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Institutional Culture of Underperformance in Higher Education

Richard H. Hersh¹

A Commentary on “The Origins of Underperformance in Higher Education: Proximal Systems of Influence” by Michael Moscolo and Jose Castillo

Many critiques and calls for reform of higher education have been issued in the past two decades with concern for too little learning in colleges and universities among the most troubling.² But the vast preponderance of public conversations in Congress, state legislatures, Washington-based higher education lobbying associations, media, and especially the academy, have remain fixated not on student learning but on the easily measured ills of higher education -- dropout and retention rates, high cost, and inadequate accessibility -- the most visible but less damning indices of underachievement. All the more reason, then, that, “The Origins of Underperformance in Higher Education: Proximal Systems of Influence” by Michael Moscolo and Jose Castillo is worthy of our collective commentary.

Moscolo and Castillo properly identify student learning as the key issue in talking about higher education efficacy or lack thereof and their work is a cogent, coherent, and articulate examination of the multiple variables that help to explain student underperformance. They identify the phenomenon of inadequate student learning as complex and rightly point out that: 1. Valid and reliable student learning assessment at the institutional level is poorly and rarely done, making it difficult to evaluate the quality and quantity of student learning or judge a college’s unique contribution to learning apart from students’ normal development; 2. Curriculum is problematic, a free-for-all smorgasbord, fragmented and serving as poor scaffolding for cumulative and integrated learning; 3. Expectations and standards have been lowered with grade inflation the norm; 4. Lack of preparation for college learning leads to student retention problems; and 5. Students spend far too little time studying. Moreover, unlike most critics, the authors understand the developmental nature of “higher” learning that undergirds the active, formative nature of critical thinking, social/emotional maturation, and moral conscience. Such learning requires not only the accumulation of information but also the construction of meaning; it is an active rather than passive process, a product of intensive and

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² See for example, Arum, R., & Roksa, J. (2011). *Academically adrift: Limited learning on college campuses*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Bok, D. (2007). *Our underachieving colleges: A candid look at how much students learn and why they should be learning more*. Princeton University Press.

78 *Institutional Culture of Underperformance*

extensive engagement with different ideas and people and support from faculty members serving as teachers, mentors and advisors.

If higher or transformative learning ought to be the goal, as it should be, it is not surprising that Mascolo and Castillo conclude that students are underperforming. The combination of fragmented curricula, inadequate preparation for college, low expectations and standards, and too little student effort and engagement are virtual guarantors of too little learning. In light of these conditions, how best, then to move forward? They conclude that there is a need to confront internal tensions in the academy, the result of, “conflict among deeply held beliefs and traditions.” Yes! Such conflict pervades academic culture and leads to *institutional underperformance* that in turn contributes mightily to student underperformance.

This notion of an underperforming institutional culture is key. As Richard Keeling and I have written elsewhere,³ today's learning crisis is largely due to the absence of a serious culture of teaching and learning on campus. The current culture -- the *shared* norms, values, standards, expectations and priorities -- of teaching and learning on most campuses is not powerful enough to support true higher learning. As a result, students do not experience the kind of integrated, holistic, developmental, rigorous undergraduate education that must exist as an absolute condition for truly transformative learning to occur. We do not demand enough from students; our standards are not high enough; we accept half-hearted work from students who have not asked enough of themselves; and we do not support students in asking for more from their teachers. Degrees have become deliverables (purchased, not earned) because we are no longer willing to make students work hard against high standards to earn them.

Moscolo and Castillo point out that too many students are ill prepared for college and surely this phenomenon contributes to the deflation of college faculty's' expectations and standards with clear implications for college admission standards. That reality notwithstanding, weak educational culture creates all the wrong opportunities even if all students were properly prepared for college. Without high academic, behavioral, and cultural expectations and standards to bring structure to students' time and help them raise their expectations of themselves and others, too much time is wasted and less demanding and respectful peer norms become dominant. It has become possible -- even likely -- to survive academically, be retained in school, get passing grades, and graduate with a baccalaureate degree despite far too little effort.

The higher learning the academy espouses/promises requires an institutional culture that is *cumulative and collective* in nature. The prevailing academic curricular and teaching model is one of credit hours per course, founded on the presumption that what needs to be learned ought to be packaged into one or two courses (such as freshman composition), or a series of courses in a major or minor. Each course, or series of courses, is presumed to stand alone, signifying a module of learning achievement. That module - even if it comprises the requirements for a minor or major - is too often compartmentalized and

³ Keeling, R. & Hersh, R. (2012). *We're Losing Our Minds: Rethinking American Higher Education*. Palgrave Macmillan.

disconnected from other learning that happens in that semester, year, or four years. This system conveys to students and teachers alike that learning occurs best when students take individual courses and stack them up like building blocks - as if learning becomes greater as these courses are piled higher. But that assumption is false. No mortar connects these blocks; they topple easily, and the learning that occurs is both disconnected and ephemeral.

A genuine Core curriculum—not the distribution requirement kind—is close to extinct and the core learning outcomes proffered by higher education (e.g., critical thinking, effective written and oral communication, or the ability to use knowledge to solve problems) are ineffectively attained in any one or two required courses or random out-of-classroom learning experiences. One or two freshman writing seminars are not sufficient to produce competent writers. A required general education course in critical thinking does not alone teach someone how to evaluate the credibility of information and solve problems. Serving as an elected officer of one student organization does not alone teach the qualities of effective leadership. It is not surprising, then, to hear the common faculty lament, "They were supposed to learn how to... before they got to my course," a sentiment usually expressed as a preface to blaming students' poor motivation for lack of carryover competence.

This fragmented rather than integrated curricular approach inhibits higher learning because the significant outcomes of higher learning are best accomplished *cumulatively* requiring far more instruction, practice, assessment, and feedback than is provided, or expected, within single courses or other isolated learning experiences. Learning how to think and write creatively, for example, are skills optimally learned over the span of the entire undergraduate program; these objectives must be intentionally articulated, planned around, and assessed by faculty and staff across all courses and programs. Writing-across-the-curriculum initiatives are one example of the application of this idea, but the concept can be carried much further to include across-the-curriculum approaches to critical thinking, problem solving, and ethical development. Asking students to apply their learning from one discipline/course to another is necessary if authentic integrated learning and authentic problem solving we claim are necessary for future employment is to be mastered.

The essential work of higher learning becomes cumulative when all coursework shares and reinforces common outcomes, intentionally progressing each year in complexity, adequacy, and sophistication towards collectively established learning goals. For example, a well-written paper in history that offers a critical analysis of the causes of World War I would share similar standards for critical thinking and effective writing as would very different papers describing the threats to the preservation of biodiversity or the emergence of the H5N1 influenza virus. A cumulative approach to higher learning also requires that as students progress through their college careers, they are taught to an increasingly higher standard of competence, in all courses and programs. An undergraduate education that is intentionally cumulative is far more integrative, stable, and coherent. This result is radically different from the commonplace diploma representing an incoherent tangle of learning resulting from students left alone to make

80 *Institutional Culture of Underperformance*

sense of it all.

The challenge of cumulative learning is that it demands a different institutional culture of learning; faculty and staff must agree on shared outcomes, expectations, and standards and take account of all of the ways and places in which learning occurs to collaboratively articulate a progressive, cumulative perspective for designing, implementing, and assessing students' educational programs. It requires faculty to come together – *collectively*. It requires that students be acknowledged as members of the institutional culture in which outcomes, expectations, and standards must be made transparent by faculty, advisors, and staff as students matriculate and progress throughout their college experience. Only when students engage with faculty in pursuing transparent, institution-wide objectives, expectations, and standards, and when they receive frequent and appropriate feedback on shared higher learning outcomes, will there be a chance of improving higher education.

Constructing the institutional cultural conditions necessary to support the formation of “faculty” as a collective noun in each college and university is profoundly difficult. Professional academic acculturation militates against it. Doctorates are earned alone. Faculty members are largely alone in their quest for promotion and tenure. And the reward system for promotion and tenure is skewed toward research and scholarship, not student learning. And an even more insidious cultural reality intrudes; the vast increase in the utilization of part-time faculty structures out, temporally and physically, the ability of faculty members to come together collectively to agree on the crucial conditions necessary to support higher learning. Mascolo and Castillo are correct. Unless faculty within each institution rise above the “conflict among deeply held beliefs and traditions” it is unlikely that the problem of student underperformance can be resolved. Nothing less than the reconstruction of the academic culture of learning will result in the elimination of institutional and student underperformance.