



Jankowski, N. A., & Marshall, D. W. (2017). *Degrees that matter. Moving higher education to a learning systems paradigm*. London: Stylus Publishing.

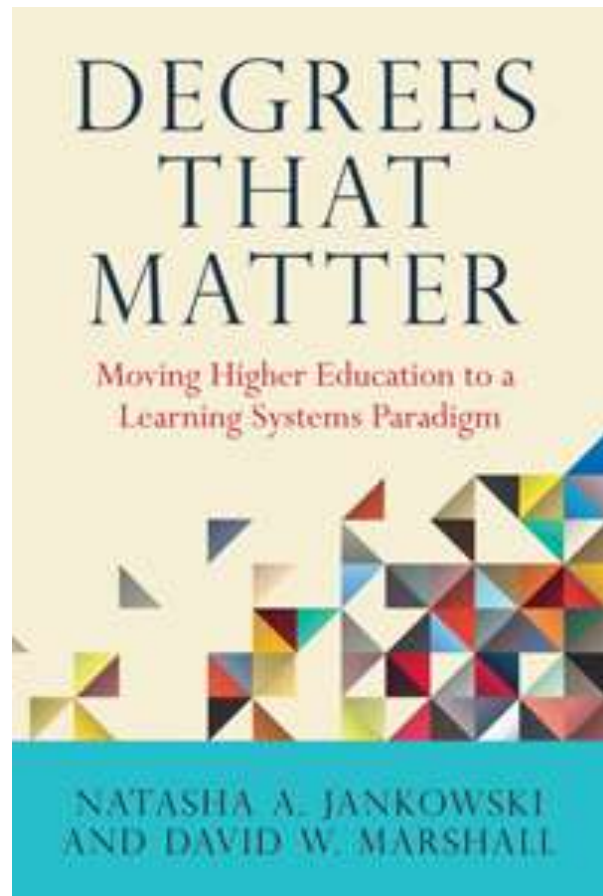
Pp. 216

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That there is a crisis in higher education is widely believed. The consensus breaks down, however, when it comes to agreeing on exactly what the crisis is, what its causes are, and – most important – what is to be done. Indeed, the disagreement is more fundamental since it touches on the principal purpose of higher education. As Jankowski and Marshall note at the outset of their most informative volume, *Degrees That Matter*, there are three main candidates for that purpose: Preparation for employment, development of engaged citizens, or personal fulfillment. The authors also identify three contributors to the air of crisis: Increasing costs that reflect, in part, declining government support and contribute to reduced access; poor completion rates; and doubts concerning the extent and depth of learning signaled by the four-year degree.

The authors, wisely I believe, sidestep much of the controversy regarding purpose by focusing instead on how colleges can do a better job of enhancing students' learning experiences so that – whatever their goals – they graduate with a proper foundation on which to build their adult lives. By focusing on the “how” question, rather than the “what”



question, they challenge the higher education community to rethink the prevailing, and somewhat shopworn, paradigms regarding content, pedagogy, and assessment (at both the course and disciplinary major levels). They also offer an alternative paradigm that they term the learning systems paradigm. In the authors' words,

[The volume makes] ... a philosophical argument for a framework that can structure and guide the work of educators in building learning environments and experiences that better foster student learning by recognizing that learning happens both inside and outside classrooms or their virtual equivalents. (p. 129)

The learning systems paradigm (LSP) is intended to serve as such a framework. Most of the book is devoted to explicating the paradigm, explaining how it can be implemented in different settings, illustrated by a variety of examples, and discussing the very real obstacles to successful implementation and how they can be addressed. The authors stress that the LSP provides a high-level structure that must be thoughtfully adapted to local contexts and purposes. One implication of the necessity of local interpretation and development is that LSP does not offer a quick fix. A second is that there is a greater chance for meaningful faculty buy-in and sustained implementation.

Both authors are associated with the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA). Through NILOA they have played key roles in the development of the LSP. As they explain, the LSP emerged, in large part, from their earlier involvement with two NILOA initiatives: the Degree Qualifications Project (DQP), and the Tuning Project. Examples are drawn from their experiences working with a wide range of institutions, consortia, and disciplinary bodies. Consequently, this work should resonate with

faculty and administrators across a broad swath of higher education.

The DQP and the Tuning projects, both funded by the Lumina Foundation, are complementary initiatives. The former is a multi-year effort to define at a high level the learning expectations for five core areas of learning (pp. 7-9). Institutions and disciplinary associations are invited to use the DQP document as a starting point for specifying the learning expectations for the domains in their purview. By contrast, Tuning focuses on the faculty. It demands that they "... define the essential learning within specific disciplines through collaborative processes" (p. 10). The end result is a set of learning outcomes at each degree level. Ideally, faculty participation in the process leads to greater curricular coherence within the major, as well as a more integrative perspective on how the general education offerings and those in the major can better complement each other.

Throughout the volume, the authors stress the importance of adopting a student-centered approach to curriculum and assessment. Such an approach comprises multiple strands. One is to design course sequences in the disciplines so that each one builds productively on the skills developed in earlier ones or in general education courses. A second is the need to communicate clearly to students both the intentionality in course design and the learning goals of each course or course sequence. Another is strengthening the alignment between curricular and co-curricular activities so that there is a productive synergy from the point of view of the student. The ultimate goal is to enhance what students glean from their experiences in and beyond the classroom. Presumably, an auxiliary benefit is greater student engagement, which research suggests is also associated with higher retention rates and greater learning (Kuh, 2003).

Jankowski and Marshall do not minimize the challenge to faculty and other

professionals in implementing the learning systems paradigm. Indeed, Chapter 6 is devoted to this issue. For many on campus, the LSP represents a sea change from “business as usual,” with its focus on engaging with a wide range of stakeholders (not only colleagues across the institution, but also students and the public) in delineating learning goals and how they can be achieved. Strongly held beliefs about faculty autonomy, as well as concerns about top-down mandates leading to standardization and homogenization, must be confronted and dealt with respectfully. That nearly 900 institutions have participated to some degree in one or other of these processes gives hope that we may soon reach a tipping point where not engaging meaningfully in this sort of institutional improvement will be regarded as a dereliction of duty. At the same time it is important to acknowledge the many formidable difficulties (Banta & Blaich, 2011; Ewell, 2016).

Although Chapter 2 is devoted to a survey of the landscape of higher education initiatives, I find it curious that there is no mention of the many assessment-related initiatives funded by the Teagle Foundation nor, in particular, the rich research legacy of the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education (WNSLAE). A focus of the foundation has been to explore how redesigned assessment practices could both strengthen the major and contribute to liberal education outcomes (Liberal Education, 2009). To this end, over many years, it has funded consortia of liberal arts colleges to explore strategies for strengthening the role of assessment in both pedagogy and program

evaluation. Research based on the WNSLAE has shown, among other things, how to evaluate rigorously the impact of educational interventions or programs (Pascarella & Blaich, 2013). Unfortunately, such high quality studies are rare in higher education.

In fact, Chapter 5 of the present volume treats the issue of assessment design and its critical role in supporting and extending student learning in the context of the paradigm. As someone immersed in the world of assessment and measurement for more than 35 years, I applaud this emphasis. At the same time, designing educationally powerful assessments, developing the capacity to evaluate student responses accurately and reliably, and providing useful feedback are very challenging goals. Although any improvements in this regard are to be welcomed, how are the faculty participants, not to mention other interested parties, to know whether they are truly on track? What sort of external benchmarks or comparisons could be employed to make such judgments? Indeed, how can institutions – either singly or collectively – rigorously evaluate their success? Evaluations of educational interventions at the college level are notoriously weak methodologically, with only a few notable exceptions (Pascarella et al., 2013; Siefert et al., 2008). This is an area that deserves greater attention from LSP proponents if they are to make their case to funders, skeptics, and critics. That said, *Degrees that Matter* represents an important and very readable contribution to the cause of making higher education work for all, not just for some.

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