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Abelard to Apple: The Fate of American Colleges and Universities

Richard A DeMillo

Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011.

Reviewed by Chris Abrams, Malone University

The general public does not understand the mission of higher education...what else is new? According to Richard DeMillo here's what's new:

American Higher Education is in trouble because an alarmingly small – and shrinking – portion of the public believes that colleges and universities are worth the expense. In business terms, this means that the American public is for the first time questioning the value received for dollars invested in higher education. If American higher education had paid attention to the marketplace, both the penalties for failure and rewards for success would be easier to explain to the public and to policy makers. (2011, p. 51)

As indicated by this statement, Richard DeMillo in *Abelard to Apple: The Fate of American Colleges and Universities* urges leaders in America's higher education system, upper-level administrators, deans, department chairs, and state government officials, to “define its value” and “become architects” of its future in order that higher education may succeed in the 21st century.

DeMillo's analysis and solutions for the future of higher education are divided into five parts: Great Visions to Lure Them On, An Abundance of Choices, A Better Means of Expressing Their Goals, Abelard to Apple, and The Long View. In part one, Great Visions to Lure Them On, DeMillo attempts to help the reader understand the “mystical” professoriate. He attempts to help the reader understand course loads, research, academic freedom and tenure, just to name a few unfamiliar areas which are often misunderstood. DeMillo believes the general public does not understand faculty and thus views them as lazy and wasteful.

In part two, An Abundance of Choices, the author encourages institutions to plan for future student and academic trends, and know their competition. The higher education landscape has changed; for-profit institutions are growing, and by 2017 student demand for higher education will level off at around 25 million. What niche(s) will keep your institution relevant in the overall higher education landscape? Who will fill the new majors needed to fuel our world? What will those majors be? These are questions each institution must answer as they move forward.

In part three, A Better Means of Expressing Their Goals, DeMillo urges leaders in higher education to go back to the general public and help them understand the value of colleges and universities not only for the students who attend but also for the public through the research they produce. At the same time, he continues to implore higher education to reconsider curriculum, asking the simple question; what do students really need to know? Put another way, how does higher education and our culture define an educated person? With these questions in mind, DeMillo recommends a reexamination of majors and instructional methods asking these two critical questions: (1) what majors have become irrelevant and need to be discarded, and

(2) what teaching styles are relevant for today's student? As an illustration of where higher education has succeeded and failed, DeMillo shows how higher education capitalized on society's need for well-educated men and women in computer science, but also its inability to react when the bottom fell out of the technology industry in the early 21st century (2011, p. 159).

In part four, *Abelard to Apple*, DeMillo comments on the efficiency of higher education. Throughout, he looks at how business and industry have stayed competitive in ways higher education has never explored. He examines how technology can, for example, make industry more resourceful and reduce costs, but how it increases costs within higher education.

Part five is where he begins to explore the opportunities for change. DeMillo encourages the reader to look overseas for innovations in higher education, specifically within the higher education systems of China and Singapore. In chapter 19, *Change My Name to Architect*, he illustrates that positive change for the future of American higher education is not a one-size-fits-all proposition. Lastly, in Chapter 20, *Rules for the 21st Century*, he spells out what it means to "define your value" (p. 272) as an institution and to "become an architect for the blueprint for future success" (p. 275).

In reading *Abelard to Apple*, my first thought is that DeMillo's observations and suggestions don't always fit when examining smaller private liberal arts colleges with endowments below \$50 million. DeMillo spends a great deal of time talking about the life of a tier-I research faculty member or budgets at Ivy League schools. I am not sure he references one institution with less than 2,000 students, and institutions acting on the basis of a faith-based mission do not appear in his analysis. This may lead some readers to conclude that DeMillo's book offers little value for a person who has spent an entire career at a small-tuition-driven institution. But DeMillo's *Rules for the 21st Century* are worth examining regardless of the type of institution at which one serves. For example, all institutions of higher education can benefit from better defining themselves, cutting costs, and finding a balance between faculty-centrism and student-centrism.

Along the same lines, I am waiting for the book that discusses the "typical" institution of higher education, the non-flagship state school or the under-\$50-million-endowment private liberal arts institution. There are many wonderful anecdotes about the things which have taken place in the history of the "top" institutions of higher education in America, but most of higher education does not have a great deal in common with Harvard or California Berkley. The front flap of the book addresses "the middle" reputable educational institutions, but those are not considered equal to the elite institutions in this country. The majority of the anecdotes and much of the analysis focuses on institutions outside "the middle."

Overall, *Abelard to Apple* is an excellent read. DeMillo is fair in his analysis of the higher education landscape, including his own profession as a faculty member. The historical context sets the appropriate framework for the argument, and his ideas for change are relevant and worth further exploration. I recommend *Abelard to Apple* to those interested in learning more about where we, as members of the academy, have come from and what it will take to maintain our significance in an unpredictable future.

Contributor

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