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Book Review: Cracks in the Ivory Tower: The Moral Mess of Higher Education

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Jason Brennan and Phillip Magness. *Cracks in the Ivory Tower: The Moral Mess of Higher Education*. Oxford University Press, 2019. v., 322 p. ISBN 9780190846282. \$31.95.

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The “cracks” addressed in this book were not architectural or financial, but ethical. None were newly discovered by the authors. Each has a long history. What is novel about this book is that the authors use conservative economic principles from their field of business ethics to explain why universities and faculty members do what they do (Brennan was identified in an *Inside Higher Ed* interview as “leaning left” and the authors explicitly claim that they did not want the book to be right- or left-winged). Brennan teaches at establishment Georgetown University, and Magness works at a conservative think tank.

For the authors, the main reason universities have fallen into so much unethical practice is that they provide those who work there with perverse incentives. The core proposition was that people in ivoried and ivied towers are selfish, self-interested, and extrinsically motivated. The first two chapters outlined the authors’ basic economic/business principles. The general principle that incentives influence behavior is one that most readers will accept. Faculty members are rewarded for publishing and obtaining grants, not for effective teaching or meaningful service to their communities. Faculty members do want knowledge (although much of it is useless and some professors are not dispassionate scholars, but activists). They just want fame and status, less teaching, fewer administrative tasks, and increased freedom more. Students want credentials and good jobs and more play time, not knowledge or skills—and they want it at a low price. Administrators want promotions, high salaries, prestige, power, and security. Faculty members have it is easy, especially if they are tenured. Typical is an 8 to 5 workday, five days a week, 8 or 9 months per year (the title of Brennan’s solo-authored book about academic jobs, is “Good Work if You Can Get It”).

Although some of the incentives the authors described apply to the state comprehensive university sector, there are many differences. The towers at SCUs are likelier to be red brick than ivory. Because prestige, status, power (except localized power), and high pay are less available at comprehensive universities, other rewards are relatively more important. Faculty members at comprehensive universities teach more, teach more different courses, and, I would argue, generally find the act of teaching highly rewarding. Students at comprehensive universities certainly want to get credentialed for jobs, but many SCU students work before and during their schooling and know they need knowledge and skills. Brennan and

Magness seriously underestimated the role of intrinsic motivation (e.g., curiosity and creativity) in the behavior of students and faculty members. Their estimate of the workload for faculty was clearly off.

Perhaps because they are business ethicists, Brennan and Magness' harshest critique came in the chapter "Why Most Academic Advertising is Immoral Bullshit." Their target was not just the glossy, misleading materials institutions produce and disseminate in great bulk. Their argument was that the claims universities make about changing students are either altogether bogus and/or unsupported by evidence. Students do not learn to think, lead, or behave more ethically because of their college experience, or at least, universities do not know if they do. Brennan and Magness argued that universities do not directly test their products and that to the extent graduates are different from non-matriculaters, the differences were due to selection (brighter, more creative leaders with better character are selected in the admissions process) or signaling (employers use the diploma as a sign that an individual is a bright but compliant worker). The conclusion of the chapter was: "one of the main missions of the university system is to educate students and our discussion here suggests that we're spending half a trillion a year on a failed mission" (p. 81).

There is plenty of hype in admissions brochures and campus tours. But is it true that a college education has little or no effect on student thinking, knowing, or behaving? The authors' main source for the ineffectiveness of college was the methodologically flawed "Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses" (Arum & Roksa, 2011). They did not even reference the three volumes of "How College Affects Students" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Mayhew et al., 2016), which provide a more positive view of the effects of college attendance. There will never be experimental cause-effect proof of the effectiveness of higher education, because randomized clinical trials are not ethically possible.

Two other cracks concerned how students evaluate faculty and how faculty evaluate students. The authors concluded that both are unreliable and invalid. Student "evaluations" are not really evaluations but reports of perceptions. Students cannot judge the scholarship of teaching, and student evaluations can be tainted by student prejudices and the desire to avoid challenge. This is as true at SCUs as at research universities, but Brennan and Magness went too far. Adding items about workload and challenge can make student perceptions of instruction more informative. Grading problems can be attenuated by better teaching practices. The issue is feedback, and teachers need to be prepared to offer more feedback. At the research university, faculty members are busy grinding out publications and writing grant proposals and reports, so they cannot risk the investment of time required to provide frequent feedback.

Other cracks were rampant student dishonesty, the use of general education as job programs for faculty, the problems surrounding tenure for faculty who

subsequently are unneeded or unproductive, and the over-production of Ph.D.'s. At all types of universities, many problems with academic integrity can be reduced with better teaching methods, especially using more complex and creative evaluations and assignments. State comprehensive universities have no particular solutions for problems of incoherent general education or tenure. The over-production of Ph.D.'s by research universities has been a boon to the quality of the faculty at state comprehensive universities.

Despite its relentless cynicism, the authors raised important questions. For those of us at state comprehensive universities, perhaps the central question is whether we can be more ethical than those at research universities by adhering to a teaching-centered, student-centered mission. It will take more than a 40-hour week.

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