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In *Consuming Higher Education: Why Learning Can’t Be Bought*, Joanna Williams addresses many aspects of higher education that have come to the forefront of public discussion in recent years. Exploring the rising cost of college tuition and the growing consumer culture surrounding higher education, Williams not only documents the shift in the purpose of higher education in recent years but questions whether or not we as a society are headed in the right direction.

In the introduction, Williams makes a convincing argument for the timeliness of such a study. As a student at the University of Birmingham (UK) in the early 1990s, Williams reflects upon the culture surrounding higher education some twenty years ago and argues that students of the not-so-distant past were less consumerist in their outlook and viewed their education more as a learning experience than as an investment that should pay off in monetary terms. Some signs of the growing consumer culture surrounding higher education include the increased amenities and services that students can expect at universities. According to Williams, “[t]oday’s students expect comfort way beyond the cheap shared rooms of yesteryear” and in addition to this, “student complaints are reported to have risen 37 percent in the two years between 2008 and 2010,” signaling that students not only expect more in the way of service, they have also become more vocal in their demands and expectations (p. 1).

This change in student attitudes also comes at a time when tuition both in the U.S. and the U.K. has risen dramatically. Not only has the increase in tuition caused a growth in public discussion about higher education in general, but it has also served as the “common-sense” rationale for the “student as consumer” model which has become prevalent both in the U.S. and the U.K. in recent decades. Although the student-consumer is often presented by popular media as a generally positive development that is empowering for students, Williams argues that a negative consequence of this includes the restructuring of universities towards more corporate, profit-driven models and the erosion of some of the founding principles of higher education. For one thing, the shift towards more profit-driven models of operation, which emphasize efficiency and closer ties to the private sector, have weakened higher education institutions’ commitment to serving the public good and providing students with a liberal education.

Although the purpose and function of higher education institutions in society have been debated for well over one hundred years, by the mid-1990s “arguments had firmly swung in favor of instrumental objectives for higher education” (p. 41). For one thing, policy makers and the general public have come to regard universities in terms of conferring private benefit upon individuals rather than functioning for the public good. Williams attributes this to changes in social values, and in particular, a post-modern questioning of “the very assumption that there is indeed a coherent body of knowledge that is worth preserving and passing on…” (p. 41). Not surprisingly, universities are now more often charged with serving non-educational purposes such as enhancing “individual employability, social inclusion, or even personal transformation” (p. 41).

Williams explains that much of this change is evident in the rise of the student-consumer—that is, “customers” of higher educations who wish to attain a university degree in order to exchange it for employment and social mobility in the post-graduation job market. What supports the rise of the student-consumer is the increased focus of higher education policies on instrumentalism and consumer satisfaction. This student-consumer model encourages the notion
that students have purchased their right to a university education and turns the focus towards instrumental outcomes rather than the process of intellectual development. In order to support her claim, Williams presents not only evidence of policy changes in recent decades but also interviews with students, faculty, and administrators. She also effectively uses examples from media, popular culture, and advertisements to show changes in values and attitudes regarding higher education.

According to Williams, changes in university practices have also greatly contributed to the instrumentalization of education and the rise of the student-consumer model. Rather than challenging the notion of a degree as an entitlement, institutions have strengthened this notion by placing increased emphasis on quantifiable information on assessment and post-graduate employment prospects. Williams also shows evidence of professors being perceived by students and the public as service providers whose aim is to provide a “learning experience” and to deliver results to students. Previously, when higher education was conceived of in the more liberal terms of promoting knowledge and learning for its own sake, the process of managing students’ transition to adulthood was bound up in the “moral concept” of character formation and intellectual struggle. As higher education has moved towards serving a mass population and ensuring employability, institutions no longer play such a role.

Williams ends her work with specific proposals for change. For one thing, she suggests that university admission should not be viewed an entitlement for all young adults and should be available for those who demonstrate an intellectual commitment to academics, irrespective of wealth or family background. Furthermore, non-vocationally oriented disciplines, such as those in the liberal arts, should focus less on employability and instead, the academy should be able to make a case for liberal education on its own terms. In addition, emphasis should be placed back on genuine intellectual engagement and struggle rather than a “satisfactory experience” and investment returns (p. 149).

A major strength of Williams’ work is her ability to capture an attitudinal shift in higher education that is difficult to quantify or define. Her work supports the findings of Arthur Levine, who has found that compared to students of generations past, U.S. college students today experience more stress about the state of the economy and a heightened preoccupation with post-graduation career prospects. In addition, Levine has also found that students today are more career-focused and anxious about gaining skills that can be exchanged on the job market (Levine, 2012). Hence, Williams’ work adds valuable information to our growing body of knowledge on how our evolving knowledge-based economy is affecting students’ perceptions and value of higher education.

Williams also provides convincing evidence that the neoliberal shift in institutional practices and student attitudes cannot be fully blamed on rising tuition costs and institutional involvement in commercial activity. Rather, she demonstrates that understanding this troubling process requires a more complex analysis of the historical development of higher education and an examination of the recent social, political and cultural trends which have shaped students into consumers and have influenced public opinion and policy. From this, we may be able to gain a realistic assessment of the impact this shift has had upon students’ learning and the greater mission of higher education.

Nonetheless, some may find aspects of Williams’ work to be less than convincing, such as her reinforcement of a concept of higher education that is organized around a binary of socially “useful” versus “liberal” education. This overly simplistic dichotomy separates disciplines into two opposing camps that are mutually exclusive and neglects to acknowledge
that even the most esoteric of disciplines help students to develop skills that are transferrable at the practical level and vice versa. In fact it can be argued that with the growth in interdisciplinary areas of study, this type of rigid dichotomy is not only simplistic but passé.

Nonetheless, what readers may find to be most unsettling about Williams’ work is her argument that not all young adults ought to attend college. Instead, Williams suggests that only those who have demonstrated a commitment to intellectual pursuit should attend a university while those who are more interested in job acquisition should consider a technical or vocational training program. This suggestion undoubtedly poses some philosophical and political questions especially in the context of the U.S. For one thing, arguing for this type of system is in essence an argument against mass higher education and some would say a reversion to an elitist model of higher education. From a social justice standpoint the value of creating truly mass higher education is one that is firmly entrenched in American culture. Instead of determining before college who is “deserving” of higher education and who is not, it is perhaps more useful to improve higher education institutions themselves so that all students who enter can expect to receive a rich and fulfilling educational experience that will not only broaden their intellectual horizons but also equip them with the knowledge to make wise career decisions.

References

Reviewer
Tiffany Lee Tsang is a doctoral student in the Higher Education and Organizational Change at the University of California, Los Angeles, where she also works as a Graduate Student Researcher. Her research interests include Higher education in the context of a liberal democracy, academic capitalism, diversity issues, historical and philosophical foundations of higher education, as well as female students and faculty. She also holds a M.Ed. and has worked in various positions in student affairs and student development.