



Lesson Plan: An Agenda for Change in American Higher Education

William G. Bowen, Michael S. McPherson

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American higher education faces some serious problems—but they are not the ones most people think. In this brief and accessible book, two leading experts show that many so-called crises—from the idea that typical students are drowning in debt to the belief that tuition increases are being driven by administrative bloat—are exaggerated or simply false. At the same time, many real problems—from the high dropout rate to inefficient faculty staffing—have received far too little attention. In response, William G. Bowen and Michael S. McPherson provide a frank assessment of the biggest challenges confronting higher education and propose a bold agenda for reengineering essential elements of the system to meet them. The result promises to help shape the debate about higher education for years to come.

Lesson Plan shows that, for all of its accomplishments, higher education today is falling short when it comes to vital national needs. Too many undergraduates are dropping out or taking too long to graduate; minorities and the poor fare worse than their peers, reinforcing inequality; and college is unaffordable for too many. But these problems could be greatly reduced by making significant changes, including targeting federal and state funding more efficiently; allocating less money for “merit aid” and more to match financial need; creating a respected “teaching corps” that would include nontenure faculty; improving basic courses in fields such as math by combining adaptive learning and face-to-face teaching; strengthening leadership; and encouraging more risk taking. It won’t be easy for faculty, administrators, trustees, and legislators to make such sweeping changes, but only by doing so will they make it possible for our colleges and universities to meet the nation’s demands tomorrow and into the future.

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