Book Review/ Compte rendu

Kirst, Michael W. and Mitchell L. Stevens, eds. *Remaking College: The Changing Ecology of Higher Education.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015. Pp. 323 paper (9780804793292)

Remaking College is an impressive edited volume that should adorn the shelves of every serious sociologist of education. Editors Michael Kirst and Mitchell Stevens have compiled a series of insightful chapters, authored by leading sociologists of education (Richard Arum, Josipa Roksa, etc.) and organizations (Richard Scott, Martin Reuf, etc.), that provide a state-of-the-art understanding of how the ecology of American higher education has evolved in recent decades. The average reader will walk away from this book revitalized, with a nuanced understanding of how institutionalized ways of thinking about higher education have become decoupled from empirical reality.

Many parts of *Remaking College* read like exercises in "myth-busting". Common understandings of a variety of topics associated with higher education are laid out in detail, only to be subsequently dismantled with the usage of contemporary data sources. Regina Deil-Amen's discussion of the "traditional" college student in Chapter 6 is an apt example. She convincingly argues that students who enter higher education directly after high school, living on campus, and ready to undertake college-level coursework, although perceived as normal or modal, have actually become atypical (p. 136). In their place, colleges have begun to accept a more diverse group of older students with work experience, living off-campus, and those lacking the preparation or knowledge to seamlessly transition into post-secondary studies. Settersten's chapter takes a similar approach, outlining how normative understandings of early adulthood are no longer representative of contemporary life-course trajectories. He notes that young adults are now delaying life-transitions, such as leaving their parent's home, marriage and having children, far more than common sense understandings suggest. Penetrating analyses such as these are presented throughout *Remaking College* as a way to demonstrate the need for contemporary social scientists to be cognisant of higher education as it currently exists, rather

than relying on institutionalized ways of thinking and talking about the system that date back to its "golden era" *circa* 1965.

Another primary theme in *Remaking College* is the idea that higher education research needs to more holistically conceptualize its unit of analysis. This argument is made in distinct ways in several chapters. Starting in the introduction, for example, Stevens notes that "educational social science tends to privilege four-year residential education at research universities and liberal arts colleges as the ideal expression of higher education" (p. 3). He states that this occurs despite the fact that other institutions, such as community colleges, are now the "workhorses of U.S higher education, serving most of those who attend college", and others, such as for-profit schools (Devry, etc.), are now the "fastest growing component of the national postsecondary sector" (p. 3). In a similar vein, Deil-Amen takes a dig at the highly influential book, *Academically Adrift*, authored by Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa (2011), for proclaiming to deal with American higher education while only really addressing a tiny fraction of unrepresentative four-year institutions (p. 140). A salient aspect of these critiques within *Remaking College* is that such distorted and outdated images of higher education, regularly produced by social scientists, hinder our ability to usefully understand and address problems within the system itself.

The backdrop to these insightful contributions discussed above is the idea that the "golden era" of American higher education is effectively over, and that the system is undergoing radical ecological change. This transformation is described by Stevens in the introduction as being fuelled by a perfect storm that includes a mixture of shrinking government support for the system and the emergence of disruptive technologies, backed by venture capitalists, including for-profit entities (Capella, Kaplan, etc.) that offer increasingly flexible forms of online program delivery (p. 6-8). This perfect storm is one that the editors believe will forever restructure the existing landscape of American higher education.

This exotic narrative developed by Stevens in the introduction to *Remaking College*, which rests on the idea that the field of higher education is experiencing seismic shifts, will likely be the target of much scepticism from seasoned scholars. These individuals will likely ask: In how many flavours have we already tasted these apocalyptic proclamations? How many times have we heard that education, as we now know it, is coming to an end? Surely, the American higher education system is evolving in response to changes in its ecology. But, if we have learned anything from history and organizational theory, it is that institutionalized structures are stubbornly durable. They persist long after

the initial conditions that generated them have crumbled. By contrast, many "revolutionary" innovations within the field of higher education are being washed away by turbulence in their market environments. Despite being heralded as a "disruptive" force, the for-profit higher education sector has undergone dramatic downsizing since 2010, with many of its main players (Corinthian, ITT) faltering. The initial allure of MOOCs (Coursera, etc.) has also faded almost as quickly as the form emerged, aided by consistently unimpressive completion rates. In light of such developments, one is left wondering: rather than evolving, is the system as a whole not regressing to the norm? With the craze about MOOCs subsiding, it seems more likely that we are simply returning to business as usual.

Despite these questions about its overarching narrative, *Remaking College* remains an impressive edited volume. The quality of its chapters, particularly that written by Scott on field perspectives, as well as Reuf and Nag on the classification of organizational forms, will make this book an influential one within the sociology of education. International readers, in particular, should be left deciphering the relevance of this volume to their own higher education systems. The American example, with its many unique structures (Davies & Zarifa, 2012), will likely render many of the insights produced throughout *Remaking College* less than representative of trends across nations. From a Canadian standpoint, for example, the overarching narrative of *Remaking College* will be difficult to associate with our current policy environment. Surely, our provincial systems are each evolving at variable rates in response to budgetary constraints. In Ontario, for example, universities are being slowly driven by the provincial government to specialize or differentiate (Pizarro Milian, Davies & Zarifa, in press). Yet, such changes fall dramatically short of the image painted within this book.

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References

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