'We're Losing Our Minds'

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By Doug Lederman

You know about the completion agenda. Let's call this the "learning agenda."

With most critics of higher education focused on rising prices or on whether American colleges and universities are producing enough degree and certificate holders with sufficient skills to keep the U.S. economy vibrant and competitive -- the latter known in shorthand as the "completion agenda" -- a few analysts are homing in on the quality and rigor of what students are learning (or not) en route to those credentials.

Last year's *Academically Adrift* set the tone, providing data suggesting that many colleges are imposing relatively minimal academic demands on their students and that, perhaps as a result, many students do not appear to gain in some measures of cognitive abilities as they move through college.

The authors of *We're Losing Our Minds* (Palgrave MacMillan) add their own clamoring to the agenda focused on the quality of learning. Richard P. Keeling and Richard H. Hersh, longtime scholars and administrators, describe themselves as "friendly critics" of higher education, and unlike many of academe's naysayers, they don't spend a lot of time trashing the faculty as overpaid and underworked or bashing administrators as fat-cat corporatizers (though they do complain that institutions have overemphasized rankings and enrollment growth and sports and research -- take your pick depending on institution type).

Instead, they make the case that too little of what happens in institutions of "higher education" deserves to be called "higher learning" -- "learning that prepares students to think creatively and critically, communicate effectively, and excel in responding to the challenges of life, work and citizenship." Keeling (founder and principal of Keeling & Associates, a consultancy focused on learning issues) and Hersh (a consultant at Keeling and former president of Hobart and William Smith Colleges) engage in a dense but important discussion about how such development learning occurs (filled with terms like "neuroplasticity").

But, perhaps recognizing that the sort of "rethinking" they propose would require

the sort of "systemic institutional change" that is difficult to bring about in higher education, the authors spend much of their time laying out the sorts of discussions in which campus administrators and professors must engage, jointly, to decide to make learning the "touchstone" priority, and kinds of practices and approaches that colleges might adopt to make it so.

In an e-mail interview, Hersh and Keeling jointly answer questions about *We're Losing Our Minds* and its prescription for higher education.

Q. As you note, there have been no shortage of critiques of higher education in recent years, but most have focused on the rising price of college tuition and the declining productivity of the U.S. "system" of higher ed. Yours zeroes in on whether students are learning enough. Why is that the most important issue in your eyes?

A. There's no question that high costs are a problem. But low value is a bigger problem. No matter what the cost is, higher education is overpriced if it fails to deliver on its most basic promise: learning. Value is low when, as the research shows, too many of our college graduates are not prepared to think critically and creatively, speak and write clearly, solve problems, comprehend complex issues, accept responsibility and accountability, take the perspective of others, or meet the expectations of employers.

Thinking of undergraduate degrees as commodities -- tickets to a job -- has led students, parents, institutions of higher education, governing boards, and state and federal officials to focus on efficiency, rather than efficacy. Attempts to improve efficiency -- to produce more graduates with more degrees at lower cost -- have created misguided policy "fixes" and supported demands for a particular kind of accountability that can be measured by simplistic indicators like cost and retention.

We are facing a national crisis in higher learning, or, rather, in the lack thereof. Improving efficiency and lowering costs are just not enough; we need to improve value. And we can only improve value by increasing the quality and quantity of learning in college. We wrote our book to help catalyze a national discussion on this issue -- and with the hope that the academy will rise to the occasion and avoid the imposition of "solutions" from outside higher education.

Q. Some of the prior critiques of higher education -- like that of the Spellings Commission in 2006 -- were derided as rhetorical brickbats used to bash higher education rather than to help them. One might say the same thing about your book's title, which you concede is an "extraordinary judgment." Does an inflammatory title like that risk alienating the faculty members and administrators who have to do the heavy lifting under the prescription you lay out?

A. We acknowledge that risk and thought seriously about it. We chose the title to provoke a different order of conversation and because the metaphor ("we're losing our minds") is apt in the context of the synthesis of learning research summarized in the book. Brain science is clear: "use it or lose it." Students -- and their minds -- respond to high expectations. If all they are asked to do is demonstrate skill at memorization and basic content comprehension, that will be the modality of "mindfulness" attained -- but if they are required not only to master essential facts, but also to integrate and apply their new knowledge and understanding, they must invest substantially greater effort in their learning. More effort -- which demands more study time, more practice, and much more feedback through assessment -- builds capacity and, eventually, expertise. We claim that higher education today does not demand enough of students, so we are in a real sense losing the potential of their minds -- what economists often call human capital.

Q: The overpowering policy imperative in higher education right now is the "completion agenda," the push by the Obama administration, the Lumina and Gates foundations, and a slew of advocacy groups to increase retention rates and the number and proportion of Americans with college credentials. Do you see danger that that push -- which you call an emphasis on "throughput" -- can actually work against what you see as the most pressing goal: increasing the quantity and quality of learning?

A: We know from both research and experience that the greater the amount of time, effort, and feedback, the greater the amount of higher learning. Logically, then, we want more students to stay in and complete college, and we would agree that promoting retention and completion are appropriate and needed public

policy. But just being in college and getting through, accumulating enough credits to get a degree, are not sufficient. Access, retention, and completion are not -- or, at least, should not be -- considered ends in themselves. We should not uncouple them from the primary purpose of college, which is higher learning. So we suggest focusing on learning, because in fact the more success we have in promoting significant learning, the greater will be retention and completion.

Q. Many critics (and more than a few campus administrators) blame faculty members as the primary impediments to getting colleges to pay more attention to student learning, citing their defensiveness and unwillingness to acknowledge that they may be part of the problem. (Our recent survey of chief academic officers suggests they may have their own blind spot about how much learning is taking place on their own campuses.) I read your book as being much more sympathetic to the faculty. To what extent are professors responsible for the dearth of learning (perhaps by asking too little of their students?) and to what extent are they being undermined by their institutions' policies?

A. Faculty were educated to be masters of a discipline and producers of new knowledge. Few were required in their graduate programs to learn about learning and teaching, or to practice and improve their teaching skills. Once hired on tenure track, they adapted to an incentive and reward system that primarily values research, scholarship, and publications. In most four-year colleges and universities, there is no consensus about how to judge the quality of teaching (except for student evaluations, which are too often a popularity contest). So faculty are behaving exactly as they have been educated, acculturated, and reinforced to do. The culture of higher education generally does not elevate teaching, and its intended purpose, learning, to high priority.

In our consulting work we regularly encounter dedicated faculty members who are interested in students, focused on learning, motivated to improve their teaching, and struggling to balance those commitments with the demands of promotion and tenure. On most campuses, faculty and institutional culture provide counter-incentives to faculty who want to hold students to higher standards, raise their expectations for student effort and work, and provide abundant and timely feedback. As we argue in our book, what is then needed is a

fundamental cultural change on most campuses and in the field of higher education. Faculty must both lead and be at the center of such change.

Q. The idea of a three-year bachelor's degree is suddenly sexy and hot, embraced by high-profile politicians like Lamar Alexander and Govs. Christine Gregoire (Washington) and John Kasich (Ohio). You call it a shortcut. Where does the idea fall short?

A. We don't doubt that there is a small percentage of undergraduates who can graduate in three years by accelerating their academic schedule -- taking extra courses during regular academic terms, going to summer school, etc. It is probably possible for some colleges to restructure the academic calendar radically and compress four years into three. Proposals to provide a three-year bachelor's degree advocate acceleration and compression, not fewer courses or credits; they argue for a more efficient use of faculty and campus resources.

Our concern is about how implementing a three-year undergraduate curriculum and degree would affect the quality and quantity of learning. Maintaining current curriculums, pedagogy, and levels of student effort, but compacting undergraduate education into three versus four years, might increase certain efficiencies, but will not improve educational value. That is a shortcut not worth taking. We know that achieving the key desired outcomes of higher learning is a cumulative, collective process that takes time and demands integration and synthesis from the learner. That is, students don't learn critical thinking or coherent writing from one course, or only from any number of courses; the whole of the college experience, inside and outside the classroom, is what provides the structure, learning opportunities, and reflective time needed to achieve essential learning goals. Students come to college inadequately prepared for college-level work as it is; even four years may not be adequate for many to learn enough. What we hope for and should expect from higher education -- true higher learning that is developmental and transformative -- happens inside and outside the classroom, takes time, cannot be rushed, and would probably be undermined by a compacted three-year college experience.

Ultimately the concept of three-year bachelor's degrees is a testable hypothesis -- which is a strong argument for assessment of learning and comparative

benchmarking of the quality and quantity of learning among institutions and degree programs. If reduction of time to degree is implemented, it will be essential to determine how it affects the efficacy of higher learning.

Q. The undergraduate program you outline for producing a true culture of "higher learning" includes a lot of elements -- across-the-board first-year seminars, comprehensive exams, capstone courses/experiences -- that can be costly to institute as broadly as you recommend. How big an impediment are institutional finances to your agenda, especially in an era of diminishing (or at least flattening) resources?

A. Budgets express institutional priorities. As it is, too many budgets reflect priorities that have little to do with learning -- high-priced varsity athletic coaches and programs, expensive and elaborate facilities, and, often, reduced teaching loads to allow professors to spend less time with undergraduates and more time on research. There is no question that priorities, and the budgets that are manifestations of them, must change. In other words, what we are proposing should not be seen as additions to a currently dysfunctional system, but as reallocations of resources toward learning. More is not necessarily better; better is more.

Some observers will claim that what we are proposing is possible only in the context of small, private liberal arts colleges or that it can't be done in large classes. We disagree. Creative faculty have designed ways to use interactive learning and timely assessment in classes of almost any size. Components of what we recommend exist in many places -- notably first year seminars and capstone experiences. But, yes, there will be costs -- especially the reallocation of faculty time and priorities. We would argue that in the end, many of those costs will be offset by increased retention and the reduction of institutional expenditures on budget items that do not advance learning.

Q. There are several efforts on the landscape to try to define commonly, across institutions, what students should know and be able to do upon leaving college -- the Association of American Colleges and Universities' Essential Learning Outcomes, the Lumina Foundation's Degree Qualifications Profile, etc. Do you believe that's a worthy and necessary goal, and how do

you rate those efforts?

A. These are worthy and necessary goals. It is unclear to the public, policy makers, and academics themselves -- not to mention students -- what is reasonably expected of students entering and graduating college. Given the extensive public support provided to our colleges and universities, is not unfair to expect that higher education will make clear what we can count on in someone who earns a bachelor's degree. Both AAC&U and Lumina have done good work in drafting recommended undergraduate learning outcomes.

Still missing, though, are two things: first, operational definitions of these outcomes adapted to the missions, contexts, and student bodies of individual institutions, and second, ways of knowing such learning when we see it. These needs speak to the imperative for appropriate assessment of learning -- not necessarily done by common exams across all colleges and universities (although doing so would allow for some useful peer-campus benchmarking) but certainly by diligent, rigorous assessment practices that document what learning is taking place on each campus. We think it is reasonable to expect that each institution assess students' learning of commonly agreed learning goals and make public how such assessment is taking place and what the results are. Over time, we would learn which learning and assessment methods are most effective. Without serious assessment, the establishment of core learning outcomes will be futile and unproductive.