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## *Book Review*

# Campus Confidential, How College Works—and Doesn't—for Professors, Parents and Students

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*Campus Confidential, How College Works—and Doesn't—for Professors, Parents and Students*

Jacques Berlinerblau, Brooklyn: Melville House, 2017, 272 pp., \$21.59

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Ah college! Who can make sense of it? Does it really deliver on all those lofty goals we hear extolled every year from solemnly robed figures at graduation ceremonies, giving an enormous cross section of American youth an opportunity to “think critically” and be “exposed to great ideas” on their way to maturation? Or is it a corrupt and unreformed holdover from another era, just fleecing students with silly course offerings inevitably prefaced with the term “postcolonial,” before they really get to work on their lives, subsidizing a bunch of slugabouts and Maoists in the process? Well, in *Campus Confidential, How College Works – and Doesn’t – for Professors, Parents and Students*, Jacques Berlinerblau, a professor at Georgetown, tries very hard to be both funny and just about college,--or at least about the most important parts of it. For parents and prospective college students, there is much to be gained here, including many worthwhile peeks behind the scenes. For example, it is amazing how little parents of prospective students know about widespread administrative policies regarding adjunct teaching, and the economics of the adjunct market. Berlinerblau explains it all to you with as little fuss as one could wish, managing to mix humor and justified outrage nicely along the way. And tied to this, for academics, much it will have a “speaking truth to power” quality to it. Professors will recognize Berlinerblau’s points and will nod knowingly saying, “That’s right!” before many passages. Of course, the lightness of touch – for Berlinerblau is as anxious to charm as he is to inform – goes hand in hand with incomplete treatment sometimes too. Some subjects just do not get the full discussion they deserve, and I will say more about that below. But the range is impressive. Berlinerblau has something to say about almost everything that is discussed when the subject of college comes up – from political correctness on campus to sexual relations between faculty and students – and he tends to treat such matters with a Garrison Keillor-like reasonableness this reader at least found quite appealing, and on the whole seems justified. But the *real* reason for this book is anything but easygoing. Berlinerblau argues fiercely that academia has very much lost its way with respect to its central purpose, which is, undeniably, undergraduate *teaching*.

There are many reasons for this as well as several culprits. But the central explanation for the unsatisfactory state of teaching in undergraduate colleges today lies with the profession itself. Undergraduate education is presently compromised because of how academia understands itself, how graduate schools shape the professors of the future, and how the schools that hire them corroborate this unfortunate conception. It is because Berlinerblau very much wants us to re-evaluate this concept, this dominant paradigm if you will, that he has written this book. And so, while this book will be of great use to parents and students who they will learn much from it, by contrast, few academics will find very little that they do not already know. Nevertheless, the real audience for this book is the academic world since Berlinerblau wants to start a conversation in academia about changing undergraduate education in a very fundamental way. The jaunty tone,

the many jokes, the casual style belie a very serious, almost revolutionary purpose. If we are to be who we say we are, those committed to excellence and teaching young minds, then we have to change.

Alright, what is wrong? And why is it so? There is of course the remarkable degree to which, over the past two or three decades, colleges have seen the enormous proliferation of administration, and the accompanying obsession with driving down costs. This in turn has led to a widespread use of “contingent” faculty – part and full time instructional staff that is not and cannot be tenured. Berlinerblau rightly recommends several times that prospective students and parents look very closely at the school’s website and course offerings (look for those “TBAs” and “Staff”) to see what the ratio of full time faculty to overall instructional offerings is; don’t take at face value the inevitable remarks about a “longstanding commitment to teaching excellence” or whatever other pieties grace the schools’ promotional literature. But it is Berlinerblau’s view that it is not the tenure/non-tenure divide and the use of the non-tenured staff that undermines education. Instead the data shows that the full time non-tenured faculty usually does a very good job teaching and mentoring students (the excessive use of overworked *part time* adjunct staff is quite another matter). No, the real problem lies in how tenure is understood, how it is achieved, and what professors turn themselves into in order to get it.

And here, every academic knows exactly what Berlinerblau is talking about. From the start graduate schools indoctrinate in the young aspiring professor the need to publish, and to publish in some domain, or on some subject, that has not been taken up. By contrast, graduate schools simply do not teach their students anything about techniques for how to teach effectively the subject they are studying. When a recent graduate gets a job, he or she has been trained from the start to see teaching as a burden best minimized. Competitive applicants bargain to have a reduced teaching load. Colleges offer “release time,” or a release from teaching obligations to prospective “hot” candidates who are likely to publish a great deal in the right journals in order to lure them to their schools. The best schools of course – what Berlinerblau calls Destination Colleges – require the least possible teaching from their faculty. “Star” faculty at such schools may well teach no lower undergraduate courses at all, or they will offer lecture courses so large and so insulated from the annoying freshman and sophomore by an army of teaching assistants that the undergraduate in question will get no closer to such faculty than if he or she stayed home and just watched the TED talk. Michael Sandel’s much praised 700 student lecture on political theory at Harvard is treated with appropriate skepticism for just this reason. (In my younger years, I “attended” Roberto Mangaberia Unger’s much gossiped about weekly performance for a similar sized crowd, and I can attest – there was indeed no teaching going on whatsoever.) Whatever colleges *say*, everyone

knows that the tenure decision that a junior faculty member faces will be almost entirely driven by his or her publication record, and the quantity rather than the quality of it at that. The main point is: from the start, from the first day of graduate school, to the competition that unfolds on the job market, to the actual tenure decision, the message is clear: you don't really have to worry about teaching. Indeed, you will be penalized if you do, since, if you spend too much time thinking about what goes on your classroom, or, even worse, meeting students outside of class with the idea of spending time making them better at the subject at hand, you are jeopardizing your future, taking time away from that article or monograph or chapter or book project that alone is the lingua franca of advancement. It is the fact that the college and the faculty have a deep and not even unspoken agreement *not to care about teaching* in the first place, and to worry about something else, which is the problem.

Of course, there are talented teachers at every college all the same, and real mentoring does go on. But there can be no question that policies governing tenure do prevent faculty from thinking about teaching, or their students, to the extent they might. The result is a lot less real teaching, or good teaching, than there could be. Berlinerblau recommends a real – not symbolic – commitment to considering teaching ability in the tenure process, a real commitment to small class size (the large lectures, whoever is parading around in the front, just don't generate much teaching – and the data seems to support this claim), and policies that encourage and reward real mentoring, where the student learns the most. He points out, quite correctly that a lot of colleges you never heard of do a very good job with respect to these goals, and may be better choices in some ways than the more famed Destination Colleges.

However, Berlinerblau exaggerates the degree to which concerns about teaching do not enter into the job market and so will not be a concern for prospective applicants. Yes, there are some schools where teaching ability really does not matter very much at all in the hiring – particularly those with prestigious graduate programs, for graduate students who are interested in the doctrines of faculty, may get a lot out of interesting thinkers who are not particularly gifted pedagogs. (The list of such cases in philosophy is so long and so distinguished it boggles the mind. I mention one: W.V. Quine was no gifted teacher. It hardly follows that the graduate students got nothing from him and his classes.) But on the whole, in my experience, schools looking to make a new hire rightly worry that the bright and shiny graduate student before them may bore the pants off their undergraduates, and hiring committees need to be reassured that, in addition to having the most interesting view of intentionality and speech acts since Grice (so fulsomely attested to in the letters), the candidate can also convey introductory level claims with some panache. Finalists for most jobs usually have to teach a class as part

of the interview, and a poor performance there will not be brushed off. Many graduate students seek out adjunct work just so they can claim, with some credibility, that they know what they are doing in the classroom, and they have figured out good strategies for handling difficulties with doctrines and so forth. And on the other side of the coin, while it is true that graduate schools often do not directly teach their students how to think about teaching, that hardly means no guidance along those lines is ever given. Many of us had extremely charismatic teachers in graduate school, and we were profoundly influenced by their example when it came time to teach ourselves.

And then there are all the things that are nobody's fault. As our academic culture becomes more and more prestige-oriented, undergraduates may just not mind being deprived of good teaching, so long as they get the prestige. Of course, for most in Sandel's huge lecture, it is just a voice droning on, and little is added to whatever they might find of Sandel's views online. But, they do get to brag about having had Michael Sandel, and increasingly that is a bargain they are willing to make. Professors for their part, as they age and continue to think and write about the material they are interested in may find that they just are more comfortable teaching in classes where they can draw upon their most considered thoughts straightforwardly. It may be something we should not mind or resist if some senior professors really prefer to teach upper class students as opposed to incoming freshmen, for it is there they will be more motivated and so will do a better job. But in a way, none of this matters to Berlinerblau's argument. The main point is hard to deny. Colleges have on the whole agreed to let a certain conception of academia dominate to the point where teaching skill, or interest in developing that skill, has become irrelevant to professional advancement. And, when you take this point in combination with the claims colleges typically make on their own behalf, the result is both comic and scandalous. Whatever the details of reform should be, and of course they would vary enormously with the institution at hand, it is clear that *some* serious reform is needed. Berlinerblau has done the world he clearly loves a real service, and this book is nice tonic to our complacency as professors.