

Of the People, By the People, For the People

Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class

Christopher Newfield
HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2008

Crossing the Finish Line: Completing College at America's Public Universities

William G. Bowen, Matthew M. Chingos, and Michael S. McPherson
PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2009

REVIEWED BY: MARK SMITH

Speaking at Indiana University's commencement in 1910, the historian Frederick Jackson Turner identified the strength and weakness of public higher education in the United States, "the State University has thus both a peculiar power in the directness of its whole influence upon the whole people and a peculiar limitation in its dependence on the people."¹ Two recent books make clear that while public higher education has grown tremendously since the progressive era state university, the peculiar limitation Turner identified has grown even more challenging.

In a work attracting a large amount of recognition from governmental and educational hierarchies, Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson, two former university and foundation presidents and a graduate student, present a wide range of data outlining the current performance of American public universities. They find a declining rate of educational attainment overall, low completion rates in colleges and universities, and educational gaps among racial, ethnic, and socio-economic groups. In language mirroring the proposals of the early Obama administration, they argue "it is finishing programs of study—earning degrees, not just starting out

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in college—that is the metric to be emphasized.”² This book will be cited in countless conferences and articles over the next few years.

While much of the early accounts of *Crossing the Finish Line* emphasized the main finding—public institutions do not do a good job at graduating students, especially when compared to recent advances internationally—there are more interesting findings within the data presented. First, not surprisingly, the authors find that, money matters. “Students from high-income families are significantly more likely to graduate on time.”³ They present the logical conclusion that “making college less expensive for students from modest backgrounds has to be a key consideration in any concerted effort to raise graduation rates and shorten time to degree.”⁴ While Congress has made some major advances in this area in the last few years, and the Obama administration is building on these accomplishments, more remains to be done.

Another finding that may spark further research involves how students are matched to institutions. Opponents of affirmative action have long suggested that students admitted under such policies find themselves “overmatched” at institutions that are too academically difficult for them. In an earlier work co-authored with Derek Bok, Bowen found no empirical support for the overmatch hypothesis.⁵ On the other hand, this book advances significant new understanding of the extent of “undermatching,”—when students attend institutions less selective than they appear to be qualified for. Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson find that significant undermatching occurs in cases where a student is the first in their family to attend college, and where students come from lower income families. They also found that undermatched students “paid a considerable price in terms of the time it took them to complete their program of studies and in the reduced probability that they would finish at all.”⁶

Instead of simply examining the current situation, in *Unmaking the Public University*, Christopher Newfield, an English professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, provides a detailed narrative of the emergence of the multiple crises facing public higher education. These crises reflect a variety of forms, but all involve a growing decline of public support—financial, political and cultural. The opposition arises not only from critics outside of the academy, but is also reflected in structural and personnel changes within the institutions. Newfield itemizes the various elements of this loss of support, including the reestablishment of traditional racial preferences through the assault on affirmative action, the cultural wars that seek to delegitimize intellectual life itself, and an overemphasis on financial accounting economics in the general public as well as within the universities themselves. By way of contrast, he argues that the expansion of public higher education after World War II sparked general educational attainment improvements, and thus was largely responsible for the economic well-being of the era and the explosion of the middle class.

Both sets of authors recognize the value of public higher education. Bowen,

Chingos, and McPherson conclude that “it is the public sector that has the historical commitment to educational attainment for all.”⁷ Newfield goes further, arguing that “the [postwar] success of higher education showed the dependence of American business on high-value public expenditure.”⁸ In recognizing that public support has declined,—noting that “the conventional wisdom in higher education today is that while public education is more crucial than ever, there is no will to support it with public funding”—Newfield challenges educational leaders to do more to transform the political will, both inside and outside the academy.⁹

He argues that the costs and benefits of higher education cannot be simply reduced to economic terms, and also charges that as the academy “became obsessed with innovation” it “wrongly decided it could capture innovation in financial terms.”¹⁰ He makes a convincing case that the current fixation on securing research grants not only does not pay for itself in financial terms, but mischaracterizes the nature of scientific creativity and discovery. In fact, he succeeds in exploding the belief that the hard scientists and mathematics are revenue enhancers, and therefore more worthy for investment than social sciences and humanities.


Crossing the Finish Line and *Unmaking the Public University* do share one weakness, in that both concentrate on more traditional institutions, than the wide variety of institutions comprising higher education today. Both books use many more examples from flagship institutions than a truly comprehensive examination of public higher education would use. Nevertheless, taken together, these works go a long way toward explaining the current situation of public higher education, with Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson explaining how public institutions are not doing the job that policymakers have set for them, and Newfield giving the history of why they are not able to live up to those expectations.

Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson probably do a better job at accomplishing what they set out to do, engaging in a deeper, yet narrower, research task. Newfield undertakes something much more ambitious and he sometimes strains to connect all his suppositions. Nevertheless, while these books provide a great deal of material to criticize public colleges and universities, they also provide some grounds for hope. If the gaps between goals and outcomes in *Crossing the Finish Line* are transformed into legislative expectations, as both the Obama administration and the Congress seem set to do, we could see increased support for all levels of education which could lead to those goals becoming reality. But this will only happen if public attitudes toward institutions of higher education are fundamentally transformed.

Even after his encyclopedic detailing of the ills affecting universities, Newfield retains his optimism:

For better or worse, the university has become increasingly responsible for imagining progress for the whole of society. Intellectually, at least, it is up to the task. But if it is to succeed, it will need a renewed financial base and a new confidence in its public mission.¹¹

The financial base is needed to restore the institutional capacity of colleges and universities across the country. We need fully supported faculty to teach, fully staffed libraries, laboratories, and computer centers for students to learn, and fully staffed counseling departments in the high schools, colleges and universities to advise students. And our society needs public colleges and universities to help create the knowledge needed for economic and cultural progress.

A few years before Turner spoke in Indiana, Henry James returned for a visit to the United States after living abroad for 21 years. He found a country full of innovations and change, which seemed to be saying “See what I’m making of all this—see what I’m making.” James was not taken in, and replied “I see what you are not making, oh, what you are ever so vividly not.”¹² It is time to build something that contributes to the cultural and intellectual challenges James presented us a century ago. Public higher education has a vital role to play in the building of that something and these books will help. 

ENDNOTES

1. Frederick Jackson Turner, “Pioneer Ideals and The State University” in *The Frontier in History*. New York: Dover Publications (1996): 283 [originally published by Henry Holt & Co., New York, 1920].
2. William G. Bowen, Matthew M. Chingos, and Michael McPherson. *Crossing the Finish Line: Completing College at America’s Public Universities*. Princeton University Press (2009): 223.
3. Ibid, 230.
4. Ibid, 231.
5. Ibid, 209-210.
6. Ibid, 108.
7. Ibid, 225.
8. Christopher Newfield, *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty Year Assault on the Middle Class*. Harvard University Press (2008): 173.
9. Ibid, 173.
10. Ibid, 272.
11. Ibid, 275.
12. Henry James, *The American Scene*. Penguin Classics, 1994. [Originally published by Harper & Brothers, New York, 1907.]