

BOOK REVIEW COMMENT/COMMENTAIRE

COMPTE RENDU

Response to “Anxious Academics: Mission Drift and Sliding Standards in the Modern Canadian University”

Joseph Galbo has written a poor review — not by panning *Ivory Tower Blues*, but by misrepresenting its central thesis: that grade and credential inflation have conditioned a crisis wherein students and professors are disengaged in ways that threaten the quality of liberal-arts education. Galbo has done a disservice to the readers of this journal for this mischief as well as for misframing our other arguments. We cannot possibly address all of his inaccuracies in the space we have been allotted. However, we will point out several of his most egregious mistakes.

The most fundamental error Galbo makes stems from his failure to understand that the book was written for several audiences. In our introduction, we specified these audiences: “first and foremost” (p. 13) the general public, especially parents with children in the system; but “our third audience, in this order of priority” (p. 14) was other professors. Apparently thinking we wrote a book strictly for academics, he claims disappointment that the book wasn’t more “intellectually challenging” and that we made reference to some popular social science literature.

Galbo claims that we present a “pet theory,” when in fact we drew on the massive research carried out by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP). He should have checked our references, especially the publications of George Kuh, the Director of the NSSE, to see that academic disengagement and its associated “disengagement compact” is not our “pet theory,” but a documented problem in the United States, that was exposed as *worse* in Canada when the NSSE was carried out here beginning in 2004.

Rather than admitting this, Galbo goes on to claim that we present no “compelling evidence” that disengagement is a problem in universities.

To the contrary, the evidence is overwhelming that academic disengagement has been increasing since at the least the 1980s (from the CIRP studies; the NSSE picked up the trend in 2000). Even without looking at the evidence produced by these massive research undertakings, Galbo should have realized that because hundreds of universities across the United States and Canada are participating in the NSSE, disengagement is already recognized as a serious problem that needs to be monitored and addressed. In Canada, student enrollments have risen 50 percent since the 1980s, budgets have dropped by 30 percent, and faculty complements have hardly grown at all. Does Galbo really believe that this had no consequences?

A rather facile reading might lead one to think that we are blaming students, and in pushing this superficial interpretation of the book, Galbo fails to acknowledge our structural analysis. Contrary to his claims, we repeat throughout the book that we are not blaming students (e.g., pp. 8, 103), and we trace the history of structural changes of the university from clerical training to the most recent era of credentialism, where we locate the "credential mart." Never mentioning this, Galbo claims that we are ahistorical because we do not focus on women, minorities, and those from lower social class origins, whom he notes "were previously excluded" from attending university (by the way, we include ourselves in two of these three groups). His historical frame is curious because he criticizes us for making reference to the university of the 1970s, but the exclusion of these groups in Canada predates the 1970s by several generations. Galbo also misses the point of our reference to the 1970s. We did so because our primary audience — parents — would identify with their experiences in the 1970s in attempting to understand their children's experiences today.

Galbo argues "that increasing participation in university has [not] led to decreasing standards. If more people of less [*sic*] ability and motivation are now entering university then overall performance levels should be plummeting." In asserting this, he shows that he has entirely missed our argument. Grade inflation creates the illusion that performance is actually improving when it is not. Why does he find this so difficult to grasp? In fact, nowhere in his review does he acknowledge the problem of grade inflation. He seems unaware, or perhaps is excessively defensive of the possibility that one resolution of this debate involves closing down universities. Ironically, we warn about the growing trend toward "edubis" and vocationalism that will overwhelm attempts such as ours to rescue the liberal arts from obliteration by a corporate mentality that has little regard for liberal pedagogical ideals. Nowhere do we call for universities to be shut down or for any qualified applicants to be excluded.

On a related issue, our observations about the new functions of higher education are completely misunderstood. Galbo claims that we feel a “firmer policy needs to be put into place to ‘sort,’ ‘weed,’ and ‘cool out’ students,” when we merely documented how these functions have been passed to universities from high schools, much to the chagrin of “reluctant gatekeepers.” In fact, we argue that universities could handle the current number of students if they were better prepared by their earlier education.

The debate about higher education does not involve simple either-or choices. It is all too easy to reduce debates to simplistic left-right polarities, and to position those with whom you disagree on the “other side.” We are not neoconservatives, but associating us with that position seems to be important to Galbo. This is perhaps why he chose the straw argument form of critique: misrepresent an argument, invent one that can be easily knocked down, and proceed to criticize the latter.

Since its publication in the spring of 2007, we have received hundreds of encouraging emails and letters, and the book has received numerous positive reviews. In addition to nation-wide media coverage, we have given public lectures to thousands across the country and received widespread congratulations for bringing these issues into public view. These audiences have included concerned parents, high school teachers, university students, professors, and even some enlightened administrators. Readers will have to evaluate Galbo’s anomalous and misguided review for themselves, but we hope they do so in an informed and fair-minded way that moves the debate forward rather than defensively protecting a system in need of repair.

UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO

JAMES CÔTÉ AND ANTON ALLAHAR