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Most Likely to Succeed: Preparing Our Kids for the Innovation Era

Chris Riley
Abilene Christian University

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Most Likely to Succeed: Preparing Our Kids for the Innovation Era

Tony Wagner and Ted Dintersmith, 2015
New York, New York: Scribner

Reviewed by Chris Riley, J.D.

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According to the authors of *Most Likely to Succeed: Preparing Our Kids for the Innovation Era*, America as we know it is on the verge of collapse, based not on threats from ISIS, global warming, or political polarization, but our continued reliance on an outdated education model. Using equal parts inspiration and drama (there is an accompanying documentary by the same name as the book), this primer on entrepreneurial education provides many good ideas of what could be along with a handful of solutions to achieve the desired results. While fewer overgeneralizations and more practical guidance would be ideal, the work provides interesting insights into a system that often comes up short in holistically developing students for success in the modern era.

The authors begin by outlining early educational systems that reserved the study of philosophy and ideas for the aristocracy, while the majority of citizens worked in a trade or apprenticeship program. In the late 1800s, that changed when Charles Eliot of Harvard and the Committee of Ten developed a system to educate large numbers of immigrants and refugees from farms for basic citizenship and for jobs in a growing industrial economy. The new system taught students to perform repeated tasks rapidly without errors or creative variation. As time passed, uniform assessments were developed to measure student (and teacher) success in terms of memorizing educational content.

According to the authors, little has changed since the adoption of that educational system, despite the shift of technological tectonic plates that forever altered the landscape of the world's economy. In short, they contend that our educational system continues to produce students ready for the assembly line and not the Genius Bar. While the authors acknowledge the necessity of students in grades K-6 grade to learn the basic core concepts of reading and writing, math, science, and history, they allege the educational-industrial complex including standardize testing, lectures, advance placement courses, lack of effective teacher training, and college prep make grades 7-12 a series of hoops that students have to jump through to earn an otherwise worthless credential.

As an alternative, *Most Likely to Succeed* promotes a reformed system that inspires students with real world problems and assesses skills learned rather than information memorized. The authors point to the following essential skills that an effective modern-day educational system should foster: learning how to learn; communicating effectively and productively with others; creative problem-solving; managing failure; effecting change in organizations and society; making sound decisions; managing projects and achieving goals; and building perseverance and determination. But above all, the authors conclude that “the single most important lesson we can impart to our youth is that they can, through their passions and talents, make the world a better place, in a way they define” (p. 143).

Turning to colleges, the authors contend that a degree as currently constituted is an overvalued relic that does not live up to what it promises. In so doing, they rely on a mix of questionable data related to the lack of proven learning; overgeneralizations about faculty preoccupied exclusively by tenure and abstract research; and misconstructions of the academic factors considered by national college rankings. Still, they do provide helpful insights regarding the growing emotional cost of college and need for colleges to help prepare students for careers, which both should be considered by leaders in Christian higher education.

The authors point to the growing number of students who are depressed, anxious, unable to solve their own problems or recover from minor setbacks as evidence of the emotional toll of the current elite educational system. As a solution, they indirectly point to entrepreneurial efforts that require students to fail early, fail often until their innovations succeed (as the student would define it). This seems somewhat contrary to the theories in William Deresiewicz's book, *Excellent Sheep*, which argues that education should not only “teach kids to think” but assist them in building their souls in addition to their resumes.

This should resonate with Christian student affairs professionals who recognize that students' emotional turmoil cannot be solved by more success (even as they define it). This is especially true when they do not know how to find peace

and fulfillment in the absence of new hoops through which to jump. Helping students understand not only how or what they are doing, but why they are doing it remains essential in Christian higher education.

With regard to helping students prepare effectively for careers, *Most Likely to Succeed* points not to specific career placement courses but to liberal arts as a whole, which entrepreneurial-minded employers recognize as increasingly valued over content expertise. Moreover, recent research by Gallup, referenced by the authors, points to six undergraduate practices that support not only deep learning but career satisfaction:

at least one professor who made the student excited about learning; professors who cared about the student as a person; a mentor who encouraged the student to pursue her goals and dreams; a project that took a student one semester or more to complete; an internship or job that allowed the student to apply what she was learning in the classroom; and the student was extremely active in extracurricular activities and organizations. Gallup, Inc. (2014). *Great jobs great lives: The 2014 Gallup-Purdue Index report*. Washington, D.C.

These practices reflect many of the entrepreneurial purposes of a 21st-Century education model and should guide both curricular and co-curricular endeavors.

The book concludes with a single chapter related to practical solutions focusing mainly on examples in the K-12 context. With regard to the vision to transform colleges, the authors provide a list of innovations that many universities are considering or have implemented including reduced focus on standardized testing in admissions, competency-based projects and offerings, interdisciplinary or capstone courses, internships, accelerative learning programs, and even hacking higher education with a series of six-month internships.

I recommend this book because it is important to consider and understand how both our universities as a whole and our work as student affairs professionals have been and will be impacted by the changes of the innovation era. Moreover, it is obvious that our educational systems face big challenges that can only be met with big solutions. While those may not all be included here, it sets the stage for professionals to appreciate and undertake the work before us. 

Chris Riley is the Vice President of Student Life at Abilene Christian University, where he has taught in Political Science and Higher Education.