

INTRODUCTION

During the 1980s, as major U.S. companies felt the hot breath of foreign competition and Japanese goods invaded our stores and showrooms, Americans began to ask what had gone wrong with the economy. Government officials, journalists, and analysts of every kind looked for anyone or anything that might be responsible for our seeming competitive weakness. Business executives were the first to bear the brunt of public scrutiny. Education's turn came soon after. In 1983, a national commission on the public schools wrote a widely publicized report, *A Nation at Risk*, which referred to "a rising tide of mediocrity" and warned of "unilateral educational disarmament."¹ A flood of commentary followed, urging all manner of reforms.

As public schools came under heavy assault, old university hands predicted that higher education would eventually suffer the same fate. They were soon proved right. Within a few years, Secretary of Education William Bennett and Lynne Cheney, head of the National Endowment for the Humanities, issued sharp critiques of the undergraduate curriculum along with concrete proposals for reform.² Public intellectuals, such as Dinesh D'Souza, and journalists, such as Charles Sykes, quickly weighed in with harsh attacks on a broad array of university policies.³

Professors too—almost all from the humanities—began publishing critical essays of their own. The titles of these books capture the prevailing tone: *The Closing of the American Mind*, *The University in Ruins*, *The Moral Collapse of the University*, *Tenured Radicals*, *The War against the Intellect*, *Impostors in the Temple*, *Killing the Spirit*.⁴ Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* made the New York Times Best-Seller List. Other books were not so fortunate, but almost all were published by well-known houses and respectfully discussed in the pages of leading reviews.

The authors do not come from the same point on the ideological spectrum, nor do they all emphasize the same concerns. Nevertheless, their writings have certain features in common. Almost all their criticism is directed at leading research universities rather than the full range of undergraduate institutions. Their books are mainly polemics, containing little that is positive about the work of universities or the professors who teach there. Among their complaints, moreover, certain common themes recur that seem to have resonated widely with their readers.*

Many of the authors deplore the lack of any overarching purpose in the undergraduate curriculum. As Allan Bloom declares, “There is no vision, nor is there a set of competing visions, of what an educated human being is.”⁵ In the words of Bill Readings, “The story of liberal education has lost its organizing center—has lost, that is, the idea of culture as both origin and goal, of the human sciences.”⁶ Without a compelling, unifying purpose, universities are charged with allowing their curricula to degenerate into a vast smorgasbord of elective courses. Knowledge itself has splintered into a kaleidoscope of separate academic specialties with far too little effort to integrate the fragments, let alone show students how they might connect. Hence the education offered undergraduates has become incoherent and incapable of addressing the larger questions “of what we are and what we ought to be,” a point elaborated at length by Bruce Wilshire in his *Moral Collapse of the University*.⁷

A number of the detractors have pilloried universities for cheapening their students’ education by allowing intellec-

*Since this book is concerned with the quality of undergraduate education, no effort has been made to discuss complaints involving such topics as college costs, admissions policies, or financial aid.

tual standards to deteriorate.⁸ As they see it, discourse on campus is seriously inhibited by the orthodoxies of political correctness. Affirmative action has undermined the integrity of faculty hiring. The great canonical masterpieces of literature have been downgraded to make room for lesser works whose principal virtue seems to be that they were authored by women, African Americans, or Third World writers. The very ideals of truth and objectivity, along with conventional judgments of quality, are thought to be endangered by attacks from deconstructionists, feminists, Marxists, and other literary theorists who deny that such goals are even possible.⁹

Another theme in several of the critical writings emphasizes the growing tendency to turn colleges into training camps for careers. As former Assistant Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch has observed, “American higher education has remade itself into a vast job-training program in which the liberal arts are no longer central.”¹⁰ According to Eric Gould, “What we now mean by knowledge is information effective in action, information focused on results. . . . We tend to promote the need for a productive citizenry rather than a critical, socially responsive, reflective individualism.”¹¹ Those who share this view observe disapprovingly that the number of students majoring in vocational programs has risen sharply over the past several decades, while the percentages majoring in traditional liberal arts subjects, especially the humanities, have declined. With students flocking to courses in business administration, computer science, and the allied health professions, more and more colleges seem preoccupied with serving the occupational needs of undergraduates instead of preparing them to live a full life as widely informed, reflective human beings.

A final complaint accuses the faculty of neglecting their students. Authors such as Charles Sykes in *Profscam* have

assailed tenured professors for caring only about their research and appointing new colleagues almost entirely for their scholarly reputations, with little heed to the quality of their teaching.¹² The few young faculty members who manage to inspire their students are regularly passed over for promotion. Meanwhile, according to the authors, professors content themselves with lecturing to large audiences, leaving the real teaching to inexperienced graduate students in small sections. Lost in the crowd, many undergraduates finish college without knowing a single faculty member well enough to ask for a letter of recommendation.

Many people were surprised that books about undergraduate education, such as *Profscam* and *The Closing of the American Mind*, could sell so many copies. Yet their success is not so difficult to explain. More than half of all young people in America go to college, and more than a quarter receive a bachelor's degree. Virtually every aspiring lawyer, doctor, minister, scientist, and schoolteacher must earn a college diploma, and almost all future corporate executives, legislators, and high public officials will do the same. If colleges miseducate their students, the nation will eventually suffer the consequences. If they can do a better job of helping their students communicate with greater precision and style, think more clearly, analyze more rigorously, become more ethically discerning, be more knowledgeable and active in civic affairs, society will be much the better for it. Small wonder, then, that critics care enough to write with such passion and that large numbers of people want to read what they have to say.

Since most of these books were published, developments overseas have given a new reason to care about undergraduate education. A revolution in technology has enabled any work that can be digitized to be performed virtually any-

where on the globe. Today highly skilled employees in Bangalore, Beijing, and other distant places on the planet can communicate with colleagues in American companies almost as easily as if they were working down the hall. Already, several hundred thousand U.S. tax returns are being prepared every year in India; CAT scans from American hospitals are being analyzed by doctors in Australia; scientists in China are doing research for Microsoft; Russian engineers are working on aircraft design for Boeing. No longer are bright Americans who went to the right schools protected from overseas competitors in forging careers in the world's most prosperous economy.¹³ Ambitious young men and women all over the world are eager to take their place and are empowered by technology to do so. In this environment, the quality of education in American colleges has assumed greater importance than ever before. Reason the more for casting a critical eye at what goes on in undergraduate classrooms across the nation.

American universities, too, face the prospect of growing competition from abroad. Over the past half century they have come to take their preeminence for granted, while higher education in other advanced countries has suffered from low faculty salaries, overcrowded conditions, inadequate facilities, and excessive state control. Educators in the United States have grown accustomed to being able to attract the ablest students from around the world to enrich their faculties and raise the quality and quantity of highly skilled people working in American companies, hospitals, and other institutions. In recent years, however, there have been signs that countries in Europe and Asia are beginning to pay more attention to their universities, recognizing that first-rate research and advanced education are essential ingredients of success in today's global economy. As India and

China continue to develop, they can offer more challenging, better paid jobs to the hordes of young scientists and engineers graduating from their universities. In the future, it may no longer be as easy as it has been in decades past to have our pick of the world's talent.

In view of these developments, neither American students nor our universities, nor the nation itself, can afford to take for granted the quality of higher education and the teaching and learning it provides. To be sure, professors and academic leaders must keep a proper perspective. It is especially important to bear in mind all the purposes universities serve and to resist efforts to turn them into instruments preoccupied chiefly with helping the economy grow. But resisting commercialization cannot become an excuse for resisting change. Rather, universities need to recognize the risks of complacency and use the emerging worldwide challenge as an occasion for a candid reappraisal to discover whether there are ways to lift the performance of our institutions of higher learning to new and higher levels.

Unfortunately, the widely publicized critiques of the past 20 years are not a particularly helpful guide for deciding what needs to be done. Indeed, there is something very odd about their indictments. If they were anywhere close to correct, prospective students and their families would be up in arms. After all, going to college costs a lot of money, even in public universities. Those hoping to attend and those who pay the bills presumably expect a first-rate education in return. If colleges were truly in crisis, burdened by incoherent curricula and uncaring professors, students would hardly be applying in such large and growing numbers. Nor would parents be seeking out well-paid counselors to help with college applications or paying for special tutoring to teach their children how to get higher scores on college entrance exams.¹⁴

Critics may reply that students are not affirming undergraduate education in its current form but are merely anxious for an impressive credential now that a college degree has become so important to future success. But this response will hardly bear scrutiny. Survey after survey of students and recent graduates shows that they are remarkably pleased with their college years. Americans may dislike their government and distrust most institutions in the society, but 75 percent or more of college alumni report being either satisfied or very satisfied with their undergraduate experience.¹⁵ Just after many of the hostile books appeared, a nationwide poll found that more than 80 percent of undergraduates expressed satisfaction with the teaching at their college.¹⁶ In subsequent surveys, large majorities of students have reported being satisfied with their contacts with professors.¹⁷ Two-thirds would choose the same institution if they had to make the choice again.¹⁸ Among the most selective colleges that are repeatedly singled out by critics for special scorn—the Stanfords, Princetons, Harvards, and Yales—the percentages of contented graduates are even higher, and alumni support their alma maters with exceptional generosity.¹⁹

How can writers condemn our colleges so harshly if students, parents, and graduates value them so highly? On this point, the authors are silent. Whether they are simply unaware of student opinion or consider undergraduates incompetent to judge (this was clearly the view held by Allan Bloom), they fail to explain why those attending college do not complain more loudly. Are the critics right and the students wrong? Or is it the reverse? Or are both right or both wrong? These questions provided the initial impetus for writing this book.

Having examined the evidence on the effects of college, I find good reason for the satisfaction of most alumni with

their education. Countless studies have found that college students, overall, achieve significant gains in critical thinking, general knowledge, moral reasoning, quantitative skills, and other competencies.²⁰ Most seniors agree that they have made substantial intellectual progress. The marketplace affirms these conclusions by giving large additional rewards to those who carry their education beyond high school to acquire a B.A. degree.

These positive results suggest that the critics were too harsh and too one-sided in their judgments. They do not prove that all is well with undergraduate education. Far from it. Despite the favorable opinions of undergraduates and alumni, a closer look at the record in the chapters that follow shows that colleges and universities, for all the benefits they bring, accomplish far less for their students than they should. Many seniors graduate without being able to write well enough to satisfy their employers. Many cannot reason clearly or perform competently in analyzing complex, non-technical problems, even though faculties rank critical thinking as the primary goal of a college education. Few undergraduates receiving a degree are able to speak or read a foreign language. Most have never taken a course in quantitative reasoning or acquired the knowledge needed to be a reasonably informed citizen in a democracy. And those are only some of the problems.

These weaknesses are not the ones discussed in the widely publicized critiques of American universities. There is little in these polemical books that takes a serious look at how much students are learning or gives hard evidence of what is actually being accomplished in college classrooms. Fortunately, however, the more important weaknesses have not gone entirely unnoticed. Most of the problems have been recognized and many have been investigated in detail by

specialists in educational research who try to discover how much students are learning and what methods help them learn best. But these researchers rarely spend much time describing the policy implications of their work. Moreover, their findings normally appear piecemeal, usually in specialized professional journals and little-known reports that few people (other than educational researchers themselves) ever read. Although some professors are aware of the problems and try new methods of teaching to overcome them, their concerns are rarely shared by the faculty as a whole. Even the faculty committees that periodically review their colleges' curricula give little sign of having studied the relevant research or recognized the weaknesses it exposes in their undergraduate programs. Throughout undergraduate education, a great wall separates the world of research from the world of practice—even though the practitioners involved are professors, trained in research, who would seem ideally prepared to take full advantage of whatever findings empirical investigators have to offer.

In writing this book, I have tried to breach this wall by making ample use of the published work on how students learn and what effect colleges have on their development.*

*This book does not concern itself only with the large research universities or the highly selective colleges that rank near the top of the annual rankings in *U.S. News and World Report*. Instead it treats undergraduate education in all kinds of four-year colleges. Some readers may wonder whether one can write a single book that encompasses vast public universities, small liberal arts colleges, church-related institutions, women's colleges, and urban universities. The differences among these institutions are obvious and will be noted where it is important to do so. Nevertheless, despite the contrasts in such matters as size, facilities, and student abilities, a remarkable feature of American undergraduate education is how little effect these differences seem to have on the development of students during college (once account is taken of variations in the talents and back-

Although there is much we still do not know about teaching and learning, we know enough to throw light on many of the most important problems affecting the quality of undergraduate education. What emerges is a clearer picture of how students develop in college together with an agenda for reform quite unlike the ones advanced by either the well-known critics of universities or the faculty committees that periodically review undergraduate programs.

The good news is that most of the serious deficiencies can be overcome, at least to a significant degree, given the will to do so. The bad news is that most of the problems are not being seriously addressed on campuses today, nor will they be until they are correctly identified and clearly understood by those responsible for the quality of teaching and learning in our colleges. That is the real reason why I have written this book.

ground of freshmen at the time they enter). As two noted researchers concluded after reviewing hundreds of studies, “on just about any outcome, and after taking account of the characteristics of the students enrolled, the dimensions along which American colleges are typically categorized, ranked, and studied, such as type of control, size, and selectivity, are simply not linked with important differences in student learning, change, or development”; Ernest T. Pascarella and Patrick T. Terenzini, *How College Affects Students*, Vol. 2: *A Third Decade of Research* (2005), p. 641. Community colleges do seem different enough from four-year colleges that they will not be treated in this book. With this exception, however, it does seem possible to write a single book about the effectiveness of American undergraduate education despite the diversity of the colleges that provide it.