Kirp, D. (2019). *The college dropout scandal.* Oxford University Press.
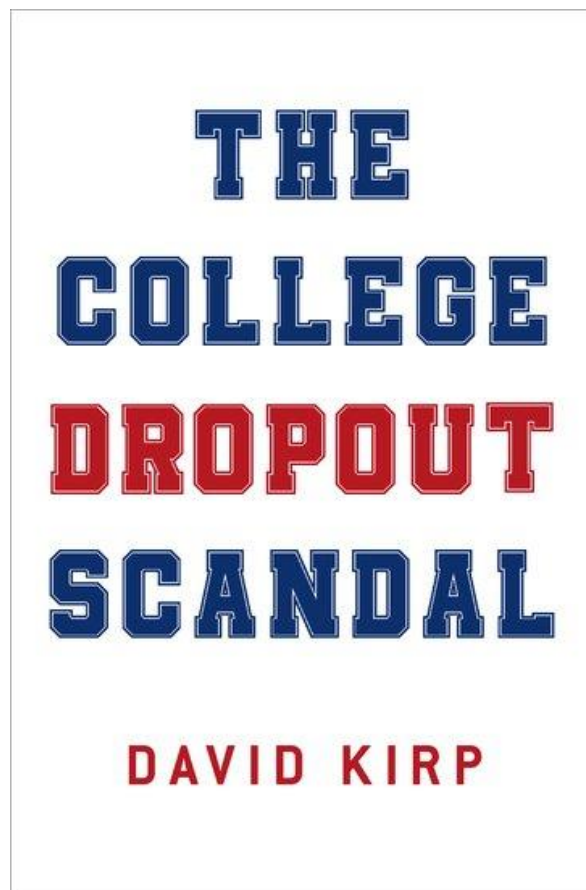
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David Kirp's book is a highly readable introduction to the structural problems facing contemporary institutions of higher education. One of these problems, and the "scandal" that Kirp refers to, is student attrition rates, the percentage of students who leave institutions of higher education without a degree. The work, which includes an introduction and eight chapters, reviews current research and statistics about students who "drop out," whom Kirp defines as those who do not finish a bachelor's degree within six years of enrollment. He then provides case studies of several institutions: Georgia State University (Chapter 2); City University of New York (CUNY) and Rutgers University-Newark (Chapter 3); University of Central Florida (UCF) and Valencia College (Chapter 4); the University of Texas at Austin (Chapter 5); Long Beach State (Chapter 6); Amherst College (Chapter 7). These institutions have made significant inroads into reducing student "dropout" rates by increasing student degree completion rates.

In each chapter, Kirp summarizes the institutional context, profiles at least one campus leader who worked to decrease

"dropout" rates and increase retention rates, and shares that campus strategies for success. What is common to all institutions is their focus on the small, often cost-effective programmatic and psychological interventions that promote student graduation. In these interventions, the colleges and universities reconceptualize student graduation as a whole-institution initiative. Student success is the responsibility of not only students, but also faculty, and staff members. Kirp argues that this change of perspective is a crucial element of efforts to increase graduation rates. In Chapters 5, 6, and 7, for example, Kirp discusses how the relatively inexpensive implementation of belonging and growth mindset interventions, in which students are told that they belong and that academic issues are temporary setbacks that create the opportunity for learning, have led to student success at UT Austin, Long Beach State, and Amherst College. Although these interventions might cost money by increasing the grant and scholarship aid available to low- and middle-income students, as they did at Amherst College, changing faculty and staff mindsets does not necessarily require additional funding.

Other, more high-investment programs can also contribute to improved graduation rates. In Chapter 3, Kirp documents the success of CUNY's wraparound (inside and outside of the classroom), expensive but successful Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP). The programs provide tuition, fees, public transit passes, and books for students who qualify for the program and allow students to focus more closely on their studies. In his discussion of Georgia State (Chapter 2), Kirp emphasizes the importance of small grants that provide students with the funding needed to finish the last few courses required for their degree. Georgia State's program also illustrates how data analytics can predict the impact of student grades in a particular course on future academic outcomes and help target interventions to improve those

outcomes. These interventions do require capital, but they are also effective methods of promoting student success. With these examples, Kirp argues that student graduation can and should be reframed as a structural and institutional hurdle rather than solely an individual responsibility. The book concludes with a discussion of leadership in higher education and strategies that might inspire other colleges to alter their programming and structures related to student success.

The strengths of this book include its accessibility and its focus on advising staff in higher education. Structures matter when institutions work toward student success. While Kirp often comments on the large-scale organizational shifts required to change campus cultures and improve graduation rates, he repeatedly emphasizes in his case studies that the featured institutions prioritize individual interactions between staff and students to support student success. He recognizes that there is more to the higher education experience than what happens in the classroom. Further, he acknowledges the role that staff members who interact with students on a daily basis play in student success.

Another strength of the book is its holistic understanding of the complex entity that is American higher education. Though the book offers ideas for changing higher education and improving student retention, Kirp acknowledges that there is no single magic bullet to improve retention. He depicts in detail the institutional shifts in teaching, staff and student interactions, and financial aid that can lead to a better higher education system. When discussing important theoretical contributions to combatting student attrition in higher education, such as Claude Steele's (1995) research on stereotype threat, David Yeager's (2011) work on belonging, Carol Dweck's (2000) insights into growth mindset, and Vincent Tinto's (1994) student retention model, Kirp usually interviews these authors rather than solely summarizing their research,

a technique I found effective in explaining their theories.

Some areas of the book could have used more attention, however. First, I find the term "dropout" a bit misleading and alarmist. Kirp considers students "dropouts" if they have not received a bachelor's degree within six years of entering higher education. This assumption does not match the financial realities of the current college population. Particularly at community colleges, students frequently enroll part-time in a few courses a semester to make progress toward their degree. Due to other obligations such as work, family caretaking, or emergency situations, they do not enroll full-time and, hence, take longer to complete degrees. Moreover, students may start higher education seeking a four-year degree, but realize that completing a certificate credential or a few courses better suits their needs. Today's college students often "stop-out" by taking a semester off from school but plan to return; these students are again considered "dropouts" by Kirp's definition. Kirp valorizes the benefits of enrolling in school full-time, which does predict degree completion. He does not, however, acknowledge the link between wealth and degree completion; only wealthier students can afford to enroll full-time and focus solely on schoolwork. More economically privileged students are more likely to complete college. I would have appreciated more attention to the other influences that take student attention away from their college studies.

Second, Kirp's conception of change in higher education, as depicted in these case studies, assumes that a bold leader is necessary to create the kinds of program depicted in the book. These bold leaders, according to Kirp, are not afraid to stand up to faculty and higher-level administrators to disrupt the status quo and advocate for the needs of students. A typical example of this conception is found in the discussion of David Laude at my institution, UT Austin (Chapter 5). In this

example, Kirp depicts Laude's efforts to create course- and structural-level initiatives to increase graduation rates as one in which "Laude had to convince skeptical, sometimes hostile, professors and administrators to embrace a new way of thinking about undergraduate education" (p. 90). To make these initiatives successful, Laude relied on the "forceful backing" of Bill Powers, UT Austin's then-president, who took on this task "against the advice of some graybeards, who warned him that curriculum reform was the graveyard of presidents" (p. 90), and made undergraduate curricular change "his legacy issue" (p. 91). Kirp portrays this approach approvingly.

Kirp sees this pattern of bold changes and overcoming campus resistance recurring in each of the case study chapters: typically, a male leader, armed with both data and a vision, struggles against overwhelming odds to achieve success. I find this leadership model simplistic and unduly dismissive of both faculty and administrators in higher education. It is difficult to assume that all faculty and administrators are so stubborn and resistant to change that they willfully ignore what Kirp presents as an obvious best practice. Gender identity and how that identity interacts with leadership is also rarely mentioned in this book, with the possible exception of the efforts of President Biddy Martin at Amherst. A more nuanced account of leadership and coalition-building beyond what historians might term the "Great Man" theory of leadership would have improved Kirp's argument.

I found little in this book surprising, but it would be nonetheless a worthwhile read for a general audience or those new to the field. The writing is very clear and a pleasure to read. I especially appreciated the attention to the small campus changes that improve student retention that focus on keeping students connected to the institution, like Georgia State's hiring of advisors even during the

Great Recession or CUNY's programs that encourage students to talk with advisors about their out-of-class experiences that could impact their academic course behavior. Kirp makes the proposed changes to help students seem both logical and affordable to cash-strapped institutions. While I would have wanted to see more nuance in the term "dropout" and in the description of campus leadership behaviors, this book still provides a cogent summary of procedures that can increase student retention. A future book could focus on a longitudinal study of these campuses, investigating how these interventions have eventually succeeded or failed.

About the Reviewer

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