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Cote, James E. and Allahar, Anton L. (2007). *Ivory Tower Blues: A University System in Crisis.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press

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Reviewed by Mark Oromaner

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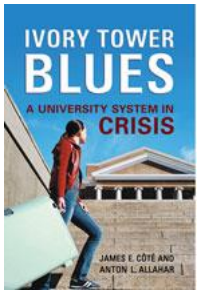
Sociologists often pride themselves on their ability to debunk conventional wisdom, the world taken for granted, or the official line. Thus, the emphasis on the underside of society, the informal, unanticipated consequences, contradictions, and dysfunctions. In *Ivory Tower Blues*, James E. Cote and Anton L. Allahar, sociologists at the University of Western Ontario, take on the Canadian higher education system. For instance, they state,"… the optimism that higher education will be the panacea for Canada's labour force challenges, especially among the young, has been somewhat exaggerated. At one level, this book is an expose of that overstated optimism, as it has affected professors, students, and their parents, and those in charge of the system - administrators and policymakers" (pp. 6 – 7). Sizable proportions of each group, especially students, their parents, and professors have reasons for singing the blues. Cote and Allahar wish to compensate for what they consider the "one-sided" positive coverage that claims that all is well in the university system. Unfortunately, for political and ideological reasons, some critics of the university system will forget about the "one-sided" nature of *Ivory Tower Blues* and use this work to portray the full picture of that system. From the perspective of U. S. higher education, issues of credentialism, social promotion, underprepared and disengaged students, grade inflation, disengaged professors, rising costs, affirmative action, and political correctness are widely discussed in the popular and professional literature. For instance, Cote and Allahar point out that they could have written a book on grade inflation based solely on the contents of various issues of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (p. 159).



The authors would like to inform the various audiences in order to involve them in a public debate concerning "…the interrelated problems of poor preparation, grade inflation and academic disengagement, and general underemployment" (p. 13). It is likely that almost all readers of this review are quite well informed about these problems and, therefore, are not target readers of the book. I also doubt that students and parents are likely to read the book on their own and, if they are aware of it, they may not be interested in the perspective of other stakeholders. However, each of the five chapters is self-contained and may be read alone or in conjunction with other chapters.

Unfortunately, this leads to much repetition and lessens the smooth reading of the book for those who read it in its entirety.

The frequent reference to U.S. data requires something to be said about the comparative nature of the Canadian and U.S. systems. Given the close social, cultural, economic, and historical similarities between the two societies as well as the quite similar evolution of their higher education systems, "… in principle there is nothing wrong with cautious and informed generalizations between the two countries on matters related to their institutions of higher education" (p. 189). The data presented certainly make this a reasonable position. One difference is the existence of a large number of prominent private universities in the U.S. Thus, in terms of financial support, Canadian universities are most similar to state universities. It would have been interesting to see comparisons of Canadian schools with private and public schools in the U.S. As an ironic aside, Cote and Allahar point out that the private schools (e.g., Ivy League) seem to have the greatest difficulties with one of the central issues for them, grade inflation.

James E. Cote (left) & Anton L. Allahar

The five chapters are:

One - " Troubles in Paradise." Sets the framework for the book (see above). To give some indication of the magnitude of the crisis Cote and Allahar argue that students can be grouped into three categories: fully engaged who do the full amount of work professors expect of them (10%), partially engaged who do less than what is expected but enough to get by (40%), and disengaged who do the minimal required to play the system or do nothing (40-50%). Given these percentages, the traditional mission of providing a foundation for lifelong intellectual inquiry "… is given a back seat to other social agendas, demoralizing those who attempt to hold on to the old ideals" (p. 55).

Two - "The Professor as Reluctant Gatekeeper." This is quite a bleak view of professors. They are employees of organizations that are increasingly based on business models ("edubusiness") and are called upon to weed-out, cool-out, and sort-out students. One can imagine that individuals educated as scholars, researchers, and teachers will be reluctant to take on these tasks. We are told that teachers bow to pressures of political correctness, and challenges from administrators, parents, and students, and "… avoid confrontation, and engage in 'social passing' that was once the purview of primary schools (also thereby passing the buck)"(p. 116).

Three - "The Student as a Reluctant Intellectual." It is odd for us to think of undergraduate students as "intellectuals." It seems that Cote and Allahar employ this term to refer to the type of fully-engaged liberal arts student they would prefer. In reality they are faced with a large segment of underprepared and disengaged students. As a result of grade inflation and social promotion at secondary levels and the belief that university education is superior to all other job preparation these students are funneled into the university system. That system and it stakeholders have made

adjustments to the reality of these students. e. g., grade inflation, remedial courses, watered-down texts and courses.

Four - “Parents as Investors and Managers: The Bank of Mom and Dad (BMD).” Parents must become better well-informed about ways in which they can invest in order to provide necessary financial assistance to their children. With increasing tuition and associated costs and decreasing government grants, this is a major concern particularly for middle and low income families. While I was reading this book the October 26, 2007 issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, carried a lead article titled, “Consultants Help Families Pay Less for College.” In addition to gaining financial advice, parents are given the reasonable suggestions to prepare their children to handle themselves in an independent and mature manner and to discuss their children’s long-term motives and plans. What about parents who lack the cultural capital to engage in such activities in a meaningful manner?

Five - “Policy Implications: So What Is University Good For? What Is Added beyond Alternatives?” The policy recommendations range from greater public accessibility to a full array of outcomes data to providing more accurate information concerning the return on investment in higher education to disadvantaged families to providing more structure to the “soft” sorting systems in the U.S. and Canada. They conclude with a plea for the liberal arts as distinguished from training and vocational education.

Cote and Allahar have employed a well-established sociological tradition, debunking. And, with the exception of redundancies, *Ivory Tower Blues*is well-written with numerous interesting tales based on their experiences, the experiences of colleagues, and the literature. In addition, the book cites some limited original and existing data. Finally, there is an eleven page methodology-lite appendix for readers who wish to pursue a number of issues including grade inflation in particular. Unfortunately, I doubt that the book form is the appropriate medium for the authors to achieve their goal.. Cote and Allahar can do better through the use of mass- and quasi-mass media aimed at the general public and various stakeholder groups. In the end readers are likely to be disappointed by the lack of significant change recommendations beyond the call for more awareness and the strengthening of liberal arts. Cote and Allahar have faith in the belief that in a democratic society knowledge will lead to change. At the same time they point out that the causes of the current ivory tower blues “ultimately lie with the wider society” (p. 187). Rather than an internal analysis of the university system we need an analysis of the connections between that system and the larger political, economic, and cultural systems.

About the Reviewer

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Before his retirement Mark Oromaner served in a number of administrative/executive positions at Hudson County Community College, NJ. Prior to that he taught sociology at Hunter College, CUNY and at Jersey City State College. He served on the editorial boards of a number of journals in sociology and higher education and continues to serve on the board of *The Journal of Applied Research in the Community College* . His current work will appear in *The American Sociologist* .