

Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development

Volume 12 | Number 12

Article 12

2013

The Heart of Higher Education

John Delony
Abilene Christian University

Sheila Delony
Abilene Christian University

Follow this and additional works at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/acsd_growth



Part of the [Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons](#), [Educational Leadership Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), [Higher Education Administration Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Delony, John and Delony, Sheila (2013) "The Heart of Higher Education," *Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development*. Vol. 12 : No. 12 , Article 12.
Available at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/acsd_growth/vol12/iss12/12

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Association of Christians in Student Development at Pillars at Taylor University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development by an authorized editor of Pillars at Taylor University. For more information, please contact pillars@taylor.edu.



The Heart of Higher Education.

Palmer, P. J., & Zajonc, A. (2010).
San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Reviewed by John Delony and Sheila Delony



Higher education is undergoing a time of transition, disruption, and a crisis of identity (DeMillo, 2011). Simultaneously, broad concerns regarding the cost and financing of higher education are dominating the public discourse regarding the many forms of post-secondary education. Intentional approaches and conversations about the broad intrinsic purposes of higher education have retreated to secondary importance as more pressing questions concerning institutional and individual programmatic viability, sustainability, and importance have taken center stage.

Due in large part to escalating costs and siloed approaches to teaching and learning, higher education has become about employability, return-on-investment, and certification. Students and institutions are using new technologies to sprint towards composite credentialing by “adding up pedagogical parts” (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010, p.10) and piecemealing credits from multiple, and, at times, divergent sources of varying levels of quality. In this evolving landscape, certificates and badges have begun to replace personal interactions while communal learning exchanges are taking place between usernames and on-line personas. It is in within this tumultuous environment that Palmer and Zajonc advocate for new, highly important integrative educational practices in which “higher education become[s] a more multidimensional enterprise...that draws on the full range of human capacities for knowing, teaching, and learning [and] that bridges the gaps between the disciplines” (p.1). The authors call for a grassroots, communal renewal in the philosophical approach to higher education that “engages students in the systematic exploration of the relationship between their studies of the ‘objective’ world and the purpose, meaning, limits, and aspirations of their lives” (p.10). Originating from conversations that both led to and followed the 2007 national conference, *Uncovering the Heart of Higher Education*, the primary purpose of *The Heart of Higher Education* is to cast a plausible vision of integrative education with the hope of prompting readers to engage in “focused and disciplined conversations” with their colleagues in order to build the “social capacity” necessary for institutional movement toward an integrative approach to education (p. 12-14). The book serves to provide the premises for such conversations as well as examples of initiatives that have already been put into action.

The introduction, which the authors use to state the origins, aims, and limitations of the book, is the only chapter written jointly by both authors. The remaining six chapters are presented by each author individually to maintain the distinct perspectives provided by their academic and practitioner backgrounds: Palmer as a sociologist and educational activist and Zajonc as a researcher and physics professor with a significant interest in “contemplative pedagogy” (p. 4). This unique dual authorship allows for their individual voices to speak from personal experiences and provide relevant expertise throughout the book. Their individual contributions are a significant strength of the book as the text neither becomes too ethereal, excluding practitioners from the conversation, nor is it too prescriptive, lacking the necessary philosophical underpinnings. In chapter one, Palmer addresses the weak philosophical foundation of integrative education by presenting a set of suppositions regarding ontology, epistemology, and pedagogy. In general, Palmer rejects commonly held assumptions about being, knowing, and learning on the grounds that they do not reflect scientific reality. He argues for a relational ontology which would result

in an epistemology rooted in scholars' conscious engagement with the subjects they study. Likewise, he posits a pedagogy grounded in relationships and hospitality. Community is the common thread woven through all of the discussed philosophical foundations. In chapter two, Parker continues to answer common criticisms of integrative education including its messiness, the emotional connection to cognition, the siloed nature of the academy, and the oil and water relationship of spirituality and academics. Throughout chapters three through five, Zajonc employs a narrative and highly technical approach to explore the links between science, the nature of the world, and the methodologies scholars and teachers employ to learn about the world. Zajonc's anecdotes, both personal and second-hand, add substance to the philosophical suppositions through his classroom and research perspective. In one of the more poignant revelations regarding integrative educational exploration, he states:

The moral admonition "discrimination is wrong" changes nothing in us. But truly "living the question" empathetically and imaginatively does change us and the way we make intellectual and moral meaning of our world. (p. 106)

74

Zajonc suggests that to truly transform a student, the student must be exposed to "worldviews radically different than their own [which are] encountered and appreciated" (p. 107). In chapter six Palmer talks about the necessary dynamics of cultural change within the academy, specifically focusing on the need for conversations with like-minded colleagues and institutional stakeholders willing to speak honestly with each other and to act boldly as they feel empowered. This happens through personal stories, communal idea formation, and then action. Palmer suggests that true change will be found in "Rosa Park decisions" (p. 136) where academics living "undivided lives" (p. 136) will be moved to dramatic action for the souls of their students and their institutions. The appendix, which comprises the remaining quarter of the book, provides descriptions and examples of integrative education in practice. The appendix is a wonderful section full of ideas of integrative education that have been put into practice in classrooms, programs, and institutions across the globe.

The Heart of Higher Education is based on the presupposition that the core mission of a university is student learning and teacher-student interaction. While this assertion may sound obvious, it should be acknowledged that within a highly competitive university marketplace, many institutions of higher education are primarily interested in research agendas, revenue, student test scores, and rankings; students and learning are merely a means to such ends. In the current climate of higher education, the integrative educator

will find his or herself swimming decidedly upstream. Thankfully, Palmer and Zajonc do not suggest that this type of radical and necessary change will be easy. They suggest that “the education of the young is one of humanity’s greatest communal undertakings” and that there is a moral imperative and scientific basis for the creation of a “comprehensive learning environment” (p. 151).

For student development professionals, this book reinforces in a fresh way their work of holistic student learning. Student development researchers and practitioners daily live the importance of learning outside of the classroom, applied educational experiences, and the critical nature of integrating cognitive deposits into integrative educational experiences. Sadly, these same professionals also daily face the institutional and cultural roadblocks towards this type of seamless curricular experience for students. As such, this book is both a call for seemingly impossible change within the academy, as well as an affirmation of the work student affairs practitioners and outside-of-the-classroom educators perform in the lives of students. While *The Heart of Higher Education* is at times utopian, it is a significant start towards an important transformation in student learning and the pedagogies that guide it.

Palmer and Zajonc believe that the tools for change in higher education are in place and simply need higher education professionals to answer the call for the deep, holistic approach to educating students. This book is a conversation starter for those who want to engage at a deeper level in the importance of higher education and the critical changes in teaching and learning that must happen in order to educate for “the increasingly important challenge of how we live together in our time on earth” (p. viii). 

Dr. John Delony is the Associate Dean of Students and Adjunct Assistant Professor of Higher Education at Abilene Christian University.

Dr. Sheila Delony is an Assistant Professor of Teacher Education at Abilene Christian University.

References

- DeMillo, R. A. (2011). *Abelard to apple: The fate of American colleges and universities*. Boston, MA: MIT Press.
- Palmer, P. J. & Zajonc, A. (2010). *The heart of higher education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.