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Ben Miller

Center for American Progress, blmiller@americanprogress.org

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Book Review:

American Higher Education in Crisis? What Everyone Needs to Know

By Ben Miller

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The crisis narrative is a popular trope in higher education media coverage. It's easy to understand why. Fears of college cost and student debt play right into middle class insecurities, while narratives of American universities falling behind the world fit the concerns of U.S. decline that drive political agendas. And that's all before uttering the words "disruptive" or "MOOC" (Massive Online Open Courses).

The truth of what's actually happening in higher education is, of course, much more complicated and doesn't always fit into breathless op-eds. But absent time to read daily in-depth coverage of the higher education trade press (a luxury afforded to few), it's easy to understand how thorny issues get simplified into quasi-accurate talking points.

Fortunately, *Chronicle of Higher Education* Senior Writer Goldie Blumenstyk is here to set the record straight. A reporter for over a quarter-century, she brings her expertise to bear in *American Higher Education in Crisis? What Everyone Needs to Know*. Although a better title might be "Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about Higher Education but Were Afraid to Ask."

The book is part of Oxford's *What Everyone Needs to Know* series, which takes a format familiar to those who are accustomed to explainer journalism. In place of long essays, it walks readers through answers to common higher education policy questions, ranging from broad issues (Who goes to college in America?) to very specific (What is "undermatching," and what role does it play in higher-education diversity?). While the book does address the most hot-button issues surrounding student debt—what's driving college costs, and yes, MOOCs—it also delves deeper into other topics like college governance, university debt, and athletics. And though climbing walls do not make an appearance, their 2014 counterpart, the lazy river, does show up in a discussion of the effect of the higher education amenities race.

The result is a book that is the equivalent of reading the last 10-plus years of higher education media coverage in a breezy 154 pages. It will probably be most useful for anyone starting cold and looking to get a handle on higher education issues. It is a must-read for any worried parents of high school upperclassmen, interns, and new-to-the-beat journalists, but readers of any knowledge level will inevitably learn something. Among a few fun facts I picked up: the overall increase in enrollment at community colleges from 1980 to 2011 appears to have been entirely made up of Federal Pell Grant recipients, and the shift to private for-profit colleges and away from public ones actually started with low-income white students, not the students of color public institutions tend to heavily recruit today.

The real draw for all readers, both novice and advanced, should be the book's opening and closing essays. They both present a nuanced and thoughtful investigation of the crisis question mentioned in the book's title. Yes, Blumenstyk argues in the introductory essay, higher education is certainly facing a crisis on

Ben Miller is senior director for postsecondary education at the Center for American Progress.

multiple fronts, especially financial and technological. And even the arguments made in higher education's favor can work at cross purposes, such as undermining its portrayal as a public good by emphasizing the individual benefits of getting a college degree. But there is a difference between facing a crisis and declaring something doomed. Blumenstyk argues that assuming impending doom for the dozens of different and unrelated higher education systems and thousands of institutions in the United States is far too simplistic.

Rather, the real question for colleges will be what opportunities come from the challenges that all but the richest and most elite institutions will face. Here, the story as Blumenstyk tells it is more one of cautious optimism. She describes how financial concerns are leading more colleges to use advanced analytics to identify students at risk of dropping out, explore with new teaching and learning models, and use online learning to supplement and enrich the in-person experience. She also explores the way pressure to ensure students are developing needed skills is leading hundreds of institutions to try things like the Lumina Foundation's *Degree Qualifications Profile*.

While these responses all differ, the one element they have in common is an acknowledgement of the necessity of proactivity. The old model of just existing as a college and knowing students will enroll and either thrive or fail of their own volition is not a recipe for long-term stability. The colleges that recognize and respond to these various challenges are not guaranteed to emerge unscathed—especially smaller nonprofit institutions, regional public universities, and community colleges—but at least they will have a shot.

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