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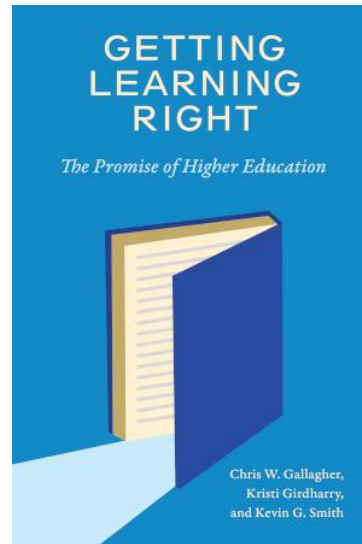
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What if the University Learned Again?

Higher education in the United States is experiencing a profound crisis of legitimacy. Public confidence in colleges and universities has declined amid increasing political polarization, concerns about affordability, questions regarding institutional value, and uncertainty about the future of work in the context of artificial intelligence. At the same time, universities face internal challenges, including student mental health crises, demographic changes, financial pressures, and growing demands to demonstrate their social relevance. In this context of disruption, *Getting Learning Right* by **Chris Gallagher, Kristi Girdharry**, and Kevin Smith presents a timely argument: the future of higher education depends not on adapting superficially to external pressures, but on recovering its fundamental purpose—creating meaningful learning experiences.



The authors propose that institutions of higher education must become what they call “learning-grounded” institutions: organizations in which decisions, structures, and practices are guided by a deep understanding of how students learn. Rather than defining innovation through technological adoption, administrative efficiency, or market responsiveness, the book argues that universities should place learning itself at the center of their mission. As the authors state, “Getting learning right is our key challenge and primary responsibility in the tumultuous years ahead” (p. 3). Their proposal is both a diagnosis of current institutional failures and a practical invitation for administrators, faculty, and staff to rethink how universities organize themselves.

The central contribution of *Getting Learning Right* lies in shifting debates about higher education from questions of survival and competition toward educational purpose. Drawing on research on experiential learning and

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institutional transformation, the book argues that universities must move beyond models organized around teaching and faculty prerogatives toward environments centered on students' learning experiences.

The Diagnosis: A University Organized around Teaching rather than Learning

The starting point of *Getting Learning Right* is a fundamental institutional contradiction: although universities frequently declare that student learning is their primary mission, their everyday structures and practices often reflect different priorities. The authors argue that "at present, most IHEs are designed around teaching and the prerogatives of faculty, not learning and the experiences of students" (p. 4). This distinction is central to the book's argument. The problem is not that universities lack commitment to education, but rather that their organizational arrangements frequently make meaningful learning difficult to achieve.

One of the authors' main criticisms concerns the persistence of an instructional model based on the transmission of information. In this model, teaching becomes associated with the delivery of content, while learning is treated as an expected outcome that occurs automatically. The authors challenge this assumption by arguing that learning requires intentional design, reflection, engagement, and connection between different experiences. Consequently, many institutional reforms fail because they focus on improving delivery mechanisms rather than examining how students actually construct knowledge.

This critique becomes particularly relevant in discussions about technological innovation and artificial intelligence. The authors warn that universities often embrace new technologies without first establishing a clear understanding of learning. Innovation, when detached from educational purposes, risks becoming merely an institutional response to external pressures. As they observe, "Making 'innovation' the noun and 'learning' the adjective risks... putting the stress on the shiny new things and losing sight of learning itself" (p. 7). From this perspective, artificial intelligence is neither inherently transformative nor threatening; its educational value depends on whether it is incorporated into environments genuinely grounded in learning.

The authors also identify broader institutional tensions affecting students and faculty. Students are often reduced to consumers or credential seekers, while their complex experiences, including economic insecurity and mental health challenges, are overlooked. Faculty members, meanwhile, work within systems that frequently undervalue teaching in comparison with research productivity.

Thus, the authors' diagnosis is not simply pedagogical but institutional. The challenge facing higher education is not only improving classroom practices but redesigning universities around a different organizing principle: learning as the central purpose that connects students, faculty, administration,

and society. The concept of the “learning-grounded” institution emerges as their proposed response to this challenge.

the Learning-Grounded Institution: Reimagining Higher Education Through Learning

The central proposal of *Getting Learning Right* is the creation of institutions that are “learning-grounded”—a concept that functions as the organizing framework of the entire book and builds on the literature on the learning paradigm and learning-centered institutions (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Tagg, 2003). For the authors, a learning-grounded institution is not simply one that offers effective courses or adopts innovative pedagogical techniques. Rather, it is an institution whose structures, policies, and relationships are informed by a comprehensive understanding of how learning occurs. This requires moving beyond isolated educational initiatives and embedding learning as the principle that guides institutional decision-making.

A key dimension of this approach is experiential learning. Drawing on Dewey’s (1938) conception of experience and its later systematization by Kolb (1984), the authors reject the idea that experience is merely an additional activity outside formal education. Instead, experience, reflection, and inquiry constitute the foundations of learning itself (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984).

Closely related to this idea are the concepts of transfer and integration of learning. The authors argue that higher education should not be understood as the accumulation of disconnected courses and credits. Learning becomes significant when students are able to apply knowledge in new contexts and synthesize different experiences into broader understandings. Transfer involves using previous learning in new situations, while integration involves creating new insights by connecting multiple forms of knowledge over time. Together, these processes allow students to develop intellectual flexibility and construct coherent narratives about their own learning journeys.

The concept of learning sponsors, adapted from Deborah Brandt’s “sponsors of literacy,” highlights that learning is shaped by relationships that provide opportunities but may also regulate or constrain access.

Finally, the authors propose that students should become active partners rather than passive recipients of institutional decisions. The framework of students as partners challenges traditional approaches in which student participation is limited to course evaluations or satisfaction surveys. Instead, students may act as informants, consultants, collaborators, and co-creators of learning experiences. This participatory model reflects the book’s broader argument: institutions cannot become genuinely centered on learning without recognizing students as knowledgeable participants in the educational process.

Together, these concepts provide a coherent alternative vision of higher education. Rather than defining institutional success primarily through graduation rates, rankings, or economic outcomes, *Getting Learning Right*

proposes a model in which the quality of learning experiences becomes the central measure of institutional purpose.

Listening to Students: Evidence and Methodological Contribution

One of the most significant contributions of *Getting Learning Right* is its methodological commitment to placing students' experiences at the center of institutional reflection. Rather than relying exclusively on administrative indicators, surveys of satisfaction, or institutional performance metrics, the authors argue that universities must listen carefully to how students understand and describe their own learning processes. This principle is not merely rhetorical; it structures the empirical foundation of the book through a longitudinal qualitative study conducted with Northeastern University students throughout their undergraduate experiences.

The value of this approach lies in treating students not simply as recipients of education, but as sources of knowledge about learning itself. Their narratives illustrate how meaningful learning emerges through the interaction of academic experiences, professional activities, mentors, communities, and personal challenges.

This methodological orientation supports one of the authors' strongest arguments: institutional transformation requires understanding learners' realities. As they state, "We cannot get learning right if we don't listen to what our learners have to say" (p. 35). It challenges reforms designed primarily through administrative strategies or technological solutions without considering students' experiences.

The emphasis on student voice is particularly valuable because it avoids reducing student success to measurable outcomes alone. Retention, completion rates, and employment indicators provide relevant information, but they cannot fully capture whether students develop the capacity to transfer knowledge, interpret experiences, collaborate, and continue learning beyond graduation.

Nevertheless, the reliance on qualitative institutional examples also raises questions about generalizability. The Northeastern study provides depth and complexity, but translating these insights into diverse institutional contexts remains a challenge. Universities differ significantly in resources, missions, student populations, and organizational cultures. Therefore, while the authors convincingly demonstrate why listening to students matters, the broader question is how institutions with different capacities can transform student narratives into sustainable structural change.

Critical Assessment

Despite the strength of its argument, *Getting Learning Right* also raises important questions about the structural conditions required for its implementation. The authors offer a persuasive vision of universities reorganized around learning, but the transition toward "learning-grounded" institutions may be more difficult than the book sometimes suggests. Higher education institutions do not operate in isolation; they are embedded in

systems of funding, accountability, competition, accreditation, and academic reward structures that frequently prioritize research productivity, enrollment growth, institutional reputation, and financial sustainability over the quality of student learning.

This tension is particularly relevant in relation to the book's proposal for a "new social compact" between higher education and society. The authors argue that universities should demonstrate their social relevance and educational impact in exchange for renewed public investment and support. This proposal is normatively compelling, especially in a context where universities face declining public trust. However, the book could have engaged more deeply with the political and economic forces that have contributed to this crisis, including the expansion of market-oriented models of governance and the pressures associated with academic capitalism (Cantwell & Kauppinen, 2014; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2009), including its effects in the Chilean higher education context (Carrasco-Jiménez, 2026b). If universities are increasingly required to function according to competitive market logics, the question remains how institutions can prioritize deep learning when many of their incentives reward other forms of performance.

Similarly, although the authors acknowledge institutional complexity, the challenge of scale deserves further attention. Many of the examples presented in the book demonstrate inspiring possibilities, but successful implementation may depend on resources, leadership capacity, and organizational flexibility that are not equally available across institutions. Small liberal arts colleges, selective universities, and well-funded institutions may have greater opportunities to redesign learning environments than large public universities facing financial constraints and significant numbers of underserved students. The central question is therefore not only whether learning-grounded institutions are desirable, but how such transformations can become possible under unequal institutional conditions.

These limitations, however, do not diminish the importance of the book's contribution. On the contrary, they reveal the significance of the questions it raises. At a moment when higher education debates are often dominated by economic return, technological disruption, and political conflict, *Getting Learning Right* restores attention to a more fundamental issue: the purpose of the university as a place where learning, intellectual development, and social contribution are cultivated. Its strongest achievement is offering a framework through which universities can critically examine their own practices.

By insisting that innovation must remain subordinate to learning, and that institutions cannot understand education without listening to students, Gallagher, Girdhar, and Smith provide an important intervention in contemporary higher education debates. Their vision represents a challenge to universities that have lost sight of their educational mission and an invitation to imagine higher education beyond credentialing, as a transformative environment for human development.

In a period marked by uncertainty, artificial intelligence, and declining public confidence, the question posed by *Getting Learning Right* is both simple and profound: if universities are to justify their future, what better foundation could they have than learning itself?

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About the Reviewer

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