

Toward a More Perfect University, by Jonathan R. Cole. New York: Public Affairs, 2016, 432 pp., \$29.99 hardbound.

What Ought to Be

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Jonathan Cole in *Toward a More Perfect University* extends his scholarly reflections on the problems and possibilities of elite U.S. research universities. The book, by the former long-serving Columbia University administrator and provost, is a follow-up companion to *The Great American University: Its Rise to Preeminence, Its Indispensable National Role, Why It Must Be Protected* (Public Affairs, 2010). He aims in his new book to suggest “what ought to occur” in an important subset of elite higher education institutions. In general Cole’s work provides sensible suggestions based on personal experience and prior scholarship in the field—interspersed with often entertaining, but less well-grounded

idiosyncratic ideas for potential institutional innovation. A strength and weakness of the book is that it comes from a deeply invested elite actor in the system—a perspective that biases the author in the direction of deep loyalty to the enterprise and a reluctance to grapple with some of the problems facing higher education.

Cole provides insightful analysis and commentary gleaned from his experience at Columbia as well as his reading of secondary research. He proposes a set of bold policies to improve higher education, including a new Morrill Act that would expand federal support to needy students, create K–12 lab schools on the campuses of major research universities, launch a new multimedia education broadcasting entity, and establish a quasi-independent national foundation with a \$20 billion endowment to expand the production of high-quality research that would be fully funded by federal revenue. Public universities would only be eligible for a portion of these federal funds, however, if state governments maintained minimum levels of financial support to these institutions. Proposals such as these that are dependent on additional public largess, he readily admits, would require

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significant changes in society and politics to be feasible.

A higher education leader asserting the need for increased public resources to improve higher education, regardless of the merits of the argument, is neither novel nor particularly surprising. More interesting are some of the ideas that would not require additional public funding. For example, Cole recommends rolling back the overregulation and unfunded regulatory mandates imposed on higher education, which have imposed an additional 8 to 10 percent increase in costs on colleges and universities. He expresses particular ire for the expansion of human subject committees (i.e., institutional review boards) that are argued to be threatening academic research and encroaching on faculty freedom of expression.

While calling for less regulatory oversight in general, however, Cole believes that professional schools are a special case that should be subject to greater external scrutiny. Cole suggests a series of five or six national reports, similar to the 1910 Flexner Report on the state of medical education, which would review and then shutter weak professional programs and schools. Cole also proposes eliminating faculty tenure at age seventy and requiring mandatory retirement at age seventy-five.

A particularly intriguing idea that Cole floats in the book is an innovative approach to cross-institution collaboration. Cole suggests the establishment of academic leagues—organized by collaborating institutions—that would “enhance the capabilities of great universities and, at least potentially, lower costs of education.” These leagues could bring together faculty in a particular field to expand traditional programs, such as philosophy. Potentially, Cole argues, these leagues could also concentrate faculty and financial resources to develop high-quality interactive on-line courses and programs for general use.

One of the most refreshing parts of the book is the honest discussion of university research. While Cole rightly champions the value of academic research to both the academy and society—and explicitly proposes organized efforts to communicate the value of these contributions to the public—he also candidly discusses the institutional costs of such pursuits. Although faculty and other stakeholders in and around universities often assume that externally funded research provides a great financial boon to higher education institutions, veteran administrators—like Cole—are aware of a darker truth: externally funded research typically imposes substantial costs on universities and requires

cross-subsidization and support from other sources of funding (including most notably, student tuition) to sustain itself. While the federal government fully underwrote research costs on federally sponsored projects during World War II, such subsidies were cut back and reimbursement caps imposed in subsequent decades. Cole laments that “the federal government was actually making universities pay for government grants and contracts.” The requirement for higher education institutions to subsidize sponsored research from private foundations is even greater as indirect cost recovery from these sources is more tightly restricted.

In addition, Cole observes that competition for the most sought-after academic researchers has led “our great universities...to offer academic stars lighter teaching loads than other professors to attract them to one’s university.” Cole believes that the externalities imposed by this arms race for academic talent on the character of U.S. higher education are large and growing. He predicts that “before long we will have a cadre of research professors who have great prestige and the highest salaries but who have never met an undergraduate or graduate student other than their doctoral students and postdoctoral fellows.”

Alongside sober analysis of the costs and benefits of the institutional

pursuit of externally funded research, Cole provides a few more fanciful proposed innovations that will likely amuse many of his readers. For example, there is extended discussion about building towering “academic skyscrapers...perhaps in combination with residence on upper floors,” to house large groupings of faculty on urban campuses. Such buildings would foster interdisciplinary cooperation, according to Cole, by “reducing the need for faculty members to march across campus to obtain advice from a colleague in a different discipline.” Perhaps concentration of campus life in “academic skyscrapers” will have these potential benefits, but when such edifices are actually constructed by elite research universities, as is the case at New York University, both faculty and community residents are overwhelmingly opposed to how this type of architecture can threaten traditional forms of community life.

Faculty audiences, however, will likely be more receptive to another of Cole’s more fanciful suggestions: required coursework for higher education trustees. Following an extended discussion of how college and university trustees are not fulfilling their institutional responsibilities, Cole recommends that “trustees ought to be given a one-year (on-line) course in ‘The University in American Life,’ where they learn

not only about the history of higher learning in the United States but also about the evolution of their own university.”

Like other scholarship in this genre—i.e., ruminations about higher education reform from accomplished senior, elite university administrators—the larger problems facing higher education are not always fully addressed. Because most of their professional lives have been in elite settings, they often have had less direct contact with problems facing institutions catering to a broader and more diverse set of students. Challenges around the state of undergraduate learning are thus briefly acknowledged then set aside by asserting that the situation in broad-access institutions differs “appreciably from what goes on at perhaps 120 or so private and public colleges and universities in the United States that are highly selective and that have their choice of students from a huge pool of applicants.” Cole provides no evidence supporting the contention that such a large number of higher education institutions are exempt from pedagogical concerns over inadequately structured curriculum, ill-defined learning outcomes, ineffective instructional practices, and lack of student engagement and academic rigor. In fact, when one inspects empirical results of the National Survey of Student

Engagement for a representative flagship public research university—such as the University of Texas at Austin (UT), which was required to release results to the public—the available evidence does not corroborate such a far-reaching, Pollyannaish claim.¹ For example, 31 percent of seniors at UT in 2010 reported studying ten or fewer hours per week (8 percent higher than freshmen reports that year); 54 percent of seniors and 86 percent of freshmen reported not writing a single paper of twenty or more pages that year.

Cole also relies not just on his experience at Columbia, but also scholarship written by his arts and sciences colleagues. For example, Cole leans heavily on Andrew Delbanco’s writings on how undergraduate education should be structured, as well as Mark Taylor’s suggestions for more broad-based academic restructuring.² Curiously, the work of leading higher education scholars at Columbia’s

¹National Survey of Student Engagement, <http://nsse.indiana.edu/>. Daniel de Vise, “Trying to Assess Learning Gives Colleges Their Own Test Anxiety,” *Washington Post*, March 14, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/trying-to-assess-learning-gives-colleges-their-own-test-anxiety/2012/02/24/gIQAyLrtCS_story.html?utm_term=.1d265f66c06a. The Mean and Frequency Reports from the 2010 National Survey of Student Engagement were available through 2014 at <http://www.utexas.edu/academic/ima/nsse> (documented results available by request).

²See, for example, Andrew Delbanco, *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012) and Mark C. Taylor, *Crisis on Campus: A Bold Plan for Reforming Our Colleges and Universities* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010).

Teachers College is largely ignored. Cole's experience at Columbia, where "virtually every aspect of the university today represents progress for students and faculty members" are not necessarily generalizable even to the population of selective colleges and universities, let alone broad-access institutions serving the vast majority of our country's youth. When the assertions in the book move beyond a focus on elite private research universities the empirical support for assertions made and

recommendations advanced are on less firm footing.

Although Cole fails to contend with some of the problems facing higher education, particularly around undergraduate student learning, the work makes valuable contributions to the field. *Toward a More Perfect University* accomplishes the author's aspirations, for it serves to raise important questions and to stimulate a critical dialog on how to protect, sustain, and nurture the national resource that is the university.