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Report on “Origins of Underperformance”

Peter Brooks¹

A Commentary on "The Origins of Underperformance in Higher Education: Proximal Systems of Influence" by Michael Moscolo and Jose Castillo

This essay strikes me as strikingly unoriginal, accepting as given what it needs to establish, analyzing the problems presented in banal ways, and recommending improvements long known to everyone.

“Despite our best efforts, colleges and universities have proceeded from the pinnacles of scholastic achievement at their inception, to a current state of mediocrity at best, and, at worst, a system needing to be scrapped and re-invented.” That is the premise of this paper. It is assumed rather than substantiated, and its causes then analyzed by way of factors that have often been discussed, and have been in place for so long that they hardly seem relevant movers of the recent decline the paper claims to have taken place. Unstructured curricula, inadequate secondary preparation for college, over-specialized teaching, careerism, anti-intellectual and alcohol-fueled student culture: critics of the university have diagnosed these failings for decades. Indeed, the failings have existed for decades, and I see no evidence that they are worse now than, say, in the 1950s. The studies called upon to document the “decline,” such as the Spellings Report and Arum & Roska all strike me as driven by their own theses more than by evidence.

When it comes to a discussion of teaching methodology and best practices, the analyses are conventional, and the recommendations worthy but hardly new. For all its deployment of statistics and studies, this paper really brings nothing new to the table. In fact, it seems to me to reinforce stereotypes that need real analysis.

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