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Colleges, universities failing students, authors say

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In a few weeks, more than 2.6 million freshmen will head off to one of the 4,352 colleges and universities in the United States. A \$420 billion industry, postsecondary education in America remains the model every other nation wants to clone. Nonetheless, according to Andrew Hacker, a professor of political science at Queens College, and Claudia Dreifus, a science writer for The New York Times, the system has blown up and broken down.

Tuition now costs a small — or large — fortune. And, they argue, higher education has "lost track of its original and enduring purpose": to expand students' understanding of their world, and challenge their minds and imaginations.

Hacker and Dreifus are contrarians, determined to challenge conventional wisdom and shake up the educational establishment. Most institutions, they claim, should get out of the job-training business — and eliminate initiatives to make students into better citizens. Professors should teach more, teach better and teach far fewer courses on their narrow sub-specialties. Colleges should not require faculty to do research, which isn't nearly as important as advertised, or grant anyone a paid sabbatical.

Tenure, which is actually a "feeble shield" for academic freedom, should be replaced by multiyear, renewable contracts. The "amenities arms race," with its Taj Mahal fitness centers, dining facilities, residence halls, football fields and basketball courts, should end. And alumni should stop sending checks to their wealthy alma maters, and give "where it will truly do some good."

Although the research on which it rests is impressive, the contentions in "Higher Education?" are not always reliable. The authors' assertion that 7.8 million World War II veterans attended college on the GI Bill is off by more than 5 million. Their suggestions that "a big slice of the tuition pie ends up with lawyers and their clients" and that a Princeton degree isn't worth all that much "once you're moving along in a career," are, well, just a bit over the top.

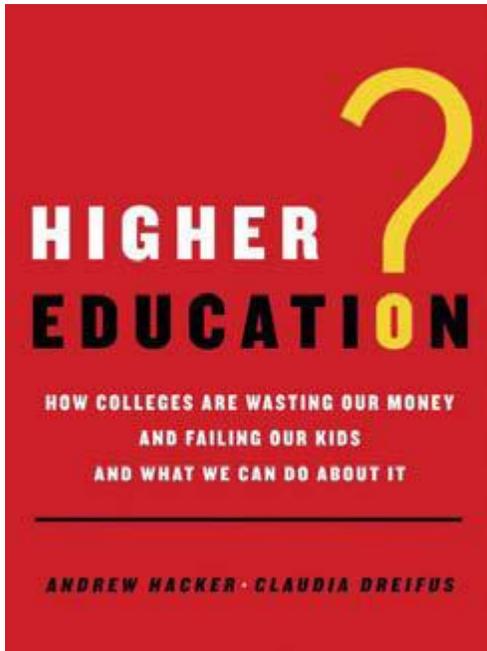
Despite its flaws — and they include a failure to address two elephants in the Ivory Tower, "Big Science" and the decline of public funding for colleges and universities — "Higher Education?" has the great virtue of challenging the status quo complacency inside academia. Although they libel professors by counting only time in the classroom and office hours in their workday, Hacker and Dreifus make a compelling case that teaching loads, especially at elite universities, are too light. That the curriculum now reflects the interests of faculty members and not the needs of undergraduates. And that the rising costs of a college education are not sustainable.

They are right, then, to put a question mark in the title of their book. It's not at all clear where

higher education in the United States is headed. Or whether a day of reckoning is close at hand. Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.

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HIGHER EDUCATION?
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