Book Review/Compte rendu

Jackson Toby, *The Lowering of Higher Education in America: Financial Aid Should Be Based on Student Performance*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Publishers, 2009, 208 pp. $US 34.95 hardcover (978-0-313-37898-0)

The Lowering of Higher Education in America adds to the growing literature concerned about the decline in standards in American universities over the past few decades. Jackson Toby is an emeritus professor at Rutgers University who has published extensively in the field of criminology. This book takes him out of his field and thus appears to have been a labour of love in which he reflects on how and why standards have declined over the span of his career.

Toby's focus is the United States, but much of what he writes is applicable to countries like Canada that have also taken an open access, universal education approach. At the same time, he provides comparisons with countries that employ different access policies and practices, such as matriculation exams in China, Japan, and South Korea.

The book's thesis is straightforward: "easy admission to [colleges and universities] in the United States is a disincentive to conscientious studying in the earlier grades" (p. 16). In other words, because it is so easy to get into a college or university of some sort in the US, high school students do not have sufficient motivation to prepare for a future intellectual journey—engaging themselves in learning and developing the habits and attitudes necessary for academic involvements. Because young Americans continually hear the message that they need higher education for a job, and passage through the tertiary level is becoming as routine as passage through the secondary level, many students simply do not apply themselves at either level and never develop the foundation for undertaking truly "higher" learning. Thus, an intellectual journey never takes place for these students. Meanwhile, institutions of higher learning are doing all they can to attract and retain as many students as they can squeeze into their classrooms, further feeding the problem. The consequences are predictable: a continual lowering of standards to accommodate increasing numbers of poorly motivated and underprepared students in order to keep enrolments up to pay the bills.

This characterization of declining standards is not new to those who have been monitoring higher-educational standards. What is new is how

Toby lays the blame for disengagement and poor preparation on tertiary institutions themselves rather than exclusively on secondary ones. That is, as tertiary institutions have taken on the characteristics of corporations whose goal is to provide services to customers, the will to maintain rigorous academic standards has given way to a drive to continually grow by appeasing prospective and current "customers."

Toby's solution to the problem is also unique. He advocates transforming the complex American financial aid system from one of entitlement to one based on merit. Currently, that system is based on financial need rather than academic merit, further feeding the lackadaisical attitude of students. He argues that more merit-based criteria would provide incentives with which to increase the motivation of high school students to do their best to prepare for university. And, if continued funding depended year to year on performance levels, academic-award holders would be motivated as university students to continue doing their best.

The book is well organized, with the chapters building Toby's case in a logically progressive manner. Moreover, his section headings are clear, rather than cryptic or cutesy, and these headings are often stated as research questions, making it easy for readers to follow his argument. For example, in chapter 1, an early section is titled "Why Inadequately Prepared Students Want To Attend College And Why Colleges Admit Them" and a later one is titled: "Is Universal 'Access' Such a Good Idea?" This chapter and these sections address the belief that all young people are entitled to a "higher" education, and the unintended consequences when this belief is acted upon. In other chapters, we find sections like "What Do Colleges Do with Underprepared Students?," where he presents evidence of a very high dropout rate for such students, and "Which College Graduates have Low Earnings?," where he questions the much-touted earnings premium of university graduates among those who take the easy route through their studies.

Toby takes great care to provide strong arguments supported by empirical evidence, providing readers with a well-documented book. In those cases where evidence is not available, he calls for further study. He does not claim to have all the answers, especially of the consequences of his recommended solutions. For example, the belief in universal access carries implicit assumptions about the value of providing opportunities for "late bloomers" from less affluent backgrounds and he admits that some deserving students may be adversely affected by a merit-based financial aid system. But he also notes that late bloomers are rare and argues that it makes little sense to degrade a system based on such faint hopes.

Critics of this book will likely include those who believe that mass higher education is the great equalizer and a panacea for labour market

problems, especially those in the "access and retention lobby" of policy research. It will be interesting see if these critics can get past the tiresome ad hominems that stifle clear debate in this area. Hopefully, the debate will focus on the evidence, and Toby's is an evidence-based argument.

My quibbles with the book pertain to some of the evidence Toby missed that would have further bolstered his case. For example, he could have used the accumulating data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), and drawn more from sociological works like Randall Collins on credentialism. Toby also seems to underestimate the destructive nature of grade inflation in eroding standards, and reserves judgment as to whether it is a serious problem or just a "nuisance" (even though he acknowledges that grade compression leaves only two categories with which to evaluate students [As and Bs], rather than the traditional five categories reflecting the full range of academic performance).

Finally, the book neglects the wider question of the mission drift in the goals of tertiary education that has created this dysfunctional system. Is the goal to help people find and develop their higher-order abilities (in which case the issue of learning outcomes is crucial)? Or is it to provide an institutional context for a new life course stage for affluent young people, as well as to keep a significant proportion of the youth population busy until the labour force needs them — busy to a new age of "economic maturity" in the mid-20s? Unfortunately, higher education seems to be drifting to accommodate the latter goals, just as high school did for previous generations, keeping young people off the dole, and thereby providing huge savings for governments by downloading costs to students and their parents. To the extent that current universal higher-education policies mask the refusal of governments to recognize youth labour market problems and develop policies to rectify those problems, I am afraid that governments will have little motivation to fix the educational system, even if it were as simple as developing more merit-based financial aid systems.

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