

Education Review

Reseñas Educativas



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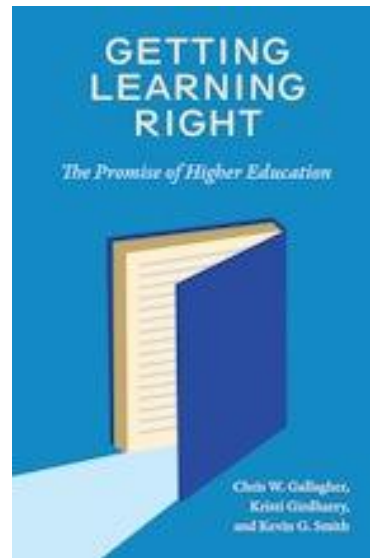
Gallagher, C. W., Girdharry, K., & Smith, K. G. (2026).
Getting learning right: The promise of higher education.
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Every few weeks, another headline registers the mounting panic of the higher education "enrollment cliff," prompting yet another round of administrative retrenchment or defensive rebranding. In this climate, public skepticism regarding the return on investment for a college degree has reached a fever pitch. Confronted with the rise of generative artificial intelligence, rapid datafication, and a volatile job market, institutions are scrambling to justify their existence. It is precisely in this anxious landscape that **Gallagher, Girdharry, and Smith** offer *Getting Learning Right*. They present the work not as a defensive apologia for the status quo, but as a pragmatic, human-centered guide for structural transformation.



The authors are uniquely equipped to tackle this diagnostic task. As longtime college professors and administrators, they bring both scholarly rigor and practitioner pragmatism to the page. Chris W. Gallagher, formerly an associate dean and later vice provost for curriculum innovation at Northeastern University, has long written on integrative education. He is joined by co-authors Kristi Girdharry, Associate Teaching Professor and Director of the Writing Center at Babson College, and Kevin G. Smith, Associate Professor, General Faculty and Director of Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) at the University of Virginia. Girdharry and Smith both completed their PhDs at Northeastern University, where they initially collaborated as researchers on the multiyear longitudinal study that anchors this volume. Together, they leverage their experiences inside Northeastern's College of Social Sciences and Humanities (CSSH), an institution that has undergone a rapid transformation from a local commuter school to a global research powerhouse over the past two decades, to anchor their theoretical frameworks in the concrete, messy realities of student lives.

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Structured with deliberate focus, the book consists of an introduction, six thematic chapters, and a speculative afterword. The core engine of the text is a longitudinal study of 20 Northeastern students, tracking their perceptions of writing, global learning, and cooperative education ("co-ops") over their entire undergraduate careers. The methodology is highly transparent and admirably inclusive: the cohort is demographically diverse, representing 10 students of color, 8 international students, and 17 native languages. Each chapter follows a deliberate structure: an introduction, a deep dive into two central learning concepts grounded in student voices, "snapshots" of three external institutions enacting these concepts, and a closing suite of reflective questions meant to bridge theory and local design.

These chapters trace the dimensions of learning: why, where, how, with whom, and when students learn. Chapter 1 addresses why and how through motivation and experiential learning, looking beyond the reductionist "job preparation" narrative to explore how students cultivate a search for "impact" and "meaning". To demonstrate that these principles transcend Northeastern's unique context, the authors highlight external programs, such as Richard J. Light's interviewing work at Harvard, the Ohio Focus Group Project, and the Meaningful Writing Project.

Subsequent chapters explore where students learn by examining "learning climate" and place-based education in Chapter 2. Here, Grabill, Hart-Davidson, and McLeod's digital platform, Eli Review, is highlighted as a model for creating formative, interactive online spaces. The authors then tease out how students learn with others in Chapter 3, focusing on collaborative and project-based learning through the illustrative models of Boston College's Complex Problems curriculum, Georgia Tech's Vertically Integrated Projects, and Plymouth State's radical "Cluster Learning Model".

Chapter 4 shifts to who students learn with, utilizing Deborah Brandt's concept of "sponsors of learning" to complicate traditional, unidirectional notions of mentorship, alongside Etienne Wenger's "communities of practice". The institutional snapshots here, ranging from Bunker Hill Community College's LifeMap program to the University of Manitoba's culturally humble "Working in Good Ways" framework, are instructive models of support and opportunity. Chapter 5 investigates when students learn, offering "bridges and ladders" for learning transfer and integration, and highlighting the open or flexible curricula of Hillsborough Community College, Brown University, and the University of Rochester. Finally, Chapter 6 unites these dimensions by looking at "Students as Partners" (SaP) and self-directed learning, showcasing the long-running student partnership models at Bryn Mawr, Haverford, Vassar, and Emmanuel College.

It is in their treatment of power and positionality that the authors show their true analytical strength. They refuse to romanticize student experiences, instead exposing the quiet, pervasive inequities embedded within institutional systems. For example, they critically interrogate high-impact practices (HiPs), demonstrating that without learning-grounded intentionality, activities like

study abroad can degenerate into miseducative exercises that tax local communities and reinforce stereotypes.

Even more compelling is their critical dissection of the co-op workplace. While students generally celebrate co-ops, the authors disclose a more complicated transaction: students are often recruited into corporate worldviews that incentivize compliance and loyalty. In a sharp analysis of "ghostwriting," in which students write social media posts, corporate proposals, or correspondence for politicians under another's name, they ask a crucial ethical question: What is the emotional and practical fallout when a young, undercompensated female student is asked to bear the "ideological freight" of speaking for a CEO without receiving credit? By highlighting how writing is regulated, disciplined, or withheld, they force us to confront the power asymmetries of learning sponsorship.

True to their identity as "scholarly educators," Gallagher, Girdhar, and Smith prioritize practical application over dry, abstract theorizing. They provide tools that are meant to be disassembled and implemented. The end-of-chapter questions are not mere comprehension checks; they are invitations to collective, localized inquiry. For instance, the questions in Chapter 6 prompt us to consider how our own institutions recruit, prepare, and support students in partnership roles, challenging us to treat students as "makers" rather than passive consumers.

This practitioner-focused utility relates beautifully to other seminal pedagogical texts. While Ken Bain's *Super Courses* (2020) brilliantly illustrates how to cultivate self-directed learning at the micro-level of individual courses, *Getting Learning Right* operates at the macro-level. It provides a road map for how a whole institution, spanning from registrar offices and budgeting to student affairs, can align itself toward a unified, learning-grounded "North Star."

However, a review of this work must also grapple with the structural limitations of its primary site of study. Northeastern University is an elite, highly selective, R1 institution with a singular, historic co-op infrastructure that has been developed over more than a century. For small, under-resourced, or historically open-access institutions, the Northeastern model may seem impossibly far out of reach. Although the authors attempt to mitigate this by highlighting community colleges like Bunker Hill and Hillsborough, the cavernous gap between a private university with an acceptance rate in the single digits and a cash-strapped state university facing retrenchment remains under-addressed. And for good reason. It is difficult to scale high-stakes experiential learning without massive capital.

This institutional gap, however, raises a second concern: how do we maintain the "emotional and practical fallout" of rigid curricular structures (such as student Sophia being stymied by administrative boundaries when trying to pursue three minors), they do not fully resolve how institutions can maintain these high-effort, collaborative models when the faculty workforce itself is in a state of structural crisis. How can we sustain "Students as

Partners" (SaP) initiatives when academic labor is increasingly defined by a precarious, overworked "precariat"? Drawing on Adrianna Kezar and Daniel Maxey's *Adapting by Design* (2015), the authors acknowledge that the systemic reliance on contingent, non-tenure-track faculty, who now comprise the vast majority of instructional staff in American higher education, threatens the very foundation of institutional learning.

This precarity compromises the exact relational model required for deep, transformative education. Genuine pedagogical partnerships and relational mentoring are not transactional; they require significant time, emotional labor, and existential stability. For an adjunct or contingent instructor scrambling between multiple campuses with semester-by-semester contracts and sub-living wages, the slow, deliberate work of co-creation with students is a structural luxury. When faculty are forced into survival mode, their interactions with students inevitably skew toward the transactional, disrupting the very "continuity" and "interaction" that John Dewey (1938) identified as foundational to educative experiences.

This relational vulnerability also extends far beyond the classroom walls. Sustaining partnerships across university, local, national, and global contexts requires long-term, trust-based relationships. Whether co-designing community-engaged initiatives, managing international co-ops, or maintaining ongoing collaborations with local civic organizations, continuity of personnel is the currency of trust. When the faculty members who brokered these external connections are transient and undervalued, the institutional bridges collapse. In their place, we are left with short-lived, transactional projects that risk exploiting external partners and students alike, eventually degenerating into the very "technological Hail Marys" and superficial innovations that the authors' introduction so sharply critiques.

Getting Learning Right is a timely, urgent, and highly accessible volume that transcends its academic apparatus. It is an essential read for higher education administrators who must find a sustainable, ethical alternative to passive retrenchment. It is equally valuable for faculty looking to transition from mere "purveyors of information" to active facilitators of self-directed student inquiry. By listening closely to their students, Gallagher, Girdharry, and Smith have reminded us of higher education's true democratic promise: to cultivate individuals who are contextually agile, culturally humble, and prepared to collaborate on the "wicked problems" of our shared world.

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About the Reviewer



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About the Book Authors

Chris W. Gallagher is author or co-author of five books and many articles in writing studies and education journals. His PhD in Writing, Teaching, and Criticism, from State University of New York at Albany was awarded in 1998. Gallagher has held numerous administrative positions at Northeastern University, including Writing Program director; Associate Dean of Teaching, Learning and Experiential education in the College of Social Sciences and Humanities; Vice Provost for Curriculum Innovation; and Vice Chancellor for Global Learning Opportunities.



Kristi Girdharry is Associate Teaching Professor of English and Director of the Writing Center at Babson College where she co-leads The Generator, Babson's interdisciplinary AI lab. In addition to supporting faculty and students on their generative AI journey, The Generator has been recognized through receiving a 2026 NERCOMP Distinguished Team Award and being featured in

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