

The Challenge is to Help Students Learn More

*Making Reform Work: The Case for Transforming
American Higher Education*

by Robert Zemsky

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Robert Zemsky, a member of the Spellings Commission during the Bush administration, has written a subtle yet revolutionary book. Critical of today's colleges and universities, he is equally critical about their critics who, he concluded from his experience on the commission, were more interested in attacking than improving higher education, leaving him "a disappointed signer of its final report" (18). This book is Zemsky's effort to outline what he had hoped the commission might have achieved.

In *Making Reform Work: The Case for Transforming American Higher Education*, he issues a wake-up call for all involved in higher education. Echoing Derek Bok's, *Our Underachieving Colleges* (2006), Zemsky believes that higher education fails students because educators are not held accountable for the quality of student learning. Discussing recent discoveries in cognitive science, he laments that new knowledge about how brains learn has not transformed pedagogy and curricula. Too often, curricula are based on the convenience of faculty and the priorities of administrators rather than on how students might learn more, Zemsky argues. While much of what he claims is now pedagogical common sense, he is right that higher education's current structure—characterized by large, passive introductory classes; high, impermeable borders between disciplines; and an emphasis on specialized over liberal education—limits how effectively faculty can teach and students can learn.

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Today's institutions, Zemsky believes, must radically redesign their curricula to improve student learning. He does not reject research; in fact, he was disappointed by how little Spellings commissioners cared about it (19). But when it comes to teaching, higher education must rethink its content delivery model and focus on engaging students to learn better. How to do so when the current system serves administrators and faculty so well? Only via a "dislodging event" large enough to force complacent institutions to change. He suggests two possibilities. First, the federal government could link funding to accountability, but this would hinder innovation. Instead, Zemsky supports an American version of Europe's Bologna process, including reducing the baccalaureate degree to three years. The purpose of such a process would be to force institutions to revisit their programs' fundamentals, to change according to a thoughtful plan affecting all institutions, and to be creative.

Even as he embraces new ideas about learning, Zemsky's ideal institution is traditional in the best sense of the term. He recognizes that improving student learning depends on sustained intellectual interaction between students and faculty. In short, a good education is expansive and personal. His goal is to make colleges and universities provide it.

By contrast, most critics offer reform that is misguided at best and destructive at worst. In chapter after chapter Zemsky demolishes the idea that better education is simply cheaper education. If higher educators have not been living up to their responsibility, others, whom he labels "efficiency" advocates, are wrong to assume that the market will impose the right kinds of changes. In fact, markets threaten to impose the opposite. To Zemsky, a real education is a special thing, something that happens when students and faculty focus on their shared purposes in common settings.

How to ensure accountability for student learning without the market's discipline? Zemsky argues that *US News & World Report* rankings are unreliable because they reflect current market position rather than educational quality. A better approach would be thoughtful student surveys that focus on the actual learning experience within each institution and provide real data about graduates' success in achieving their goals. Published results from such surveys would ensure institutions are accountable to the right market—their students. Moreover, such surveys could be used as outcome-based measures to improve educational quality and to guide students in choosing the best school.

The influence of markets on higher education has not spurred better quality. Pointing to payola scandals concerning student loan companies and education officials and the growing compensation packages of college and university presidents who act more like CEOs than educators, Zemsky urges higher education to remember that its goal is not to make profits but to educate students. Yet he does not concur with some critics who condemn markets outright. Given declining public financial support for higher education, Zemsky sees private revenue as a neces-

sary fact of life. Moreover, market pressures could encourage spending money more wisely. But the money must be used to promote an institution's core mission. He thus reminds schools to talk consistently "about purposes, about ends rather than means" (105) in order to hold fast to their mission in the face of the market's sirens.

The author expands his effort to protect higher education from becoming an extension of the market by urging educators to become "flat-world contrarians." Admitting that he, like so many, was "smitten" by *New York Times* columnist and author Thomas Friedman's work, Zemsky now emphasizes the dangers of embracing the globalization paradigm. Globalization relies on standardized commodities, the absence of a home base, and virtual networks over personal ties, but higher education is specific, based on campuses, and personal. Nor is the World Wide Web a panacea since online technologists have been selling products designed to make learning cheaper rather than better. Despite the for-profit University of Phoenix's success, Zemsky reminds readers that brand-name institutions lost money trying to go global and virtual. The reason is simple: Faculty are committed to teaching real people, and most students want the personal relationships with teachers that encourage learning. Zemsky concludes: "market forces will not yield the kinds of reforms—better teaching, more engaged students, more affordable as well as accountable institutions—that lamenters seek" (142).

Zemsky respects teachers but also believes that faculty "have met the enemy, and he is us" (164). He is right that faculty, especially at elite schools, often sacrifice teaching for research, and design curricula around their needs rather than student learning. Yet Zemsky ignores how faculty—and unions—are among the few voices resisting the trends he opposes. Administrators often focus on the bottom line: They hire adjunct over tenure-track faculty; favor large over small classes; and emphasize retention and credit generation rather than ensuring faculty are given the resources to teach each student well. Moreover, Zemsky does not take a position against casualizing the higher education workforce, despite the negative effect this trend has on educational quality (184-86).

Zemsky makes the same mistake as many others who invoke pedagogy and brain science: he ignores what brings faculty to the classroom in the first place. Faculty teach because they love their subjects and want to convey that love to their students. Any assessment regime that ignores this fact will destroy what makes higher education special and inspiring. Content matters. A liberal education provides not just skills—literacy, critical thinking, numeracy—but knowledge. Faculty must improve teaching not for its own sake but because teaching is a means to a larger end: understanding. Otherwise we will graduate students capable of thought but lacking the values and knowledge for judgment.

Zemsky offers a defense of teaching but not of the status quo. If Zemsky had his way, colleges and universities would be more focused on student learning. To reach this goal requires both changing today's institutions and challenging the baseless accusations and utopian hopes proffered by many critics. 