

These days, it seems like there is a lot to hate about the state of higher education. As I write this review, the state of Alaska has decided to remove most state funding for their public universities, in favor of prioritizing direct monetary transfers to state residents. Observers on the left bemoan state-based disinvestment in university systems. On the right, commentators paint a dismal portrait: professors, locked in their ivory towers, immune (via tenure) to the demands of “real” Americans, waste the taxpayers’ money pursuing lines of inquiry that are useless or just downright silly.

But wait! Dr. Steven Brint, author of *Two Cheers for Higher Education: Why American Universities Are Stronger Than Ever—and How to Meet the Challenges They Face*, invites us to reconsider these two opposing frameworks. In Dr. Brint’s conception, there is a lot to love about the state of higher education. On page 1, Brint posits that American universities are, today, “much bigger, stronger, and in a more dominant position.” His aim, in examining the American university system from 1980 to the present, is to detail how universities have accomplished phenomenal growth by employing three interconnected strategies: (1) intellectual advance; (2) market logic; and (3) social inclusion. These efforts, Brint contends, demonstrate that the “golden age” of higher education in the United States is now. These competing strategies, Brint argues, contribute to the “dynamism” of the system, a point he returns to frequently. This is an argument that is hard to refute, and so at the same time, it resists a merit-based assessment. Whether or not a system is “dynamic” is a value-free judgement. How can the reader conclude whether increased dynamism is worth offering one cheer, two cheers, or none at all? The rest of the book throws a wealth of data at the reader to assess the effects of this “dynamism,” and happily, much of it sticks.

First, Brint examines academic-commercial partnerships. Brint argues that these have been mostly positive, though he acknowledges that they have “a spotty record,” with some firms and universities having little to show at the end of the day. Along with “use-inspired” research (read: commercial potential), Brint credits academic innovationism with recent pushes for greater interdisciplinarity, and the development of “technology clusters.” Yet, Brint finds that innovators have yet to identify a formula for success in these efforts.

Next, Brint delves into the “college for all” ethos, arguing that social inclusion has helped to drive universities’ expansion. Readers who value social inclusion will be relieved to find Brint definitely states that expanded access is not responsible for two widely reported negative trends: reductions in study time and rising disengagement. Indeed, Brint points out that two of the groups previously targeted for exclusion (white women and Asian Americans) that now stand out as high achievers. Brint points out that students attend college to improve their futures. Institutions, he argues, may wish to increase selectivity, yet the industry as a whole has an imperative to achieve “100% market penetration.” The bad news, Brint acknowledges, is that students with the greatest needs are concentrated at institutions with the fewest resources. Brint redresses this woeful fact with some bright spots, including peer mentoring, advising, and a computer-aided mathematics instruction system at my institution, Virginia Tech. These efforts, Brint admits, are often trumpeted, yet seldom rigorously tested, and self-selection bias remains a bugaboo. This reviewer would offer, for example, that the touted

Virginia Tech Math Emporium is almost universally reviled by students, some of whom reportedly rearrange their plans of study to avoid “Math Empo” requirements.

I found chapter 5, “Multiplying Status Locations” to be one of the most intriguing. Brint explores how institutions and individuals “invent new hierarchies,” pushing back against the democratizing forces of “college for all.” New status locations—e.g., leadership institutes—can replace traditional “social sifting” mechanisms. Colleges no longer limit overall enrollment to white men, but high status, quantitative majors can become “restricted majors,” carving out arenas that preserve white male advantage. Brint’s evaluation of what amounts to higher education “tracking” is a worthy effort. However, Brint points out that few well-controlled studies exist to evaluate the influence of participation in athletics, clubs, honors colleges, leadership and entrepreneurship programs, and restricted majors on post-college outcomes. Brint shows the way for future research on these status locations, and researchers would do well to heed this call. Brint’s optimistic assessment that both diversity advocates and “traditionalists” have significant power somewhat contradicts his citations of diversity regime skeptics. Given the proliferation of new status locations, and the alternative pathways revealed by the “Varsity Blues” admissions scandal, the reader wonders whether traditional privilege has in fact made room for others, or merely left them behind through the “side door.”

Brint discusses the three primary “patrons” of universities: the federal government, the states, and big donors. Brint both reports and further investigates claims that low-interest student loans facilitated a “race to the top” for tuition; that patron dollars are tilted toward the benefit of wealthier students; that the priorities of patrons tipped support toward the sciences and away from the humanities; and that universities have responded to waning state funding by becoming more “entrepreneurial,” and therefore more “attentive” to the interests of patrons. Brint documents the strategies that universities have employed to meet new budgetary challenges, arguing that universities emerge in a stronger position. The numbers check out, but I still ask: at what cost? Larger proportions of adjunct faculty, increased student-to-faculty ratios, and higher costs for students and families, Brint admits, were among the negative effects of “successful” coping strategies.

Brint treads familiar ground in three subsequent chapters, which cover “administrative bloat,” whether undergraduates actually learn much in college, rising costs, online learning, and “free speech” debates. Brint relies mainly on prior research in these overviews. Brint concludes that administrative bloat is a real problem for some institutions, and quickly reviews some familiar complaints (email takes too much time, men are more likely than women to avoid service work). Brint provides a lengthy portrait of the skills, habits and styles of administrators. In a section on professors’ abandonment of assignments that develop students’ critical thinking, Brint indicts student demand for “easy” content. In my view, Brint misses an opportunity to investigate whether the pivot toward research funding affects faculty motivation to assign critical thinking exercises that are arduous to evaluate. Depending on their position in the academic landscape, the reader will delve into certain of these sections—I found the “free speech” section thought-providing, for example—and skim through others.

Brint ends with a charge for universities to move into the future with purpose. To do so, he advocates for universities trying multiple approaches, depending on their mission, funding potentials, and other variables. Regional universities could attempt to “grow their own” dynamic university-business-equity partnerships. This “tall order,” he admits, requires strong leadership. Other possibilities include pumping up undergraduate teaching, and restricting online instruction to the strongest learners. Acknowledging that the states show little appetite for increased funding, Brint argues that it is sensible to implement “well-designed” student loan repayment programs that take borrowers’ income into account. Brint’s discussion of the challenges and affordances of autonomy in academia are particularly thoughtful. Brint points out that some degree of autonomy is necessary to maintain professional identity and disciplinary cohesion. At the same time, too much autonomy pulls academics away from their best hopes for growth constituencies in these leaner times: industry, and historically underrepresented student populations.

*Two Cheers for Higher Education* is a comprehensive overview of the state of higher education in the United States. Its snapshot approach is perfect for readers looking for a broad-stroke review of the “big ideas” that have swirled around academic circles since 1980. Brint’s volume shines brightest in the first five chapters, illuminating how universities expanded, and the ways university actors contended with competing priorities. Subsequent chapters offered a useful review, but fewer new insights, as they rely heavily on prior investigation. Readers already familiar with in-depth research on topics such as the science of learning will likely skim those sections. Taken together, multiple strands Brint brings together in *Two Cheers* offer a rousing celebration of the promise of higher education, and a worthy overview of its continued potential.