Failing the Future: A Dean Looks at Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century: A Review

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Recommended Citation
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The title promises much: an examination of education for the twenty-first century. The book jacket promises even more: a book “rich with practical solutions and workable programs for change.” Perhaps some will find them in Kolodny’s work, but this reader found little more than one long whine.

Kolodny bases her book on the five-year term she served as dean of the College of Humanities at the University of Arizona (1988-1993). Arizona is a research I university as neither of mine has been, but we were deans in the same field during the same era, so I thought it might be interesting to compare her assessment of deaning with my own. Kolodny describes herself as a feminist scholar who was naive when she took the deanship, having never previously served as a department chair or in any administrative capacity, and from reading her book, this self-assessment appears to have been penetratingly accurate!

Kolodny’s stated goal is a lofty one we ought all to share: defining and enacting the good society. Having now left deaning to teach political science full-time, I consistently struggle—too often unsuccessfully—to get my students to evaluate whether our political system produces outcomes that are in the public interest (a concept many seem to find either foreign or quaint). She names three curricular emphases she deems important—interdisciplinarity, education for a leisureed society, and internationalization—but does little to develop them. Her real emphasis is less on the content of higher education than on what her opponents at Arizona call “social engineering”—reshaping universities (and the society of which they are part) in ways that will support higher education: “Unless we develop social programs to mitigate the economic displacements that impoverish entire neighborhoods, disrupt families, produce violence, and stunt young people’s growth, educational reform will not stand proof against civil disorder” (74). Unfortunately, her proof for this important claim seems to be little more than assertions, but it was not the case.

Kolodny’s bete noire, general and the right, it seems, has directed its attack on the institutions and the current curriculum of humanities and social sciences. Kolodny identifies a changed paradigm that “the right, it seems, has directed its attack on the institutions and the current curriculum of humanities and social sciences” (74). Unfortunately, she fails to develop her proof for this important claim, and by the time one reaches the teaching and what we now call the twenty-first century” (74).

For Kolodny, this was “more rigorous.” How she argues, for humanists to be less “more rigorous.” How she argues, for humanists to be less...
an examination of the first-century. The workable programs will find them in the five-year term (1988-1993). Arizona Leither of mine has the same field during the decade might be interesting deaning with my- deaning with myself as a feminist. When she took the position of administrative capacity in her book, this self-assessment is astonishingly accurate! This lofty one we ought to teach political radical right-wing elements began to attack the public’s anxiety about college costs attached themselves to new anxieties about the value and quality of higher education. In a manner carefully manipulated toward that end, the public’s confidence in higher education was compromised. (48)

For Kolodny, this attack has been paired with conservative efforts to cut education budgets: against civil disorder” (38). Even that might have been interesting, had Kolodny’s ensuing “analysis” been more than a string of unsupported assertions, but it was not.

Kolodny’s bete noirs are a repressive society in general and the right wing in particular. The right, it seems, has decided to make a politicized attack on the institution of tenure because of changes in the profession: specifically the increased number of women and minority faculty and the current commitment among many humanities and social science faculty to employ a changed paradigm that examines the “seamier” side of American history and culture. The project is nothing less than a conservative “campaign to substantially affect, if not control, who gets to do the teaching and what gets taught in the next century” (74). Unfortunately, one is forced to infer her proof for this important claim, which appears to be little more than that Sid Bass (the wealthy conservative oil heir from Texas) eventually withdrew his gift of millions to Yale for the humanities (he wanted some say in who was hired, a stipulation Yale would not agree to). Moreover, questioning tenure is nothing new: the University of Wisconsin’s Board of Regents considered eliminating it back in the antediluvian past (the Seventies), at which time the professoriate was overwhelmingly comprised of white males.

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[W]hen radical right-wing elements began to attack what was supposedly being taught to undergraduates, the public’s anxieties about college costs attached themselves to new anxieties about the value and quality of higher education. In a manner carefully manipulated toward that end, the public’s confidence in higher education was compromised. (48)

In fact, she argues, the public need not be concerned, for humanities courses have become “more rigorous.” How does she know? Her warrant seems to be that it is because “some professors are teaching [canonical] authors within far denser historical and literary contexts” (48). Dif-
different, to be sure, and possibly richer as well, but more rigorous? Unfortunately, we do not know the metric by which she establishes this claim. We do know that students read less these days. We do know that the standard reading test, the Nelson-Denny, has been changed substantially since it first appears about 1960. Review its first and latest version for yourself and decide whether it is expecting the same level of language mastery and intellectual commitment from today's students. And we do know that the standardized college entrance tests were re-normed earlier this decade. One does not know the intent, but the result was to inflate artificially the scores of today's students and make it appear that they compare more favorably with those who took it a generation ago than is, in fact, the case without in any way improving the interpersonal comparison the original norming system provided. We might all be ecstatic if today's humanities courses were genuinely more rigorous, but given some empirical evidence that casts doubt on Kolodny's statement, it will take more than her assertions to prove the point.

The spectre of inadequate budgets and budget cuts suffuses Kolodny's book. Even though she had an operating budget roughly an order of magnitude larger than the one available to our Arts and Humanities division even five years after she left her deanship (for a faculty about double A&H's), and even though she got additional lines and permission to start two new interdisciplinary graduate programs when she became dean, she seems fixated on the fact that she was asked to cut from a sum she already found to be inadequate. She is not the first dean who sometimes did not know "what [her] budget might be from one semester to the next" (202), but she seems to take that fact as additional confirmation that administrators did not share her commitment to having the university become a far more complete social service agency by funding expanded support programs for university staff and graduate students (undergraduates are essentially invisible in the book).

Kolodny does mention that at Grand Valley some of her "new" faculty (herself included) are about to leave the institution and the rationale for this decision directly observes that the institution is "not a socially oriented one." Most new faculty leave "for more urban centers," with more commitment to, their discipline and broader commitment to do a better job of helping undergraduates. One could easily find solace from the thought it was an improvement in hiring all new faculty personnel policy as soon as there nothing new under the sun.

Given her repeated feminist commitments and commitments to higher education that seem to get out of the way of her work—society that seems to her less than a concern we all share, why one would reassign, is unclear to me. Thumper's Maxim—don't say nothing nice, don't say nothing bad—Book Review Editor.
Possibly richer as well, unfortunately, we do not know that the standard reading tests were re-normed at the time these were last used. We do not know the interrater reliability of these tests. Even when we do inflate artificially the scores, we are not given any evidence of the process. At best, we inflate artificially the scores and give them to those who are not specialists in reading. Kolodny does make one important point we at Grand Valley should take seriously: she learned as dean how “abysmally ignorant” most faculty (herself included, when she was a faculty member) are about what is going on at the institution and the rationale behind it, and she correctly observes that that ignorance “makes a sham out of the institution of shared governance” (14). Most new faculty leave grad school as “cosmopolitans,” with more understanding of, and commitment to, their disciplines than of universities’ broader commitments. Like Arizona, we need to do a better job of helping all faculty develop these understandings. On the other hand, we at Grand Valley might be able to take some small measure of solace from the book. Apparently Kolodny thought it was an innovation to have begun giving all new faculty members a copy of the personnel policy as soon as they came to campus. Is there nothing new under the sun?

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Given her repeated references to how feminist commitments shape all of her actions and commitments, one cannot fail to be struck by Kolodny’s description of the process she used as dean to extract more money from the provost: “If logic and hard data failed me and I thought it would help, I teased, I cajoled, I flirted, I pouted” (21, emphasis added). To her credit, she recognizes that she had added “cunning and manipulation to [her] repertoire” (21) and takes “no pleasure” in it, but neither does she offer any other of those promised “workable solutions” to reorienting a society that seemingly devalues any aspects of higher education that are not narrowly instrumental—a concern we all ought to share. In the end, why one would read this book, save as an assignment, is unclear to me. Indeed, I even tried to get out of the assignment and thus practice Thumper’s Maxim—"If ya can’t say somethin’ nice, don’t say nothin’ at all"—but an obdurate Book Review Editor would not let me off the hook.