



We're Losing Our Minds

Rethinking American Higher Education

Richard P. Keeling

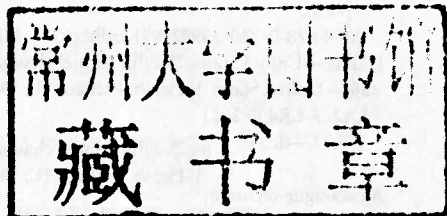
Richard H. Hersh



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We're Losing Our Minds

Richard A. Meade

As we enter the 21st century, the challenges of aging are becoming more complex and more numerous.

Today, we live longer than ever before.

At the same time, we are living longer with more chronic diseases and disabilities.

What's going on?

There are many factors at work here, including changes in our environment and our lifestyle.

One of the most significant factors is the increase in chronic diseases.

Chronic diseases are now the leading cause of death and disability.

These diseases include heart disease, cancer, and diabetes.

Richard A. Meade

Dr. Meade is a professor of gerontology at the University of California, San Diego.

He is also the author of several books on aging, including "The New Retirement Handbook."

He is also a frequent speaker at conferences on aging.

Dr. Meade is currently working on a new book about aging and the future.

He is also a frequent speaker at conferences on aging.

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Previous Publications

Richard P. Keeling

Assessment Reconsidered: Institutional Effectiveness for Student Success, coauthored with Andrew Wall and Ric Underhile (2008)

Learning Reconsidered 2: Implementing a Campus-Wide Focus on the Student Experience, edited (2006)

Learning Reconsidered: A Campus-Wide Focus on the Student Experience, edited (2004)

What Governing Board Members Need to Know about AIDS: Special Report (1992, 1990)

Effective AIDS Education on Campus, edited (1992)

AIDS on the College Campus, edited (1989, 1986)

Richard H. Hersh

Declining by Degrees: Higher Education at Risk, edited with John Merrow (2005)

The Structure of School Improvement, coauthored with Bruce R. Joyce and Michael McKibbin (1983)

Models of Values and Moral Education: An Appraisal, coauthored with John P. Miller and Glen D. Fielding (1980)

Promoting Moral Growth: From Piaget to Kohlberg, coauthored with Joseph Reimer and Diana Pritchard Paolitto (1979)

Preface

The purpose of this book is to get us, as a nation, talking seriously about quality in higher education. By quality we do not mean increasing access, although that is extremely important. Nor do we mean raising the rates of completion of college, although that is appropriately a high national priority as well. And we do not mean increasing the efficiency of colleges and universities or better managing the costs of higher education—undeniably also vital steps to take.

The concern that inspired this book is something more fundamental: the quantity and quality of student learning in college. Learning is what matters in higher education; questions of cost, efficiency, completion, and access, important as they are, are relevant only if students learn. We want to shift the national conversation from a primary focus on the metrics that make up magazine rankings to a serious discussion about the effectiveness of our colleges and universities in doing what they are there for: higher learning. We will make the case that there are critical gaps between what institutions of higher education promise and what they deliver.

We do this as friendly critics. Both authors have deep roots and long experience in higher education; we believe deeply—even passionately—in the ability of higher learning not only to discover, create, diversify, and apply knowledge, but also to change lives, enrich and sustain the arts and elevate culture, promote social justice, and ennoble societies and nations. We appreciate and have witnessed personally the exhausting stresses and daunting challenges that colleges and universities face today. Having served as faculty members, administrators, and leaders on campuses, and as consultants who have worked with hundreds of institutions, we know whereof we speak; we make our observations and claims carefully and conscientiously.

What we have to say is this: there is not enough higher learning in higher education. This is a critical problem that demands our urgent attention. The need for systemic institutional change—not just by one college, and not just in a few exemplary academic programs—is pressing. Nothing short of a national discussion, involving not only leaders, faculty, and students from colleges and universities, but also elected officials, education and workforce policy makers, employers, parents, and the media will generate enough energy and influence to restore learning as the first and highest priority in our colleges and universities.

There are reasons for concern about learning in the graduate and professional schools of our universities as well, but our focus in this book is on undergraduate education—college. What happens, or does not happen, in student learning in college sets the foundation for an educated population; a workforce prepared for the future's demands; a creative, engaged, and sustainable society; and a secure and peaceful nation.

“We’re losing our minds” is an extraordinary judgment to make, and “rethinking higher education” rightly suggests that there is no easy or superficial solution. The title—and this book—are intended to be a call to action. Some readers will already have thought, “But what can we do? How can we change higher education?”

We write this book because there are solutions, and the solutions—while fundamental and certainly not trivial—are within our reach. Conceptual and cultural shifts are key: the establishment of a serious culture of teaching and learning, making learning the touchstone for institutional decision making and for the allocation of resources, rethinking the kind of teaching that produces learning, tightly coupling learning experiences inside and outside the classroom, defining and achieving desired learning goals, implementing regular and routine assessments of learning linked to improvement strategies, higher expectations and standards for teaching and learning, revised faculty reward systems that emphasize learning, and measuring institutional performance with metrics that really matter—indicators of true higher learning.

Can those things happen? Absolutely. Will they happen? That’s up to us. Let’s start talking.

Acknowledgments

Writing any book, for any author, is a lot of work. We would not claim that our challenges, as authors who are also frequently traveling consultants working together in a small higher education consulting firm, are more, or worse, than those facing other authors. But we would say that consulting with many institutions is a great privilege, and we thank our clients for their confidence and for the many conversations that have informed our reflections and contributed to our thinking.

We are fortunate that everyone in our company, Keeling & Associates, LLC (K&A), embraces, affirms, and supports our writing. It would have been much harder, and would have taken a lot longer, to write this book without the enthusiasm and assistance of our colleagues. We are especially grateful for the help given us by two members of the K&A staff: Jennifer Stevens Dickson, DrPH, director of research, and Trey Avery, a consulting associate who is now in graduate school at Teachers College, Columbia University. Their repeated and patient reading of successive drafts, many suggestions for improving the text, and diligence in checking facts and references were truly indispensable.

We thank Eric L. Engstrom, MPH, president, and Kyle J. Hutchison, senior vice president and chief of staff of K&A, for both their unflagging encouragement and the accommodations they, and their staff members, willingly made to ensure that this book made it to press.

No author writes alone; each of us depended on our partners, Eric Engstrom and Judith Meyers, for critiques, confidence, and reassurance. We offer a special acknowledgment of the nonverbal but indubitable support of Cooper D. Airedale, K&A's vice president for canine relations, whose wagging tail always told us when we were on the right track.

Contents

Preface	vii
Acknowledgments	ix
1 Higher Education without Higher Learning	1
2 Judging College Quality	25
3 The Developmental Basis of Higher Learning	41
4 The Neuroscience of Learning	69
5 Assessment of Higher Learning	83
6 More Is Not Better, Better Is More: A Framework for Rethinking American Higher Education	109
7 Talk of Change Is Not Change: Rethinking American Higher Education	149
Notes	179
Index	189

Higher Education without Higher Learning

We're Losing Our Minds

What will hold America back in this century is the quality and quantity of student learning in college. Our colleges and universities are failing to deliver true higher learning—learning that prepares graduates to meet and excel at the challenges of life, work, and citizenship. The truth is painful but must be heard: we're not developing the full human and intellectual capacity of today's college students because they're not learning enough and because the learning that does occur is haphazard and of poor quality. Too many of our college graduates are not prepared to think critically and creatively, speak and write cogently and clearly, solve problems, comprehend complex issues, accept responsibility and accountability, take the perspective of others, or meet the expectations of employers. Metaphorically speaking, we are losing our minds. This is an unacceptable and costly failure that must be resolved if we are to avoid weakening our nation's political, social, economic, scientific, and technical leadership. It is a true educational emergency.

Why has higher education abandoned higher learning? Because learning itself is no longer the first priority in most colleges and universities, despite the fact that the core mission of every institution of higher education is exactly that—learning. The many recent critiques that assail colleges and universities for rising costs, rampant inefficiencies, and insufficient accountability hit other targets but miss this key point. Without higher learning, higher education is just a series of steps that lead to

a degree—the receipt of which is evidence of nothing except the completion of those steps.

Bachelor's degrees have become mostly a necessary and expensive item to check off among other requirements for a job. Few undergraduate degrees really promise anything or establish legitimate expectations about the graduates who hold them. Having a bachelor's degree no longer certifies that the graduate has any specific qualifications, is capable of achieving any real intellectual depth, possesses basic workplace skills, or demonstrates personal maturity.

A painful but telling anecdote illustrates these points. A neighbor of one of the authors is the president of an international insurance consulting and actuarial firm. He frequently interviews job candidates who are recent graduates of universities in the United States and abroad. Over the course of three decades of experience, he has found U.S. graduates to be increasingly and surprisingly unprepared—not just for positions that require focus, strong cognitive skills, and a well-developed sense of personal and professional accountability, but even for the interviews themselves. “I stopped expecting them to do even basic calculations,” he says, “but now most of the candidates I interview cannot think their way through a problem or tell me how they would go about solving it. How can I entrust my clients to them?” His assessment of the causes of the decline he has observed is this: “It seems that no one expected much of them in university. It's not just that they weren't challenged. No one looked to see if they were learning anything. So they have a degree, but what does that tell me?” Talk with other employers, and you will hear similar stories: American college graduates aren't adequately prepared for work.

But aren't these skills—critical thinking, problem solving, and demonstrating a sense of accountability—good examples of exactly what we should expect students to learn in college? Shouldn't we be able to assume that a college graduate can “think their way through a problem,” as the actuary said? Shouldn't universities check to see what students are learning? And shouldn't they be revising and improving their educational programs if students' learning is falling short?

What level of tuition and fees would we agree to pay for a college education that does not reliably prepare students to think, work, and contribute to society? How much is that worth? We should be arguing

about value, not cost alone. The problem is that without higher learning, higher education is not valuable enough to justify its price, unless you're just buying the degree, in which case a logical and savvy consumer would and should purchase the cheapest one available. The only thing that's "higher" about that kind of learning is the cost, and the combination of high cost and poor quality always equals low value.

The minds of human beings are our most precious asset. But higher education today is failing to develop, prepare, and inspire those minds and endangering our place and standing in the world. Just imagine the unrealized potential. What ideas, creations, inventions, contributions to the arts, and steps toward greater social justice are scuttled because higher learning did not happen? And in what possible alternate universe would we not take the scope and gravity of this problem seriously, and respond as quickly and forcefully as we could? Faced with any other major threat to our intellectual, economic, social, and political strength and viability, we would react at once, taking immediate measures to slow the rate of loss while we determined how to stop further losses from occurring. Confronted with a big problem, we would design big solutions. We invest a lot of money and put a lot of trust in higher education. Would we be comfortable just watching while the returns on any other investment of similar proportions dwindled?

There are solutions, and the solutions—while fundamental and nontrivial—are within our reach. Higher education must make learning the first priority; we should expect nothing less. At the heart of the matter is the need to change institutional culture. Making learning the first priority will require radical, not incremental, changes in concepts, policies, and practices throughout the academic world. A starter solution list includes rethinking the kind of teaching that produces learning, creating consensus-based learning goals and ensuring that the undergraduate curriculum addresses all of them, implementing regular and routine assessments of learning linked to improvement strategies, demanding higher standards for and expectations of both student and faculty performance, integrating learning experiences inside and outside the classroom, revising faculty reward systems to emphasize learning and account for the value of advising and mentoring, and providing regular professional development for faculty members to strengthen teaching. These are critical steps in the right direction. The impenetrable silos of

separate schools, departments, and disciplines focused first and mostly on research must yield to a broad commitment to use every institutional resource, in and out of the classroom, to promote, assess, and strengthen student learning.

Defining what is wrong helps little unless we can also determine how to make change—how to ensure that higher learning happens in higher education. To do so, we must be clear about what is required for true higher learning.

College for What?

What do we count on from colleges and universities? What do we want a college graduate to be able to do, besides list a degree on a résumé? Why, in other words, do we send two-thirds of our high school graduates to college? Is it just the next step after secondary school, or do we want something more than that? What are students supposed to get from college that they wouldn't get otherwise? Why does college matter?

One of the most common answers is that higher education should strengthen students' personal, occupational, and economic opportunity. The promise of higher education to help students make something of themselves, realize their potential, and reach their goals is itself a heartfelt expression of the American dream, and we, as a society that deeply values education, support its incarnation in community and technical colleges, public universities of all scopes and sizes, liberal arts colleges, and comprehensive research institutions. We assume that somehow the cultural pathways that lead to the American verities of individual and family economic prosperity, home ownership, and civic engagement pass directly through campus. This view is so deeply embedded and so powerful in our thinking that it can seem to be the only reason for going to college; too often, the purpose of higher education has been interpreted quite narrowly as just to get a job, or a better job. In that limited view, the change desired in students between enrollment and graduation seems only to be a shift from unemployable to employable, or, ideally, to employed.

According to a study published in 2009 by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, six out of ten Americans believe colleges today are run more like businesses than campuses—zeroed in

on the bottom line, rather than on students' educational experiences.¹ The pervasiveness of that mentality influences the culture and perceived priorities of higher education institutions and leads students (as it does colleges and universities) to lose sight of the higher learning they should expect. Instead, they focus on obtaining the credentials they believe will lead to employment.

Jobs are important, and every family wants their new graduate to get one; what is learned in college (which includes not just the content of academic courses, but everything else that is learned outside class) should prepare students for success after graduation. Desired college learning outcomes such as critical thinking, working in teams, and analytical reasoning are essential for many, or most, jobs. But just as a job is not the whole of a person's life, preparation for a job cannot be the whole of that person's college experience, and being ready for, or getting, a job cannot be the only reason for going to (and paying for) college.

Beyond the implied assurance of employment (a promise higher education no longer reliably keeps), the idea of positive intellectual and personal growth lies at the heart of our hopes about, goals for, and confidence in higher education. That idea distinguishes higher education in our society from primary and secondary schooling; it is what makes higher education higher—it is what puts higher learning in higher education. If we thought college was just the next mechanical, sequential step after high school, we might call it tertiary education, rather than higher education. Breaking the logic of the series of names—first primary, then secondary, then . . . higher—is no accident. The name higher education promises something extra, above and beyond. In our culture, that something extra carries significant imputed value. A college degree is supposed to signify achievement and ability that warrant not only better jobs and greater compensation, but also a special kind of respect and the recognition of added social value.

So higher education is, and is supposed to be, qualitatively different from the forms of education that came before it. And it is supposed to help students become qualitatively different—educated people—as well. The belief in that change, which is really an intentional transformation during college, means that our expectations of college are fundamentally not just about jobs and money, though jobs and money may come most quickly to mind when students and parents are asked to list the benefits

of higher education. We have come to count on higher education for a more subtle, idiosyncratic, and even mysterious process of development and growth in students, something that transcends the acquisition of greater earning power and long-term increase in wealth potential: the intellectual, personal, and social emergence of a complete, adult human being. It is that transformation that truly defines the goals of higher learning. We expect colleges to change students' hearts and minds and somehow build them into whole, more mature persons; hence, we have college programs in leadership development, multicultural competency, stress management, conflict resolution, teamwork, and volunteer service, as well as academic courses and majors.

It is worth emphasizing that at its root the idea of higher learning is one of positive change: the student who graduates will not be, and should not be, the same person as the one who started college. None of the conditions of college—personal and intellectual challenge, exposure to new ideas, interactions with people who are different, the opportunity to experience new freedom and test old boundaries—are intended to leave students inert and unaffected. This is exactly what we want; at commencement, students move their tassels from one side to the other, throw their caps into the air, and greet their families after the recession as different people.

We assume that a college graduate has become an educated person, and an educated person is both a personal and public good. We believe that the more educated our people are, and the more of our people who are educated, the better off our society will be—more secure, more stable, more prosperous, and more healthy. Accordingly, we provide generous public support to both students and colleges and universities. No other society invests in higher education as richly or consistently as we do. Perhaps no other society believes in the potential of higher education as ardently as we do.

Higher Learning

The differences that college produces should be far more meaningful and complex than just chronological growth. Students who finish college and have not changed significantly, and for the better—students who have only gotten older and taller, but not thoughtfully reassessed

their perspectives or points of view, challenged their previous ways of thinking, developed greater personal and social maturity, and been prepared for the world of work and the responsibilities of citizenship—missed the opportunity that higher learning offers. And we, as a society, lost the opportunity that the development and maturation of their minds represents.

There are different kinds of learning, though we often use the word *learning* interchangeably for all of them. A student can get through college by memorizing, absorbing content knowledge in one or more fields (say history, Spanish language and literature, environmental science, mathematics, or psychology), and repeating back information given by professors convincingly enough to merit a passing grade on exams and papers. To call that process learning suggests that learning, at a very basic level, just means knowing something that you did not know before and knowing it long enough to pass the test. Things learned in such a way may, or may not, stick.

But there is a different kind of learning—the kind we should expect of higher education. Experiments in the psychology and neuroscience of learning show that learning that sticks—the kind that leads to the changes we expect of college, what we call higher learning—requires rich engagement with new material, not just memorization, and that the outcome of this engagement is a concrete and tangible change in the mind—a change in how one thinks and makes sense of the world. We see that change when students develop greater depth of understanding, can apply their new knowledge in the world, can articulate and defend a new perspective, or show new personal, social, or civic maturity. That change in the mind is not just an abstraction; we now know from brain research that learning has flesh-and-blood correlates. Advances in brain imaging allow us to “see” and measure functional and structural changes in the brain associated with learning. We change our minds because something has changed in our brains as a result of a learning experience.

Students who are seriously engaged in higher learning encounter new material—knowledge, perspectives, points of view, creations, performances, events, activities—and make sense of it in relation to their own previous knowledge, perspectives, points of view, creations, performances, events, and activities. As they continue to make connections between past knowledge and experience and new learning, the

likelihood that the new learning will make sense, stick, and be available for later problem solving increases. Sometimes, processing and reflecting on the new material also inspire a significant change in capacities, attitudes, beliefs, or perspectives. “I used to think X, but, having [taken that course] [read that book] [seen that movie] [had that discussion] [done that community service project], now I think Y.”

Of course none of this happens in one mighty leap; the student of the past does not become the student of the future all at once. Instead, the profound changes that make up the process of higher learning occur both predictably and unpredictably, often one at a time but sometimes in a flood, and are ordered differently for each student. But the conditions have to be right, and the student has to be engaged. Critical thinking does not emerge fully developed from one class, and the empathic ability to take the perspective of another person does not arise mechanically from a single encounter with someone unlike oneself. The changes we hope to see in students' minds and hearts are ultimately built cumulatively, gradually, and collectively from multiple intentional learning experiences inside and outside the classroom. Note that phrase, intentional learning experiences—it includes activities, from courses to volunteer service, that are designed to achieve certain desired learning outcomes. They are what a college or university can and should be accountable for creating, offering (or requiring, in many cases), providing, and assessing in an effort to support student learning, achievement, and success.

Sitting passively through college while simply finishing the growth of long bones is a waste of both individual and collective time and resources. Unfortunately, it is possible and increasingly common to do exactly that—to accumulate credit hours, meet basic academic requirements, and receive a degree without truly engaging in the process of real, substantive learning—in other words, without experiencing higher learning in higher education. Hence the phenomenon known only too well to parents, employers, and educators: that of students graduating from college, but learning little. College should be about deep, soul-searching, mind-expanding, life-enhancing learning, which may, but may not, correlate with grades, retention, and graduation. Staying in college—or, for that matter, finishing it—does not, in and of itself, signify higher learning. Persistence alone is not student success. Permitting getting through college to pass for higher learning is the great failure of higher education.