions about their book.

Q: In the introduction, you discuss how "so-called crises" in higher education are "overblown." What do you consider the fundamental incorrect critiques of higher education today?

A: Perhaps the dominant case is the supposed truth that all or most people who attend college are "drowning in debt" that threatens their future opportunities and livelihoods. The fact is that most people who successfully complete a B.A. degree borrow a manageable amount of money (at public institutions about 40 percent borrow nothing at all) and wind up substantially better off in financial and other ways than if they had forgone college. In fact, the people who are at greatest risk of getting in trouble with debt from college are those who spend time in college and emerge with no degree or certificate. But the fact is that even if you don't borrow any money, spending time, often years, in college and emerging with nothing is a serious misfortune. Debt is a real problem for a limited subset of borrowers, and we need to do much better at helping people avoid this kind of problem and at solving the problem if it does emerge. But the central issue here is the dropout problem, and we shouldn't let an obsession with debt blind our eyes to the need to focus on improving students' prospects of success in school. Money is part of the equation, but it is far from the whole story.

Here are two other topics we will mention more briefly.

1. Controlling "administrative bloat" is not the key to bringing public college tuition down. The big thing pushing public tuition up is state governments' reducing their real higher education spending per student as a result of budget pressures and expanding enrollments; total nonfaculty employment per student has barely risen at all in public higher education in recent years. Let's not spend energy solving a nonproblem.
2. Rescuing every small college from closing, no matter its future prospects, is no way to strengthen the private college sector. Certainly, strong efforts should be made to preserve these places, which are often important community assets. But some colleges need to close, and that is best done in an orderly way, before the final crisis arrives, leaving students and employees stranded. The fact is that the small-college sector would be in better shape if there were fewer institutions and the remaining ones were larger and more robust financially.

Q: In several parts of the book, you stress the importance of academic rigor as opposed to speed of learning. Would you discuss how rigor and substance seem to be missing from the emphasis on training people as speedily as possible?

A: We think colleges need to be places for learning, first of all; being places for credentialing should be a distant second. As the great work of Claudia Goldin and Larry Katz suggests, it is by building a better-educated workforce, not merely a more credentialed one, that the largest benefits of higher education come about. We worry that learning may sometimes get lost in the rush to give credit for prior learning, or to set students up to take a series of tests with minimal instructional support (as some -- not all -- competency-based learning programs appear to do). Some of these efforts may lose focus on the hard and time-consuming work of helping students learn.

That said, we absolutely reject the idea that slowness is a good thing in itself. Both intuition and evidence indicate that full speed ahead is the best setting for a demanding program of learning. We think colleges can be strengthened by reducing time to degree, and that encouraging students to attend full-time, even at the cost of doing some borrowing, is wise.

Q: One of the most popular ideas in some circles today is free or debt-free public higher education. You write critically of this idea. Why?

A: A basic problem with making public higher education free in a society as unequal as ours is that the benefits of "free" will go disproportionately to people from higher-income families. Such students are more likely to go to college, they go to places like research universities that are more expensive to run and they go for more years because they are less likely to drop out. Making those advantages free is not the way to achieve greater equity! At the same time, making the colleges that low-income students are more likely to attend free isn't good enough to meet their central needs. Eliminating tuition doesn't solve the problem of covering living expenses, and we would

rather see some of the money that would go to eliminating tuition for the affluent devoted instead to support for living expenses for disadvantaged students.

Even more important, for the most part the public institutions that are most likely to serve low-income students don't succeed in seeing enough of them through to graduation. It is in our view far more important to make these colleges more effective for the students they serve than it is to make them less costly. And the most promising ideas to strengthen community colleges and broaden access to four-year institutions will cost money to implement and sustain.

Q: Many books about the failings of higher education seem to ignore the adjunctification of the faculty. You include the issue and talk about the creation of a "teaching corps." Would you describe that idea?

A: The growing numbers of non-tenure-track (NTT) faculty teaching undergraduates have come about because of developments affecting both the supply of qualified people willing to take these jobs and the demand for people to fill these jobs at many institutions. On the supply side, the rates of production of new Ph.D.s in a number of fields (including some science fields) seems to have become uncoupled from the employment demand for Ph.D.s, responding instead to the advantages that having graduate students and awarding Ph.D.s afford to faculty members, departments and deans.

On the demand side, hiring NTT faculty saves on instructional costs and avoids the risks involved in making lifetime appointments. The growing reliance on adjuncts has developed rather haphazardly, in many cases through disjointed decisions made at the department and school level. In our view, substantial reliance on NTT faculty is going to be a lasting state of affairs, and it is incumbent on college and university leaders to regularize arrangements for such faculty with the goals of assuring high-quality instruction and of treating NTT faculty as valued and respected members of the university community, with appropriate attention to job security, salary, benefits, reappointment procedures and academic freedom. The creation of a teaching corps that would identify and help people prepare for this work would help establish its legitimacy and also provide resources to address an embarrassing flaw in American higher education: its widespread neglect of systematic professional development of teaching skill.

Q: Many off the tenure track, while appreciating efforts to improve their working conditions, oppose anything that includes tiers. Why do you view it as impossible to greatly increase the percentage of faculty members on the tenure track?

A: In an era when colleges are, for very good reasons, trying hard to keep costs under control, granting all faculty the status, workload and pay of tenure-track faculty would be a big step in the wrong direction financially. We think it is reasonable to aim at a future in which substantial numbers of faculty would prepare for careers in which their principal responsibility would be undergraduate teaching, and in which they would not be judged on their productivity in the fields of research and scholarship. We are a long way from realizing that vision in our society, but we think it is a realistic and valuable direction to pursue, whereas trying through legislative fiat or some other means to create universal tenure-track appointments (or to mandate that a certain percentage of faculty must be on that track), is a nonstarter.

Q: You note both the potential of technology to improve pedagogy and the way this promise has sometimes been oversold. How can academic leaders think about technology in a better way?

A: We think two big points need attention. First, we need to think about educational technology as a developing field. People have been trying lots of things and learning a lot (and making many mistakes) as they do so. We see signs, particularly in the field of foundational mathematics, that there is the potential for real breakthroughs through the use of adaptive learning, in which the computerized instruction provided to a particular student adapts to the level of skill and understanding that the student reveals in her responses to problems and exercises.

The second big point is that the world of software engineering has increasingly come to think of human and computer-based approaches as *complements* instead of *substitutes*. Thus, while there is a place, particularly in professional training, for the kind of purely online learning that may replace the work of an instructor wholly, there is increasing recognition that the best results in many instances may come from hybrid courses in which human instructors rely on computers to complement, extend and, we hope in many cases, make less costly the provision of instruction. In some areas, this seems to be happening quickly, in others perhaps more slowly. We would modify a familiar aphorism about simplicity: everything should happen as quickly as possible, but not more so.

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