Reviews

College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be
Andrew Delbanco

We’re Losing Our Minds: Rethinking American Higher Education
Richard P. Keeling and Richard H. Hersh

Editor’s note: Given the national attention that continues to focus on higher education and its purposes, I invited three scholars to share with us their views of two books approaching postsecondary education from very different perspectives: Andrew Delbanco’s College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be and Richard P. Keeling and Richard H. Hersh’s We’re Losing Our Minds: Rethinking American Higher Education.

Rhetoric Matters: Why Denial May Not Work This Time

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As part of my self-diagnosed obsessive-compulsive disorder, I arrived at my daughter’s college graduation three hours early. Knowing for the same reason
that I could not sit for three hours without an occupation, I brought with me my mostly read copy of College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be and my unopened copy of We’re Losing Our Minds. Simultaneously awaiting the celebration of my daughter’s accomplishments and reading claims about higher education’s “absence of a serious culture of teaching and learning, and the consequent insufficient quality and quantity of student learning” (Keeler and Hersh 175) was a dizzying experience, especially for someone in the business of educating. As the ceremony began, I found myself looking about the sea of proud parents, wondering what might have occurred had the traditional speeches been replaced by adapted oral performances of these books. “Our colleges and universities are failing to deliver true higher learning,” proclaims the provost (1). “Learning is no longer the first priority of our university,” the college president chimes in (1). The student speaker then adds her reflections: “For most of us, college means the anxious pursuit of marketable skills in overcrowded, underresourced institutions, where little attention is paid to . . . the ‘whole person’” (Delbanco 7). Now imagine that these lines are on the lips of our admissions teams.

As literacy educators, we must acknowledge that current perceptions of higher education present serious challenges to our work. In his New York Times review of Losing Our Minds, David Brooks points out the “atmosphere of grand fragility hanging over America’s colleges.” More specifically, he echoes sentiments that colleges are charging more money but not making it clear “how much actual benefit they are providing.” Drawing upon the work of Keeling and Hersh, and referencing Academically Adrift, he calls for assessment and accountability, writing that “the voluntary approach is probably best for now.” Probably. And for now. He also suggests that college reform should originate in the consumer: “If you’ve got a student at or applying to college, ask the administrators these questions: ‘How much do students learn here? How do you know?’”

To better understand our role in this discussion, we must step outside the realm of who we are and what we know to consider how these rhetorical performances appeal to wider audiences of parents, journalists, policymakers, politicians, and other stakeholders that may encounter them—if not in whole, at least in part. There is, of course, an easier response: the public just does not understand us. But if we are to act as literacy advocates, it would be shortsighted of us to ignore the chance to analyze the rhetorical appeals that such critiques, which range from diatribe to thoughtful analysis, utilize—and to learn from them.
While the topic of these two books is similar, their implied ethos is quite different. Delbanco frames himself as an unlikely entrant into this parlor, interrogated by others in literary studies who ask “why would a professor of American literature distract himself” with such a topic (xi). His response is that undergraduate education is “a fascinating part of America’s history” about which faculty “know next to nothing” (xi, xiv). His audience extends to “present and future college students” and “a broader audience” who need to learn more as they are “bombarded with sound-bites and half-truths about our colleges and universities” (xiii, xiv).

The authors of *We’re Losing Our Minds* play the role of canaries in a coal mine, sounding a “call to action” (151) in this “true educational emergency” (1). Their stance is much like that of *A Nation at Risk*, whose authors claimed that “if an unfriendly power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might have viewed it as an act of war” (United States 5). They call for a “national discussion,” involving not only college faculty and administrators, but “elected officials, education and workforce policy makers, employers, parents, and the media” (Keeling and Hersh vii–viii).

Both books suggest that higher education has become too focused upon “credentialing” or “accrediting.” For Keeling and Hersh, higher learning should be “developmental,” “transformative,” and “coherent,” nurturing students’ ability to “understand oneself but also to take the perspective of another” (54). Similarly, Delbanco forwards a transformative—even a transcendental—model, viewing college as students’ “precious chance to think and reflect before life engulfs them” (35). Drawing upon transcendentalist authors such as Emerson and Whitman, American pragmatists like William James and John Dewey, and the Puritan traditions of early preachers, he unabashedly links higher learning with secular versions of concepts such as “grace” and “mystery” (47). This mix of influences situates his definitions against (but not wholly in opposition to) what he calls the economic and democratic/civic purposes of education.

While both books’ definitions of higher learning focus upon a transformational model, their conclusions and methods of argument diverge. Keeling and Hersh speak as administrators, focusing upon “curricula and pedagogy that logically flow from [ten core principles] in making up the characteristics of a college or university that intentionally supports student learning and success” (131). They call for systemic change toward “a learning-centered institution” (131). That is, they find the necessary change to be top-down. Delbanco, while
acknowledging the role of assessment and governing bodies (159), locates the central solution in the work of individual teachers and in graduate education that should “produce more teachers that care about teaching” (166). He calls for “student-centered doctoral education—in preparing scholars to be teachers too.” For example, he suggests that “it would make eminent sense to include on every doctoral examination [in his field] an opportunity for the candidate to make a case for why a given author might interest a college student” (170).

Perhaps most interesting from a rhetorical perspective is how both books rely less on the statistically based (if sometimes specious) evidence of Academically Adrift. They instead employ an aphoristic style, attempting to move their public audiences with rhetorical flourishes. Keeler and Hersh, for example, rely upon rhetorical moves such as the following:

- **Rhetorical question:** “Do we want college graduates to simply be people who have bought a degree?” (43)
- **Analogy:** “A more systemic metaphor holds that the college or university itself is a kind of bank of deposited knowledge.” (44)
- **Familiar anecdote:** “Consider an apocryphal but telling anecdote about a set of parents who take their son out for a celebratory dinner upon his graduation from college.” (45)
- **Broad summary of “the established science”:** “We know now that this process of development . . . has a physical, organic basis in brain development.” (47)

Even their major argument for an “apprenticeship model” of education is based in metaphor: “If any metaphor works for developmental, formative higher learning in college, it is the one of apprenticeship” (48). These methods of argument, while specious from an analytical perspective, do accomplish something that scholarly writing cannot; they help wider publics to become emotionally invested in what Delbanco calls a “period of wrenching change” for higher education (4).

Delbanco’s methods are similarly aphoristic, though they (in the manner of Dead Poet’s Society) rely more on the wisdom of great authors than upon the commonsense analogies and narratives of Hersh and Keeler. Delbanco treats us to powerful lines from sacred and secular texts to move the reader emotionally toward the value of a contemplative education. And despite attempts to use my sometimes jaded dean’s ear, these lines still resonate: Whitman’s “I lean
and loaf at my ease observing a spear of summer grass” (34) and a student’s nineteenth-century journal entry, “Oh that the Lord would show me how to think and how to choose” (15).

Relying upon pathos, of course, removes the need for strong warrants. The method is self-insulating, rendering attempts at critique seem harsh, even barbaric. And the method is effective, almost incantatory in its rhetoric. So, while the New York Times review of Losing Our Minds reflects its “accountability” and consumer-based conclusion, the review of Delbanco’s book concludes that it “inspired us to try to live up to” the ideals of higher education. Notably, that public document was written by the president of Wesleyan University.

At first blush, claims of a “true emergency” in higher education may seem all too familiar to those of us who live regularly through various incarnations of “Why Johnny Can’t Write.” But we may not be able to sit this one out, accompanied as it is by “frenzied competition” (Roth) from online and for-profit education and the political gamesmanship surrounding educational policy. Indeed, books like these could provide us with the exigency to teach what we know, especially if we find within them places where our field has long been a leader. Delbanco calls for more attention to pedagogy in doctoral programs. What field does this better reflect than ours? Hersh and Keeler suggest that higher learning must nurture students’ ability to “understand oneself but also to take the perspective of another” (54). What composition curriculum does not stress this key learning outcome in significant ways? And both books regularly acknowledge that these transformative experiences nearly always involve writing.

One central location for our possible entrée into these discussions is the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing, which outlines eight habits of mind that not only predict success in college writing but are themselves markers of higher learning. Indeed, these habits of mind correspond well to the state of “relaxed alertness” that facilitates learning (Hersh and Keeler 116) and the goal of higher education articulated by Judith Shapiro and cited by Delbanco: “You want the inside of your head to be an interesting place to spend the rest of your life” (33). There is also a great deal of correspondence among the “Key Principles” that Hersh and Keeler forward (130–38) and the habits of mind that populate our Framework for Success. One key difference, however, is that books like these have the public ear, and a public rhetoric, that we have not yet attained.

In the end, it would be easy to punch holes in the arguments of these
books. They are, after all, aphoristic, oversimplified, and based in a sometimes disturbing reliance on religious fervor or its counterpart in the theology of accountability. But the pragmatist in me suggests that our discipline is better off participating in these conversations than ignoring them—by telling our own stories about how our methods and practices provide pathways to higher learning.

In the end, the orators at my daughter's graduation did not quote lines from these books; that was only in my head. What those commencement speakers did was inspire with stories of success, challenging graduates to go forth and change the world. Perhaps we too might pause at times in our scholarship to speak the language of those public audiences in order to articulate the larger purposes of what we do.

**Works Cited**


**Jeremiad and Insularity**

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As I observed last summer at the Council of Writing Program Administrators’ conference in Albuquerque, the first book I remember reading about American education was Mike Rose’s *Lives on the Boundary*. What struck me most about *Lives* was neither Rose’s descriptive power nor his narrative skill, though both of those are, of course, formidable: it was, rather, his revisioning of the terms of debate about American students and schools. I’d thought (and bear in mind
that I was a graduate student) that all anyone could do faced with “Johnny can’t write” claims was be reactive, fight back, knock down others’ claims with some big bad ethos. Rose, however, made a move that Linda Adler-Kassner, some twenty years later, would call “changing the story”:

Statistics are often used to demonstrate educational decay, but let’s consider our literacy crisis through the perspective provided by another set of numbers. In 1890, 6.7 percent of America’s fourteen-to-seventeen-year-olds were attending high school; by 1978 that number had risen to 94.1 percent. In 1890, 3.5 percent of all seventeen-year-olds graduated from high school; by 1970 the number was 75.6 percent. (Rose 6)

And my graduate student self thought: Wow. You can do that? You can find success where others find failure?

What Rose does in that passage—and, I would argue, in all his work—is subvert the tradition of American jeremiad, which Adler-Kassner identifies in The Activist WPA as governing much if not all of our public discourse about education. Drawing on the work of Sacvan Bercovitch, Adler-Kassner asserts that jeremiad—originally a type of oratory delivered by Puritan preachers to keep the colonists, who saw themselves as God’s chosen, on the right track on their “errand into the wilderness”—gained force during the great whirlwind of social and educational change in the Progressive Era and remains with us. The function of jeremiad is to create “a climate of anxiety that help[s] release the restless ‘progressivist’ energies required for the success of [a] venture” (Bercovitch, qtd. in Adler-Kassner 38). In other words (and I am simplifying Adler-Kassner’s argument greatly here), because America as a nation must always be moving forward, we must always be in a state of crisis, too, about something. Or many things at once. Just as popular music seems always to be the devil’s instrument, our educational system seems always—in the minds of policymakers, at any rate—to be in need of repair. So that is the story that is disseminated to the public via those policymakers, and sometimes picked up by authors; hence the work of Andrew Delbanco and of Richard P. Keeling and Richard H. Hersh.

Delbanco, of course, claims not to be writing jeremiad. I would argue, however, that the very presence of the chapter in which he makes that claim—the final one, entitled “What Is to Be Done?”—undercuts it greatly. Delbanco characterizes jeremiad as “invoking the past to shame the present” (150) and, well, he does a fair amount of that. Here’s one example:
If most students no longer have anything like the traditional college experience, neither do the people who teach them. In 1975, nearly 60 percent of college professors were full-time faculty with tenure or on the “tenure track.” Today that fraction has declined to around 35 percent, which means that most students are being taught by part-time or contingent employees who have limited stake in the institution where they work. . . . These teachers, often excellent people forced to cobble together a subsistence wage by working in one college for part of the week, then in another (or others) for the rest of the week—have no assurance that they will be teaching next year at all. (153)

Describing the other pressures—declining endowments, insufficiency of financial aid, oversimplified evaluation and testing procedures—that have been brought to bear on both elite and not-so-elite colleges, Delbanco argues (and does so throughout the book) that his ideal of college—as a space “where young people fight out among and within themselves contending ideas of the meaningful life”—is threatened and that “[w]e owe it to posterity to preserve and protect this institution” because “Democracy depends on it” (177).

Sounds like jeremiad to me. However, the crisis he describes is that of something currently existing, and desirable, being threatened. Such is not the case for Keeling and Hersh, who in their own jeremiad, We’re Losing Our Minds, submit that college has already gone all the way downhill and that we must lift it up by attention to the “core principle” of student learning, which has been sidelined by administrative attention to other matters like more attractive facilities. As evidence, they cite anecdotes—for example, “a neighbor of one of the authors” who is president of an insurance company and has decided that the low quality of his job candidates is due to nobody having taught them anything in college. Keeling and Hersh’s claim: “Talk with other employers, and you will hear similar stories: American college graduates aren’t adequately prepared for work” (2). They also cite, not entirely surprisingly, Arum and Roksa’s Academically Adrift, which—as Richard Haswell has noted in this journal—is methodologically dubious at best, particularly the part about students not doing any writing in college. As a college WPA, and one who directs a fairly robust WAC program, I take exception to that.

Then again, I might reasonably be expected to—which brings me back to Adler-Kassner’s work. Her message throughout The Activist WPA is that the story of what’s going on in American education needs to be changed: rather than hearing calls of failure that can be remedied by more testing, the public needs to hear stories of how students really learn. (And again, I am oversimplifying her excellent argument, which is a good reason for all writing program
administrators reading this review to go out and read *The Activist WPA* right now, assuming they haven’t already.) But *College* and *We’re Losing Our Minds*, particularly the latter, are a depressing reminder of how well certain types of narrative, and rhetoric in general, work. If an author can get a substantial number of readers to believe, based on what His Neighbor the CEO said one day, that college professors are no longer expecting anything of their students, I can certainly try to counter that by finding a way to tell interested parties my own story: one (at the teaching level) of all the papers I grade and all the individual attention I give to my students, and (at the administrative level) all the class sizes I try and often succeed to keep low, all the writing portfolios (with lots of writing in them!) that we gather and assess. But it’s sort of sad that countering one narrative with another and hoping it’s more convincing is the best we can hope for. Elliot Gerson, writing recently in the *Atlantic*, argues that our “rhetoric of exceptionalism” is at the root of our failure to solve what problems we do have: he calls for looking outside our borders for solutions to those problems. However, as he himself admits, that’s a tough sell:

Imagine if a politician were to say, “France has a better health care system than we do.” I can almost guarantee that politician would suffer electoral defeat—even though that statement, in most objective respects, is true. The U.S. is, for too many, the only country that matters; experiences anywhere else are irrelevant.

We seem to be stuck, at least as far as our discourse about education is concerned, in a continuous loop of jeremiad and response. How to break out of that loop? Now that could be the subject of a really good book.

**Works Cited**


Asking the Right Questions

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Joining the growing collection of books on what ails higher education, Andrew Delbanco’s *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be* and Richard P. Keeling and Richard H. Hersh’s *We’re Losing Our Minds: Rethinking American Higher Education* offer interesting paired reading for those involved in liberal education. Delbanco narrates the historical development of American higher education from its roots in the medieval university through the present to show why a liberal education is important to preserve. Keeling and Hersh proclaim a crisis in American higher education and offer a comprehensive solution in their “call to action.”

Their initial questions are telling. Delbanco asks, “What should college be?” His purpose is “to articulate what a college—any college—should seek to do for its students” (8). The answer is liberal education’s aim at its finest—to help students ask the right questions and discover for themselves the answers to a meaningful life. Colleges should be communities of learning where students from different backgrounds consider important questions about “truth, responsibility, justice, beauty.” His vision opposes standardized testing, admissions practices that privilege students from high-income families, and the “new meritocracy,” the sense of entitlement shown by students entering elite universities and graduating without a sense of noblesse oblige. His critique is of a society that believes wealth is given to those who deserve it and of colleges that perpetuate rather than correct social inequities.

Keeling and Hersh ask, “What should college students be able to do?” Citing Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa’s *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, they similarly claim that little learning is taking place and students are not engaged. The whole of higher education needs to be rethought because “we are losing” the minds of students who focus solely on accumulating credits, graduating, and getting a job. Colleges focus on rankings or “throughput”—recruiting, admitting, retaining, and graduating large numbers of students—instead of on learning (17). Like Delbanco, Keeling and Hersh recognize that higher education is a “mysterious process” that results in changing the “hearts and minds” of students and the development of a “whole” person (6). Their argument for college as “apprenticeship” rings true. So too do the best practices they embrace, from better advising and active, problem-
based, and service learning to writing across the curriculum, authentic assessment, learning portfolios, and more. Most academics will recognize these as familiar fare, with the field of composition having taken the lead in many of these efforts. However, in their zeal to blame faculty who sacrifice standards to promotion and tenure criteria that reward research, the authors fail to mention that these best practices have come from faculty research. Nor do they note that research and teaching have been successfully blended through the scholarship of teaching and learning, scholarly teaching, and pedagogical research of all kinds, concepts that have gained momentum since Ernest L. Boyer first explored these issues in 1990.

Unlike Delbanco, who argues that college is a time to “loaf” in Whitman’s meaning of the term so that students discover the questions worth asking, Keeling and Hersh are convinced that students have too much “unstructured time” and so advocate a highly structured curriculum with a “nested” assessment system that can make students, faculty, and institutions accountable. All institutions should accept their whole “package,” which includes assessment of nearly everything—from courses, co-curricular activities, and majors to “the cumulative learning outcomes expected of all students . . . such as critical thinking, problem solving, perspective taking, and effectiveness in oral and written communication” (171). In such a crisis, learning so defined cannot come as unexpected discovery. There must be intentional learning based on learning outcomes for nearly everything so that students would know “in advance” exactly what they “are expected to know in every learning experience and how their achievement of those outcomes would be measured and reported” (172).

There is nothing new about outcomes-based assessment of general education or about structured assessment of this type. Many institutions, driven by accountability demands, have been designing such systems for years. Nor should an institutional assessment plan that allows faculty to design and perform the assessment be a call for alarm. Using faculty-created, embedded assessments that reflect students’ curriculum is a best practice. Moreover, their emphasis on effective communication supports WAC and WID programs, and the assessment possibilities throughout the curriculum can be positive. Michael Carter described a decade ago just such advantages: “An outcomes-based model . . . has potential advantages for writing and speaking professionals . . . who can work with faculty in other disciplines” to better assess writing and speaking “tied to ways of thinking and professional discourses of a discipline” (268).

To their credit, Keeling and Hersh’s accountability system rejects the standardized testing of No Child Left Behind, the Collegiate Learning Assessment
(CLA), and a number of other worse possibilities. However, there is something more than a little frightening about the scope they envision. The assessments are to be frequent and cumulative with results stored for both individuals and in aggregate. Formative and summative assessments, designed to provide feedback and improve learning, are also to evaluate staff and faculty (174). This assessment system is to do it all, and, as purposes mount to unrealistic proportions, even those of us who champion assessment must find this daunting. In designing any assessment plan, as the CCCC “Writing Assessment: A Position Statement” makes clear, one must consider the primary purpose, the use of results, and the consequences of using results in that way. Assessment is labor-intensive, and, if faculty are motivated to participate, it is not in response to a top-down directive but an attempt to ask and answer important questions about teaching and learning. As Pat Hutchings, Mary Taylor Huber, and Anthony Ciccone argue, “When assessment is done in ways that offer added insight into issues of student learning, it is more likely to command the interest and involvement of faculty and thus to enter more fully into the life of the institution.” Faculty-driven assessment, like scholarship, derives from an intellectual curiosity and a desire to learn.

And what about students? Of course, students need to become proficient in the expected outcomes of general education, and giving students clear expectations for projects and assignments is simply good teaching, but to tell students everything they need to be able to do in advance is to reduce the value of a college education to these competencies. Oddly ignoring their earlier endorsement of transformative learning as a process of discovery, they propose a system that would produce the very problem Delbanco describes:

Students are pressured and programmed, trained to live from task to task, relentlessly rehearsed and tested until winners are culled from the rest. They scarcely have time for what Newman calls contemplation and too many colleges do too little to save them from the debilitating frenzy that makes liberal education marginal or merely ornamental—if it is offered at all. (34)

The results of these assessments are also to be used to compare colleges and universities in a new ranking system made possible by all institutions having the same institutional outcomes. Instead of national testing, it is national assessment brought to serve consumer demands and marketplace competition. They do not consider how community colleges and public universities with less selective admissions might compare to the elite institutions if levels of preparation of entering students—academic and social—are not considered
in this one-size-fits-all system, particularly for assessments early in a student’s career. Of equal concern is the fact that the new rankings and continued market competition among institutions will not change very significantly the idea that college is about getting what you (are able to) pay for, and what, by extension, you deserve.

Putting the two books in conversation with each other brings into focus the questions we ought to be asking. By considering American ideals for higher education, focusing on ways to make college more affordable and inclusive, and calling for increased ways to help underprepared students, Delbanco provides a possible future that can take us beyond the regular excuses and complaints. A start is for educators to see all students as capable of engaging in those most important ideas, rather than reserving them for those in more elite institutions, a point Delbanco makes and one Mike Rose claimed for basic writers as far back as 1990.

In their conclusion, Keeling and Hersh call for a national conversation to discuss their solution—a conversation that should involve the public, lawmakers, administration, and faculty at all colleges. It seems to be a conversation much engaged in already, although some of the particulars change from year to year. I want to join the other conversation, the one about who deserves a college education and what types of liberating experiences might be offered to all—“rich, middling, and poor,” as Delbanco puts it (35). Such a conversation is not about measuring up or choosing winners from the rest, but about real changes in our thinking, based upon ideals of the past that are yet to be fully realized in American higher education. While perhaps easier in theory than in application, Delbanco’s ideas may inspire those in community colleges and four-year institutions alike to reconsider education in more expansive ways than either current consumer demands or accountability strategies can lead us to imagine. In pondering the right questions, we and our students may discover the answers for ourselves. Given the time and opportunity, the American public just might, too.

Works Cited


