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The Upshot

DEGREES OF EDUCATION

The Fundamental Way That Universities Are an Illusion

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To understand the failures of the modern American college system — from admissions marketing to graduation rates — you can begin with a notorious university football scandal.

In November 2006, Butch Davis, a high-profile coach with jobs in the N.F.L. and the University of Miami on his résumé, was hired to coach football at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The job offered Mr. Davis a rare opportunity to work for a university that had won dozens of championships in multiple sports while avoiding the scandals and corruption that seemed commonplace at Miami and elsewhere.

But it didn't take long for Mr. Davis to realize that Chapel Hill's reputation for sports excellence without compromise was a myth. From 1991 to 2009, the university's department of African and Afro-American studies ran a huge academic fraud operation. Thousands of students, including regular undergraduates and athletes trying to maintain playing eligibility, enrolled in

fake courses in which they didn't have to attend classes, meet with professors or produce any legitimate academic work.

After the fraud was exposed and both the university chancellor and Mr. Davis lost their jobs, outside investigators discovered that U.N.C. had essentially no system for upholding the academic integrity of courses. "So long as a department was offering a course," one distinguished professor told the investigators, "it was a legitimate course."

Mr. Davis came to understand this all too well. As the investigators wrote in their final report, Mr. Davis "found Chapel Hill's attitude toward student-athlete academics to be like an 'Easter egg,' beautiful and impressive to the outside world, but without much life inside."

Most colleges, presumably, aren't harboring in-house credit mills. Yet in its underlying design, organizational values and daily operations, North Carolina is no different from most other colleges and universities. These organizations are not coherent academic enterprises with consistent standards of classroom excellence. When it comes to exerting influence over teaching and learning, they're Easter eggs. They barely exist.

This goes a long way toward explaining why colleges spend so much time and effort creating a sense of tribal solidarity among students and alumni. Think of the chant that Joe Paterno and students cried out together at the height of their university's pedophilia scandal: "We are! Penn State!" The costumes, rituals and gladiatorial contests with rival colleges are all designed to portray the university as united and indivisible. Newer colleges that lack such deeply rooted identities spend millions of dollars on branding consultants in order to create them.

They do this to paper over uncomfortable truths revealed by their own researchers.

The bible of academic research on how colleges affect students is a book

titled, plainly enough, “How College Affects Students.” It’s an 848-page synthesis of many thousands of independent research studies over the decades. The latest edition was published in 2005 by Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini, professors at the University of Iowa and Penn State.

The sections devoted to how colleges differ from one another are notable for how little they find. As Mr. Pascarella and Mr. Terenzini carefully document, studies have found that some colleges are indeed better than others in certain ways. Students tend to learn more in colleges where they have closer relationships with faculty and peers, for example, and earn a little more after graduating from more selective institutions.

But these findings are overwhelmed in both size and degree by the many instances in which researchers trying to detect differences between colleges found nothing.

“The great majority of postsecondary institutions appear to have surprisingly similar net impacts on student growth,” the authors write. “If there is one thing that characterizes the research on between-college effects on the acquisition of subject matter knowledge and academic skills, it is that in the most internally valid studies, even the statistically significant effects tend to be quite small and often trivial in magnitude.”

The fact that universities hardly exist as unified teaching organizations should not be confused with the question of whether going to college is “worth it.” The typical student who graduates from a college somewhere fares far better in the job market than the typical student who doesn’t.

Many collegiate programs require students to work hard and acquire valuable knowledge, skills and habits of mind. Students often form lifelong relationships with peers and learn how to act like a college-educated person. U.N.C. Chapel Hill itself offers many courses and academic majors that require students to go to class, take notes, meet with professors and produce real work.

People can learn a lot in college, and many do. But which college matters much less than everyone assumes. As Mr. Pascarella and Mr. Terenzini explain, the real differences exist at the departmental level, or within the classrooms of individual professors, who teach with a great deal of autonomy under the principles of academic freedom. The illusory university pretends that all professors are guided by a shared sense of educational excellence specific to their institution. In truth, as the former University of California president Clark Kerr observed long ago, professors are “a series of individual faculty entrepreneurs held together by a common grievance over parking.”

The problem for students is that it is all but impossible to know ahead of time which part of the disunified university is which. Consumers of higher education have been taught that their main choice lies between whole institutions that are qualitatively different from one another. Because this is wrong, the higher education market often fails, which is probably one reason that a third of students who enroll in four-year colleges transfer or drop out within three years.

The whole apparatus of selective college admissions is designed to deliberately confuse things that exist with things that don't. Many of the most prestigious colleges are an order of magnitude wealthier and more selective than the typical university. These are the primary factors driving their annual rankings at or near the top of the U.S. News list of “best” colleges. The implication is that the differences in the quality of education they provide are of a similar size. There is no evidence to suggest that this is remotely true.

When college leaders talk about academic standards, they often mean admissions standards, not standards for what happens in classrooms themselves. Or they vaguely appeal to traditions and shared values without any hard evidence of their meaning. This is understandable, because the alternative is admitting that many selective institutions are not intrinsically excellent; they were just lucky enough to get into the business of selecting the best and brightest before everyone else.

Because universities aren't as they appear, systems designed to improve them tend to fail. Consumer protection in higher education is accomplished primarily through accreditation, in which colleges, through nonprofit agencies, are examined by members of other colleges who certify that they meet minimum standards of quality.

In other words, accreditors are charged with an impossible task: to certify that a whole college, which doesn't really exist, educationally speaking, is educationally sound. Inevitably, many colleges with full accreditation nonetheless graduate students with substandard skills. All of the for-profit colleges that have made headlines in recent years for predatory and fraudulent practices were accredited. So is, needless to say, U.N.C. Chapel Hill.

This kind of profound dissonance can knock askew the moral compasses of people who have ostensibly dedicated their professional lives to education. How else to explain the many people at Chapel Hill — including, incredibly, the director of a center on ethics — who abetted or ignored rampant fraud? More broadly, it degrades the quality of education students receive in a time when learning is more important than ever.

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