College Unranked: Affirming Educational Values in College Admissions

LLOYD THACKER, ED., THE EDUCATION CONSERVANCY, 2004
(www.educationconservancy.org) $19.95, 220 PP.

Reviewed by: Robert J. Massa

One rule from “Marketing 101” is to have but a single purpose attached to each promotional activity. A brochure that is designed for prospective students and for guidance counselors, for example, rarely works. Lloyd Thacker and his colleagues brilliantly disprove this theory in College Unranked, a collection of essays on the current challenges in college admission from multiple perspectives written by admission deans and presidents. This important book also treats the reader to four interspersed chapters of true stories from the editor, himself a long-time college counselor, about the adventures of high school students and parents as they trudge the road of college admission. At once, College Unranked contains valuable messages for educators, the media, college admission vendors, parents, and students. It is a “deans tell all” book that defines the challenging issues and placing them in perspective, while offering sound advice to its respective audiences about how to end the commercialization and “high stakes” attitude that pervades the contemporary college admission process, restoring “studenthood” to its rightful place.

“Studenthood,” a term coined by Thacker, is defined as “those qualities that equip a student to make education happen, to engage learning as a process. Curiosity, self discipline, effort, imagination, intellectual verve, sense of wonder, willingness to try new things, empathy, open-mindedness, civility, tolerance for ambiguity—these are some of the qualities that define and give value to being a student” (p. 8). The irony is that while these are the exact qualities that colleges claim to be seeking in students, the current commercial environment does not only fall on the shoulders of the colleges themselves, all of whom are eager to fill their classes with the “best” students they can lure while netting the highest revenue possible. Students, parents, and high school profile writers are frequently more concerned about the “prestige factor” than about finding the appropriate match for a particular student. The media is obsessed with the most prestigious schools and focuses on a handful of colleges as representative of the world of higher education (which they are not), while at the same time persisting in the counterproductive “rankings game” which further betrays the concept of “studenthood.” The vendors, large and small, profit and “non-profit,” play to the fears of admissions deans and students in their marketing of products to help colleges achieve their enrollment and revenue goals, and to help students “beat the odds.” Where, oh where has education gone?

The essays cover a wide range of observations about college admission today. Many are written expressly for students and their parents—advice on how to enjoy the journey of college selection rather than to “play the game” and ruin the junior and senior year of high school in the process. Some are written for our admission colleagues and college presidents with the goal of promoting an understanding of how far we have strayed from the original purpose of a college education and what we can do to change our orientation. We spend hundreds of thousands of dollars marketing our institutions rather than investing at least some of those dollars in the academic program. The quest for more and more applications, heavy and competitive non-need discounting, the manipulation of data for ranking purposes—all of these and more are addressed in the essays. At least one essay is directed toward the media and the admission vendors, though portions of many essays cite numerous challenges from these players and offer insightful recommendations.
The last essay in the book is a wonderful summary, written by Thacker. “In some ways,” he writes, “this book can be seen as an experiment in community expression for college admissions: a sort of neighborhood meeting—the kind that might naturally develop in response to threats or infringements on the shared values of the community” (p.181). The book is indeed that, but much more. While there is no question that college officials will find much to reflect about and consider within its pages, College Unranked is a resource like no other for students and parents, because it will help them see the shallowness of what they have been told is a “game,” and will, through a careful reading and subsequent family discussion, lead to a sane admission journey for the family. Thacker outlines the problem of the commercially distorted marketplace of college admission and then proceeds to summarize the personal revelations and judgments of selected essayists. He concludes by calling on the professional associations to reclaim “studenthood.”

The book concludes with a chapter of recommendations, also written by the editor, and culled from the various essays. His recommendations specifically address each audience. He enumerates six themes for students with advice regarding each: college is what you make of it; confidence counts; you are doing precision guess-work—and that is ok; there is no such thing as the one perfect college; resist the marketplace mentality of college admissions; and there will always be exceptions (e.g., some of these themes may not apply to you). Thacker gives advice to parents suggesting that “Ivyholism” take a back seat to finding a good fit for the student and allowing them to own the college admission process. He implores colleges to view these challenges as opportunities to provide educational vision and leadership and—a favorite of mine—to stop the admissions “arms race.” While falling short of making specific recommendations to associations such as the College Board and the media, he does ask them to think hard about how standardized testing and rankings have contributed to the health of higher education. He ends on a high note of hope and inspiration, suggesting that “Do the right thing” replace “Just do it” as our mantra on the road to reclaiming “studenthood.”

College Unranked is published by the Education Conservancy (www.educationconservancy.org), a non-profit organization committed to helping students, counselors, and colleges overcome the commercial influence in college admissions. Lloyd Thacker has done education a great service by assembling this book. His passion is evident throughout—a passion that all of his co-authors share. College Unranked is a “must read” for educators, families, associations, and reporters. It represents a beginning—an opportunity to redefine college admission for the 21st century.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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The Future of Higher Education: Rhetoric, Reality, and the Risks of the Market
FRANK NEWMAN, LARA COUTURIER, AND JAMIE SCURRY.

Reviewed by: Thomas L. W. Johnson

This book is the result of a series of reports and articles written under the auspices of The Futures Project: Policy for Higher Education in a Changing World. The authors recognize that market-based strategies in higher education are rapidly becoming the norm not only in the United States but throughout much of the world. By market strategies they mean a loosening of regulations that tie higher education to state mandated approvals and close oversight of business practices. Should tuition setting be held to a rigid state formula or should a school be permitted to set tuition in conjunction with its practices of managing its enrollment to achieve its goals and objectives? They argue that the era of setting marketing strategies is here. The question really becomes one of how do we channel that activity to promote the good of society? The authors acknowledge that government intervention plays a legitimate role which they liken to the activity of the Securities and Exchange Commission in overseeing the financial markets of the nation (pp. 83 and 86–92). In the authors’ view the state should be monitoring roles, missions, and performance of colleges and universities for which it has responsibility (pp.104–05).

The authors cite surveys which indicate public support for higher education (p.70) but want skills useful in the workplace taught (p.71). Business leaders also support higher education but want skills taught and are interested in how higher education operates. Public officials, on the other hand, want to see higher education as being more flexible, consumer friendly, adaptable, and innovative (p.75).

The authors review efforts to decouple higher education from the pattern of micro-management common in many jurisdictions. The use of the public corporation (p.111), charter colleges, (p.114), and the voucher system (p.118) are discussed. The use of the educational compact receives attention (pp.127–29). Institutional agreements (pp.130–31) are also explained. The authors recommend the use of statewide educational compacts followed up by agreements made at the institutional level. Schools must set learning goals, demand new intellectual skills, and new knowledge. Recognition of the need for educational leadership to respond to questions from both the public and policymakers is stressed. If these questions are ignored, the authors are fearful that higher education will find itself modeled after K-12 with firmly defined, state-dictated modes of setting standards and assessing performance (p.140).

With respect to students who are coming to college for the first time and may be coming from backgrounds in which higher education is not valued, the authors acknowledge that there is much work to be done. Given the limited financial resources available in most states, they would severely limit