

Nothing Less Than Great: Reforming Canada's Universities

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Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

Nothing Less Than Great: Reforming Canada's Universities

by Harvey P. Weingarten

University of Toronto Press, 2021, 217 pages

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Anyone who is interested in the landscape of higher education in Canada is familiar with a general desire for more informed perspectives on the state of the field. That is why when books like *Nothing Less Than Great* come along they are worth picking up. In this book Weingarten pulls back the curtain with an informed perspective on what happens within universities, how they relate (or don't) with government, the challenges they experience, and where we should be heading to remedy existing challenges. Weingarten has enjoyed a long career in Canadian public universities, first as a professor at McMaster University, then as its vice president (academic) and provost. From there he became president and vice-chancellor of the University of Calgary, and then became president of the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO). By all measures, he's had a stake in the industry for a long time and has amassed considerable experiences that give him the professional gravitas to ask some poignant questions about the state of Canada's public universities.

Nothing Less Than Great is divided into eleven chapters, each tackling a critical question (e.g., Chapter 2: Is Going to University Worth it?) or considering substantive topic (e.g., Chapter 5: The Relationship Between University Education and Jobs). In each chapter Weingarten methodically lays out the core arguments and assumptions inherent to the topic. Weingarten does not stop short of making some acute critiques of the existing higher education system in Canada, such as its failure to innovate and the degree to which this failure is the result of universities being shackled to longer-than-needed quality assurance processes. Surprising, perhaps most of all, is Weingarten's subtle (but at times not so subtle) support of diversifying the university landscape to

better respond to broader social processes (e.g., lifelong learning, micro-credentials). He talks about the prospect of other social actors filling the void where universities fail to innovate and respond to these emerging social needs; notably from the private sector which may be able to offer new institutional forms that are more suitable to short-term programs and flexible credential schedules.

Weingarten thoughtfully discusses how issues of measurement obstruct the continuing legitimacy of Canadian university education – ironic given that universities are filled with researchers concerned with measuring the social and natural world. Nonetheless, the extent to which universities can make claims about the quality of their education and their ability to prepare students for work after graduation continues to be subject to measurement errors and general suspicion by key constituents like government and industry. While he does not overtly question the quality of a Canadian university education, Weingarten points out that universities are quick to make claims about the knowledge and skills their graduates will have, all the while “there is a dearth of compelling evidence that would convince a skeptic that they actually possess them” (p. 157). Universities will therefore need to continue to work on *how* to measure the learning outcomes they purport to instill in their graduates. Such a strategy is evident of an outcome-based focus as opposed to an input focus (e.g., enrollment numbers). This is no unfamiliar challenge to those working within or studying higher education and school to work transitions.

Perhaps most admirable is that at the end of each chapter Weingarten leaves the reader with recommendations for how the preceding challenges and discussions might be remedied, falling into four broad categories: 1) increasing awareness of the state and contributions of Canada’s universities, 2) broad system reforms, 3) curriculum reform, and 4) improving equity and access. Weingarten takes the guesswork out of where the messages from each chapter should be taken. This is no small feat, as the issues raised in each chapter are inherent to the core functioning of universities individually, and our public university system more collectively. Readers are therefore not left wondering ‘what now?’ after reading each chapter or at the end of the book.

While Weingarten draws on his impressive career in higher education, readers should not expect the book to be filled with a broad or critical engagement with extant literature. At times, the sources of this book read more as an anthology of HEQCO reports, many of which Weingarten wrote. However, to be fair given his opening goals of the book, Weingarten did not intend for this to be a work widely read among academics. Rather, this book is intended to be public scholarship and “more likely to be bought at an airport bookstore than a university one” (p. 14). While this manner of writing may make the contents more approachable, it could nonetheless risk further entrenching public opinion about the dire state of higher education. By this I do not mean that pulling back the curtain in a publicly approachable manner is a bad thing. On the contrary, as public institutions universities deserve a degree of public scrutiny. But a lack of substantive engagement with existing research on higher education sidesteps some of the vocal

concerns about issues related to things like private post-secondary institutions that Weingarten suggests as a potential solution to current troubles (e.g., see McMillian Cottom, 2017).

This book will be of interest to multiple audiences. Students will be reassured to know that ‘the great promissory note’ of a university degree remains true – that going to university is associated with greater social and economic stability than those who do not attend. This, in fact, is the discussion point at the end of the book: the more individuals that go to university, the better. For those involved in administrative or service roles within the university, this book may give pause to think about the challenges universities face with respect to innovation and sustainability, and how these may be resolved by making universities more accessible or diversifying the field.

Reference

McMillian Cottom, T. (2017). *Lower ed: The Troubling Rise of For-Profit Colleges in the New Economy*. The New Press.