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Nothing Less than Great: Reforming Canada's Universities

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BOOK REVIEW

NOTHING LESS THAN GREAT: REFORMING CANADA'S UNIVERSITIES

REVIEWED BY

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Weingarten, H. P. (2021). *Nothing Less than Great: Reforming Canada's Universities*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press. Pages: 232. Price: CDN 26.95 (paper).

The quickest way for a reader to grasp the message of this book is to know something about the author's background: a premier education at McGill and Yale, a professorship, deanship, and academic vice-presidency at McMaster, presidency at Calgary, and finally President of the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario. *Nothing Less Than Great*, then, is a clarion call based partly on extensive real-life, real-time experience, and partly on evidence drawn from several studies undertaken by HEQCO under his leadership.

The culmination of *Nothing Less Than Great* is nine recommendations for reform of Canadian university education. None is a surprise. None is truly new. What is novel and worthy of close reading is the assembly of the recommendations into a persuasive whole. Although Dr. Weingarten advances a case that Canadian higher education is generically different from American higher education—mainly due to the presence in the latter of an elite private non-for-profit sector—none of the recommendations is singularly Canadian, nor is the larger part of the literature cited in support of the recommendations. This does not necessarily distract from the basic message, and in final effect may strengthen efforts at reform by pointing to solutions in other jurisdictions. In fact, the book concludes with commendation of Crow and Dabars' *Designing the New American University* (2015), which is indeed a very similar companion to *Nothing Less Than Great*.

Dr. Weingarten organizes the recommendations into

four categories: efforts to increase public awareness of the condition and contributions of universities in Canada, system-wide reforms, curricular reforms, and equity of access. When Dr. Weingarten says "system" he means Canada-wide. This is not explained, nor would any recommendation lead, within Canadian federalism, to a such a fundamentally radical change from provincial to national. This is not to say that a Canada-wide higher educational policy might not offer benefits, but it is to say that the absence of an explanation leaves a big question hanging.

Whether nation-wide or provincial, the book's prism for "system" is binary: government, through funding and regulation, acts as a principal, and universities, either one by one or collectively, act as agents of public policy. Although higher education does not fit the usual economic definition of a public good, the book begins on a premise that it does, and some recommendations for reform refer to public awareness and information that will direct and inform institutional behaviour. In this respect Dr. Weingarten seems to envision, although not acknowledge, a Clark-like (1983) triangular relationship: government, institutions, and market broadly defined to include choices made by students, employers, and philanthropists.

Perhaps in expectation of an obvious question about accreditation and quality assurance agencies—of which Ontario has two—as instruments of regulation, Dr. Weingarten advances an acutely persuasive argument that

they inhibit innovation and are, at least in Ontario, unnecessary. In other words, they should get out of the way. Although brief, this is perhaps the most thought-provoking proposition in the book. The reader wishes that he had expanded it to address the role of accreditation by self-regulated professions, for example, in Engineering and Accounting.

Even with, for example, the recommended information about faculty workloads, student return on investment, and curricular reorganization, will the professoriate accommodate the recommendations? The answer is pessimistic. At the start of the book Dr. Weingarten quotes Woodrow Wilson, the president of Princeton, as saying, "Changing a university curriculum is like moving a graveyard." At the book's end Dr. Weingarten returns to the graveyard metaphor, apparently accepting it, and arguing that change is nevertheless necessary. At that point, he has made that argument persuasively, but by returning inherently to the binary model, as if it is within the power of provincial governments and university presidents to overcome the inertia and self-interest of academe. Students, also armed with the information for which the recommendations call, might still opt for the smorgasbord curricula triggered by their activism and faculty indifference in the late 1960s in the name of academic freedom (Menand, 2010) even if they and the professoriate could be persuaded to accept the reforms. Neither Wilson nor Menand would have forecast a successful binary solution to a triangular problem, nor does Dr. Weingarten really explain how success would otherwise be realized, or why at least some public policy cannot be served by non-government third sector institutions and market competition.

Perhaps the most surprising and intriguing recommendation is the last: that equity of access will be better served by a "preferential allocation" of funds—meaning away from universities—to elementary and secondary schools, an idea proposed originally by Becker in his application of human capital theory to education (Becker, 1994). The recommendation, with application to Ontario, is supported by two HEQCO studies conducted under Dr. Weingarten's leadership (Chatoor, MacKay, and Hudak, 2019; Deller, Kaufman, and Tamburri, 2019). It is surprising for two reasons. It is the only recommendation that calls for more spending. The reader is also told, with surprising bluntness, that university complaints about underfunding are diversions from internal issues and problems that they are reluctant to face, and that

the prospect of additional government funding is dim—strong medicine which only someone of Dr. Weingarten's stature could credibly prescribe.

Dr. Weingarten is a true believer in the critical economic and social roles of the public university. Just as readers should not be surprised by his recommendations, they will find it hard to find fault with them. Nor should they. They make sense, even if the means of their implementation is not clear. However, a big question remains. Will governments and universities act on the recommendations? As President of HEQCO for a decade he could not have had a better forum from which to develop and promote the message of *Nothing Less Than Great*. Despite reports in which HEQCO demonstrated the need for a genuine system in which universities would be differentiated and classified, the track record of action is thin. When governments responded to calls for performance indicators and funding, the results were either superficial or in practice different from what HEQCO had in mind.

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