

Book Review

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## Introduction

According to Dr. Mel Scarlett, undergraduate students at public research institutions have been bamboozled by the American higher education system. Dr. Mel Scarlett expresses this sentiment and other equally provocative perspectives in his book, *The Great Rip-Off in American Education*. This book is an analysis and critique of the complexities of the higher education system and the external factors that impact the performance of public research institutions. Throughout the book and in this report, the term higher education institution refers to public research institutions. Although he candidly speaks about institutional shortcomings, he does acknowledge the success of specific colleges and universities. As a result of his years of experience as a professor and college dean, Scarlett reaches the conclusion that the hierarchical structure, institutional priorities and continued use of ineffective methods of instruction create a disservice to undergraduate students. He raises concerns about the governance, leadership, finances, academic curriculum and values of higher education institutions. Admittedly, he states that he is not the first critic to raise these issues. Furthermore, *The Great Rip-Off* is an attempt to further dialogue about the drastic need for higher education reform. Other reports such as the Wingspread Report and Boyer Committee report are referenced to emphasize the weightiness of the issues he is bringing forth.

*The Great Rip- Off* is packed with claims and arguments about the system of higher education and the requirements to successfully move forward for growth. This review will focus on Scarlett's arguments that public research institutions are not providing an adequate undergraduate experience and future reform is dependant on increased student and parental involvement. Scarlett correctly describes higher education

institutions as fraudulent because they are the only systems in America that can promise a product, the consumer purchases it and it is not what he or she expected and there is no recourse to the issuing institution. Moreover, if this happened in any other environment legal claims against the sponsoring institution would be brought forth, but not in the academic community. Public research institutions are deceiving undergraduate students with a high price for a low-quality education. “In their catalogs and promotion materials, a great many colleges and universities present a glowing description of the excellence of education they provide to their undergraduates, but they do not follow through. They seem to show little concern for the education of the undergraduates they enroll (Fraud in Education, 2004 p.53).”

### **Argument #1**

Colleges promise world-class education but do not deliver.

Scarlett questions the quality of this education from the lens of faculty requirements and methods of instruction. Undergraduates enroll in colleges under the assumption that they will be taught from the leading researchers and practitioners in their respective fields; however, this is not always the case. At the University of Arizona undergraduates are taught by graduate students or part-time instructors 87% of the time (Scarlett, 2004). In fact this trend is replicated across the country at large institutions. A primary strength of Scarlett’s view is his belief that institutions lack concern for freshmen because their graduate student instructors are not trained to teach and their first priority is their own academic course load, while part-time instructors are professionals moonlighting as professors. He feels that freshmen are at the early stages of development and require more attention than other students. Therefore, they should receive the highest

quality of instructors. When asked his thoughts on the subject, Professor Soloman of the University of Arizona replied that he is waiting for a parent to sue a university for consumer fraud because they are not getting the product they are paying for (Scarlett, 2004).

Scarlett sees the “publish or perish culture” at large research institutions as the cause of professors’ absence in undergraduate course. After further investigation, he concludes that the internal reward system tenure in higher education negatively impacts student learning. Professors realize that publishing and research are synonymous with higher compensation, advancement and status. I stand in concurrence with Scarlett, the pressure on faculty to publish their research hampers their ability to be available in the classroom, address student concerns or provide advising.

Another valid point presented by the author is that he thinks the tenure system enables bad teaching to persist due to the misconstrued notion of academic freedom. As a result of academic freedom, administrators develop a hands-off approach to correcting ineffective teaching. Scarlett goes on to define ineffective teaching as the sole use of the lecture method. Although society has changed and technology has altered communication and opened up new possibilities, students are still being taught the same way they were taught decades ago. I firmly believe, the use of the lecture method without any variation does not inspire critical thinking or active learning. The higher education curriculum also fails the students by not making broad connection between course and disciplines. Consequently, colleges are producing graduates that are ill-prepared to realize the interconnectivity of society and also function in the workforce.

The author recommends changing the internal reward system so that the guideline for advancement is effective teaching for full-time faculty. In addition, he encourages institutions to give increased work-load to faculty that do not choose to pursue research and publishing activities (Scarlett, 2004). Theoretically, Scarlett's recommendation would indeed alter the undergraduate educational experience. My objection is that this theory does not consider the advantage of research and how to substitute the spill-over benefits it brings to the school such as revenue and partnerships with the community and other sectors. His arguments and recommendations are valid, but the implementation seems unlikely. His recommendation would have been more convincing if he gave the reader a road-map as to how institutions could change the reward system. Scarlett places a considerable amount of energy laying out the issue but not the same amount of time solving the problem.

### **Argument #2:**

Due to the lack of response to previous reports, positive changes to the higher education system will be the result of student and parental effort.

Higher education critics have sought to alarm parents, students, policymakers and other stakeholders about the faults of the system in reports that date as far back as the mid-1980s. *ProfScam: Professors and the Demise of Higher Education*, written in 1988 by Charles J. Skyes, questions the role of practice vs. research in the academic culture. Other reports from the Wingspread Group and Boyer Commission, dated in the early 1990s focus on similar issues (Scarlett, 2004). Although reports have been made public, Scarlett does not see higher education reform as a priority among policy makers.

Therefore, he suggests that reform will be the result of the current leadership within institutions and the outcry of students and parents.

Again Scarlett presents recommendations, without analyzing the role of parents in the process of creating institutional change. Furthermore, *The Great Rip-Off* was primarily read by members of academia and not the general public. If parents and students are the real power surge behind the movement of higher education reform, then how are they being informed about the deficiencies within the system? Without the media and policymakers directing more attention to these issues, I do not know how parents and the community at-large will be the catalyst behind the movement. Scarlett's recommendations would be well-received if he listed examples of parents creating change and new policies focused on improving higher education.

When considering monumental changes in the systematic role of higher education and policies, most reforms were the result of legislative policies. For example, Key Scott stated in the article *Economics or Education*, land-grant institutions were established as a result of the Morrill Act of 1862 (Key, 1996). These institutions create societal advancement of great magnitude, by sharing the knowledge. This legislation was passed as a result of external pressure, but through a governmental process. Therefore, I do not see reform occurring as a result of community engagement alone. These issues have to be address through policymakers and it is probable that parents and students can raise awareness, but not lead the effort.

Overall, Scarlett's book was presented in a comprehensive and contemporary tone that I found to be engaging. I appreciated historical documentation to support his theories. In addition to learning his independent views, I was able to understand the

historical foundation of the problem and the perspective from other theorists. If the purpose of this book was to raise awareness about the higher education system, then he succeeded in that effort. However, for readers like myself who were learning about the system for the first time it left me with an appetite to know more about a possible course of action to remedy some of the challenges. Scarlett did not include any information or references for readers to learn more about the issues or sources to keep abreast of on-going events in the higher education arena. The concluding feeling was “now what?” I have seen the light now how do I follow-up on this information? Unfortunately, the book is devoid of plan of action and does not provide direction to continue the dialogue.

References

Key, S. (1996), Economics or Education: The Establishment of American Land Grant Universities. *Journal of Higher Education*, v67, n2, 196-220.

Scarlett, M. (2004). *The Great Rip-Off In American Education*. Amherst: Prometheus Books.