

Book Review

We're Losing Our Minds: Rethinking American Higher Education.
Richard P. Keeling and Richard H. Hersh.
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My parents were not “helicopter parents” and when I went off to college they only supplied me with basic boundaries and an expectation that I would do my best and make good choices; the rest was up to me. When I returned home for visits my father and I would talk about my classes and extracurricular activities and during one of these conversations I casually asked him what he thought I should be learning in college. I expected his answer would include lessons from history or great works of literature, but he surprised me with a succinct yet complex response when he replied, “College is where you learn how to think.” My father was a businessman and did not use the jargon of higher education. He would not have used phrases such as “critical thinking” or “higher learning” but as a businessman, a community volunteer, and a civic leader he knew the importance of these skills and in his own way he encouraged me to use my time in college to develop them. As my father impressed the importance of learning how to think upon me, Richard Keeling and Richard Hersh impress the importance of higher learning upon the readers of their book *We're Losing Our Minds: Rethinking American Higher Education*.

They freely acknowledge the challenges and shortcomings of colleges and universities, but do not dwell on these deficiencies. The authors provide concrete suggestions for improving the college experience for students and are optimistic and confident about these possibilities.

Throughout this book the authors cut to the chase, offering a candid and sometimes painful assessment of the state of higher education in the United States. However, their work is not limited to a litany of what is wrong with colleges and universities today. They freely acknowledge the challenges and shortcomings of colleges and universities, but do not dwell on these deficiencies. The authors provide concrete suggestions for improving the college experience for students and are optimistic and confident about these possibilities. Their solutions are anchored by the idea of a college environment that embraces a holistic approach to student learning and advances higher learning. This environment includes a culture of strong learning and teaching where students are

apprentices and a comprehensive, intentional, integrated, and rigorous program of curricular and co-curricular experiences supports student learning and development.

Keeling and Hersh define higher learning as the “learning that prepares graduates to meet and excel at the challenges of life, work, and citizenship” (p. 1). Higher learning does not occur after a particular course has been completed or when a requisite number of service learning activities have been performed. Higher learning develops gradually over time, includes thoughtful reflection on curricular and co-curricular experiences, and requires the student to engage in his or her environment to develop a deeper understanding of self and make meaning of the world in which he or she lives. Higher learning is a distinguishing characteristic of higher education and more higher learning is needed.

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In the first chapter, Keeling and Hersh lament that learning no longer seems to be a priority on many college campuses and appeal for learning to be returned to that top position. The authors endorse the perspective that college prepares one for life and citizenship as they caution against a narrow characterization of higher education as simply a pathway to employment or the means to advance from an existing job to a better one. This characterization, coupled with the concerns over lack of job prospects for graduates, the rising cost of tuition, and the amount of debt accrued by students is commonplace in news reports and even finds its way into conversations taking place among students, their families, and other stakeholders. Keeling and Hersh emphasize that college costs are not the problem, but the lack of value students receive in return is. To resolve these concerns, the authors call for radical changes, not incremental ones, and readers can easily agree with the declaration. However, this suggestion can be perilous for today’s academic leaders as evidenced by the resignation and subsequent reinstatement of University of Virginia’s president in June 2012, where differences in opinion of how change should be managed and how quickly it should occur were at the heart of the matter (Hebel, Stripling, & Wilson, 2012).

In chapter two, Keeling and Hersh describe the arguably perverted nature of college metrics and rankings. They do not sugarcoat their feelings about glossy brochures and recruitment rhetoric and wonder why the focus is placed on satisfaction and services and not on the teaching and learning mission of colleges and universities. Directors of assessment,

institutional research and/or institutional effectiveness know the institutional counts and satisfaction ratings that abound in university publications, on websites and in various rankings are easier to collect, report, and compare than the results from direct assessments of student learning.

Keeling and Hersh focus on developmental learning in chapter three asserting that learning and development are inextricably intertwined and that learning cannot be discussed without also discussing student development. Unfortunately, the authors find that developmental learning is largely absent in colleges and universities because the integrative and purposeful collection of curricular and co-curricular programs that stimulate such learning are not offered in a holistic manner that supports higher learning. This shortcoming is compounded by the challenges of alcohol misuse/abuse, drugs, the prevalence of psychological and behavioral disorders, and risky behaviors that are present on college campuses and interfere with student development and learning. The authors describe student development through narrative examples which some readers may appreciate. However, others may dislike this approach and feel that Keeling and Hersh slight the existing student development research. Renowned theorists such as Perry, Chickering, Sanford, or Kohlberg, whose theories describe the student development taking place in the authors' examples are not explicitly mentioned. Instead the authors give only a brief nod to the "extensive scholarly literature" and a reference that includes a few prominent works.

The authors emphasize that higher learning requires knowledge acquisition as well as opportunities to apply, consider, challenge and make meaning of that knowledge in the context of the broader world. They believe this can happen best by immersing students in an environment that fosters both acquisition and application and allows students to develop into unique individuals who make meaning for themselves, and that faculty are best-suited to foster this environment. Keeling and Hersh acknowledge that this will take more time and effort, but passionately believe this investment will yield incredible dividends – for the student, for the faculty member, for higher education, and for society. The authors make a valid point, but it can take a long time for the dividends to be paid and maintaining the necessary level of investment can be difficult for overworked faculty and student affairs professionals who are expected to demonstrate results quickly.

Richard Keeling is a medical doctor so it is not surprising that chapter four focuses on the neuroscience of learning. The systemic nature of body, brain, mind, and learning are outlined clearly in a way that avoids the use of detailed medical jargon, but the key theme of learning as a physical process is slightly oversold. The authors marvel at the advances in brain imaging which enable researchers to understand the functions and development of the brain better. However, implications of this research, such as the im-

portance of practice and repetition on the brain, body, and mind, may be more applicable to readers' work. Although the neuroscience clearly supports the authors' concept of higher learning, this chapter may not engage readers unless they have an interest in the science of learning.

Assessment and accountability are addressed in the fifth chapter of the book. Keeling and Hersh believe assessment complements a powerful educational culture and emphasize the importance of assessment in higher education as a way to improve teaching and learning first and as a way to satisfy the calls for accountability second. In particular, formative assessment is touted as a way of providing much needed feedback that improves teaching and learning and allows for remediation and re-teaching so students can attain higher learning.

The authors offer a framework of assessment that is thoughtful and appropriate and links clearly articulated student learning outcomes, pedagogy, appropriate assessment methods, and use of results to improve teaching and learning. This framework should be familiar to anyone engaging in assessment practices, but Keeling and Hersh emphasize that only when the framework is executed as a whole will it truly advance higher learning. It is reassuring that the authors recognize the challenges to developing a strong culture of assessment and they even attempt to neutralize arguments commonly made against assessment efforts.

They begin by acknowledging concerns over the high cost of college and recognize that higher education lacks some efficiency, but indicate clearly that cost is not the real problem – value is. Therefore, the authors focus on increasing value and quality rather than focus on reducing costs.

Keeling and Hersh present their ideas for restoring higher learning to higher education in chapter six. They begin by acknowledging concerns over the high cost of college and recognize that higher education lacks some efficiency, but indicate clearly that cost is not the real problem – value is. Therefore, the authors focus on increasing value and quality rather than focus on reducing costs. This approach is very different from the numerous news stories, speeches, and calls for colleges and universities to adopt a business-like approach to cost-cutting and efficiency. The authors are strongly committed to higher learning and do not believe that incremental changes, mechanistic efficiencies or technological advances are the panacea. For example, they do not approve of replacing full-time, tenure-track faculty with part-time adjunct instructors to reduce salary and benefit costs because of the adverse impact it has on the value of the student experience and ability to achieve higher learning. In no way do they imply that full-time faculty are necessarily better instructors than adjunct faculty, but

rather, full-time faculty have responsibility for mentoring, advising, and engaging students outside of the classroom, all of which contribute to higher learning. Keeling and Hersh do not equate improved technology with higher learning. They stipulate that today's students have greater access to information and computer skills, but point out that many students lack the developmental and higher learning abilities to use, apply, synthesize or critique the information that is available with a keystroke, mouse click or screen tap.

To improve higher learning, colleges and universities need a powerful educational culture or culture of serious teaching and learning where students are viewed as apprentices and can be immersed in rich learning experiences. The authors' description of such a culture is palpable, describing a campus that actually feels different because learning permeates casual conversations, formal lectures, campus activities and cultural events. The authors believe that this culture can and does exist, but acknowledge that the common approach allows for students to sample, not immerse themselves in these activities. The authors' ideal environment is the antithesis of Hollywood's portrayal of college as a place replete with all-night drinking parties, continuous campus festivities, and mischievous coeds.

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Keeling and Hersh offer a list of ten fundamental principles that when applied intentionally and rigorously will foster a powerful educational culture. These principles include a genuine commitment to student learning, high expectations, clearly articulated standards of excellence, and practices that promote learning and the development of student apprentices from novice to mastery levels. These principles and their recommended applications may be familiar to readers as they are quite similar to the High Impact Practices that foster learning (Kuh, 2008). The authors admit that their suggestions are not new, but most importantly, Keeling and Hersh emphasize the balanced and complete implementation of all of these efforts across campus is required for quality and higher learning. A cherry-picked subset of these practices is insufficient for a transformational impact on students to take place. *We're Losing Our Minds* is not specific to a residential college environment enrolling mostly traditional-aged students who are full-time students, but it certainly reads that way. Professionals at community colleges, urban institutions, or institutions with a large non-traditional aged student body may not connect closely with this book.

Keeling and Hersh conclude their book in a manner that is seen throughout their work with a summary of the challenges facing higher education and a focus on solutions. The final chapter is a call to action to increase the value of higher education through radical changes and a fully-implemented, holistic approach to student learning and development that immerses a student's body, mind, and spirit in an environment of high standards and expectations focused primarily on higher learning. If Keeling and Hersh are successful in their pursuit to advance higher learning in colleges and universities, stakeholders will likely view college as my father did - the place where one learns how to think.

References

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