



The Higher Education Scene in America: Some Observations

Gitlow, Abraham; and Gitlow, Howard

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Book Review

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Higher education in the U.S. is hardly a utopia. Despite common mischaracterizations in the media, neither is it an ivory tower looming, pristine and untouched, over the pedestrian affairs of plebian life below. Rather it stands in the center of academic life like a dilapidated monument which we tirelessly remodel and renovate to make relevant and meaningful in the present day and age. But what is it that needs to be preserved and what needs to be updated?

Perhaps it is a kind of perverse patriotism which makes American academics believe that a free society is dependent on what the Gitlows describe as the “tripartite” academic mission of American universities: the transmission of knowledge, the extension of knowledge, and development of critical thinking (165). Academics, however, cannot ignore the other mission of higher education in America... the preparation of students for employment. It is this open acknowledgement that institutions, and those actors inside them, are working with multiple – sometimes harmonious and sometimes contentious – missions in mind, which makes the Gitlows’ book a refreshing read.

Perhaps it is due to the fact that this father and son team have spent a combined seventy-five years in academia, not just as scholars but also as administrators, that their combined work presents such a reasoned approach. The authors address some of the most daunting challenges that higher education in the U.S. is currently facing in chapters entitled “The Fundraising Challenge,” “The Budgetary Challenge and Fiscal Responsibility,” “The Academic Pecking Order and the Unionization of Academic Staff,” and “Conflicts of Interest and Division I Sports.” The Gitlows also revisit some of the most devastating events American universities

have faced in the last fifty years, such as the economic crisis of 2008-2009 in which schools that relied too heavily on a single source of funding found themselves strapped for cash if not perilously in the red.

As new models for higher learning, such as MOOCs (Massive, Open, Online Courses) and for-profit universities, challenge the standard model of the American college experience, the authors suggest that readers should evaluate what type of threat these new modes of learning actually pose to the underlying missions of higher education. The Gitlows provide a rather optimistic view of MOOCs, deeming their introduction as “evolutionary, not revolutionary” (182). The authors see MOOCs as altering but not replacing the traditional collegiate model.

For-profit institutions (like the University of Phoenix), although presenting a seemingly daunting visage to the traditional college model in the early 2000s, were finally reined in when new rules regarding federal student loans were implemented by the government in 2010. The authors suggest that now that they are being held accountable for abuses, for-profit institutions will, like MOOCs, continue to alter the landscape of higher education, but they will not bulldoze it and build a glorified strip mall of education.

So if the largest threats to higher education in America are not MOOCs or for-profit institutions... what are they? The Gitlows point to conflicts of interest and Division I sports representing major threats to U.S. higher education. They write, “a lurking danger for the academic institution is the possible distortion of research motivation and faculty priorities as they assess their institutional responsibilities” (120). Research and the proliferation of patents generated by universities can be both a blessing and a curse. While the authors might present a rather reasoned argument for the nuances and complexities involved in evaluating potential threats to higher education in the U.S., they do not mince words regarding the corrosive effect Division I sports has on the academic foundation of American universities. The authors support a rather unorthodox solution to the ills that plague academic institutions which house sports empires... one that recommends “breaking the power of the NCAA and ESPN” and one which, the authors openly acknowledge, would require a massive overhaul of the current system (146).

While a must read for anyone contemplating a future career as a university president or provost, this book also proves to be insightful to administrators, faculty, and policy makers, or anyone whose professional life is grounded in the world of higher education.

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