

Consuming Higher Education: Why Learning Can't Be Bought by Joanna Williams. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. 208 pp. ISBN 978-1441183606.

The rising cost of college and the growing number of students attending college have brought higher education to the forefront of both public and academic discourse. In *Consuming Higher Education: Why Learning Can't Be Bought*, Joanna Williams addresses these changes alongside the growing consumer culture and corporatization surrounding higher education. By exploring these topics, Williams not only documents the shift in the purpose of higher education in recent years, but also questions the type and quality of higher education American and British institutions are providing for today's students.

In the introduction, Williams makes a convincing argument for the timeliness of such a study. As she was a student at the University of Birmingham in the United Kingdom in the early 1990s, Williams is able to reflect upon the student and academic culture of 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 monetarily. According to Williams, today's students place great value on majors that translate directly into lucrative vocational paths such as law or medicine. Other signs of growing consumer culture in higher education include the increased amenities and services that students now expect at universities. According to Williams (2013), "[t]oday's students expect comfort way beyond the cheap shared rooms of yesteryear" and in addition, "student complaints...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 in both the U.S. and the U.K. has risen dramatically. The rise in college tuition has served as the "common-sense" rationale for the "student as consumer" model which captures students' new role as "customers" of higher education who wish to attain a university degree in order to exchange it for employment and social mobility in the post-graduation job market. Although the popular media often present the development of the student-consumer as a positive development that is empowering for students, Williams argues that one negative consequence is the restructuring of universities towards more corporate, profit-driven models, which erodes some of the founding principles of higher education. For one thing, the shift towards more profit-driven models of operation that emphasize efficiency and closer ties to the private sector has weakened 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), with policy makers and the public regarding universities in terms of conferring private benefit rather than functioning for the public good. Williams attributes this shift to changes in social values and 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). She also frames her argument as a critique of neoliberalism and the negative influences of privatization practices on higher education. She claims that due to this neoliberal shift towards privatization, 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 and is supported by the increased focus of higher education policies on instrumentalism and consumer satisfaction. This student-consumer model reinforces 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. Williams also effectively uses examples from media, popular culture, and advertisements to demonstrate changes in values and attitudes regarding higher education.

According to the author, changes in university practices have also greatly contributed to the instrumentalization of education and the emergence of the student-consumer model. Rather than challenging the notion of a degree as an entitlement, institutions have strengthened it by placing increased emphasis on quantifiable information on assessment and post-graduate employment prospects. Professors are also increasingly perceived of as service providers whose role is to produce a “learning experience” and quantifiable student outcomes. 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 instead bound up in the “moral concept” of character formation and intellectual struggle.

A major strength of Williams’s 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 Levine (2012) and Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) whose works explore students’ increased concern over career prospects and larger institutional shifts that reflect neoliberal values, respectively. Hence, Williams’s study adds valuable information to our growing body of knowledge on how the evolving knowledge-based economy is affecting students’ perceptions and value of higher

education. What is especially worth noting is Williams's interviews with both American and British college students and her ability to capture students' changing perceptions of higher education in a multinational, comparative framework.

Throughout her work, Williams 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. Williams explains 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, one 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. In order to make the distinctions clear between the issues affecting the American and British higher education systems, Williams devotes separate sections to the U.S. and the U.K. The author also structures her work in a way that is easy to follow—first examining students within a changing university system and then analyzing how changes in the university system have reinforced neoliberal values.

Nonetheless, some may find aspects of Williams's work to be less than convincing, such as her insistence upon 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 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.

Perhaps what readers may find to be most unsettling about Williams's 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. For one thing, arguing for this type of system is in essence an argument against mass higher education and a reversion to a more elitist model rife with implications for ethnic and racial minority students. Williams also fails to thoroughly address the economic factors, such as the global financial crisis of 2008, that have changed the educational experience for students of this generation. 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 fulfilling educational experience that will not only broaden their intellectual capacities but also equip them with the knowledge to make wise career decisions.

Williams ends her work with specific proposals for change and suggests that university admission should not be viewed as an entitlement for all young adults. Instead, admission should be available for those who demonstrate an intellectual commitment to academics, irrespective of socioeconomic status. Furthermore, non-vocationally oriented disciplines, such as those in the liberal arts, should focus less on employability and the academy should be able to make a case for liberal education in its own right. In addition, she recommends that emphasis be placed back on genuine intellectual engagement and struggle rather than a “satisfactory experience” and investment returns (p. 149). Despite the problematic implications that can be drawn from Williams’s conclusions about the appropriate directions for higher education, her work still provides a compelling account of the current state of higher education and an invaluable analysis about the development of the student-as-consumer phenomenon that has gained ascendancy in the neoliberal age.

References

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