

## Discussion 2 – Declining by Degrees – Lynsey Newhouse

Created by Lynsey Nejman on May 29, 2014 11:57 AM

My first reaction to having to watch a documentary was one of disappointment. It's not like you can bring your laptop to the beach and watch the video over the holiday weekend. However, when I settled into my mother-in-law's couch on Monday night to dive in, I was hooked. I kept pausing the video, and asking my family "holy cow! Did you know...? This is crazy!" This being my first semester in the program, I feel every assignment provides an opportunity for me to realize that I have had my head stuck in the sand. The three issues that I feel are the biggest issues today are faculty rewards, student fade out and the rising cost of higher education. Honestly, I chose these three issues because they affected my college education and I continue to see their effects worsening.

One of the biggest challenges in higher education today is the backwards way of rewarding faculty. Good teachers are not rewarded for good teaching. In fact, they are measured and rewarded almost entirely for things they do outside of the classroom. Unless a professor is published a minimum number of times, they are almost guaranteed NOT to get tenure (*Declining by degrees*, 2005). A professor's schedule is very busy, and like most people they have to prioritize. Unfortunately, it is not in their best interest to put teaching (their *job*) ahead of their own research. Additionally, in the video, we learned that some professors are never actually taught how to teach (*Declining by degrees*, 2005). I'm sure I am not the only person who has had a professor who was absolutely brilliant. I knew she was so passionate about her field and she genuinely got excited about chemistry. However, she was a terrible teacher. She had a very hard time communicating her brilliance to those of us who were not quite as talented when it came to science. When students are put in this position, they must be disciplined in order to teach themselves the material in a challenging subject, and not all students possess the self-control this requires.

This brings me to my second point – student fade out. There was a large segment in the video about students who do not transition well into a college setting. One of the field experts in the video pointed out that in K-12, especially in high school, when a student fails all blame is immediately placed on the teachers and administrators. They are not getting to the student. However, a few short months later, when that same student goes to college and experience stronger academic pressures and does not react well, it becomes the student's fault (*Declining by degrees*, 2005). This extreme shift in responsibility is a large contributing factor to fade out in college students. The narrator says that, nationally, almost 25% of college freshmen do not make it to their sophomore year (*Declining by degrees*, 2005). It seems as though we are giving our high school students the academic equivalent of pool floaties and allowing them to walk in the shallow end, then all of a sudden taking away their aids and tossing them in the deep end. A few schools are starting to accept this as a problem and create solutions. One of the solutions they discussed is the living-learning community (*Declining by degrees*, 2005). As an undergraduate, I was lucky enough to be a part of one of these and it helped me ten-fold. Navigating the challenging academic landscape of college for the first time is difficult. This program gives students a gentle nudge in the right direction. It allows students to figure out what academic practices work best for them. This program does not cost the school any money, only more cooperation from professors (*Declining by degrees*, 2005). If more colleges took advantage of this program, I think it would help with second year retention.

Lastly, the rising cost of higher education, coupled with the falling assistance is one of the biggest challenges for Higher Education administrators today. In the video, they say that 65% of college students today graduate in debt (*Declining by degrees*, 2005). I went to a small, private, liberal arts school for my undergrad and I can say that I am certainly part of that statistic, as is my husband. We will be paying our student loans well after our children go to college. We were also lucky, because we can afford to pay off our loans. Is it irritating to pay these bills every month? Of course it is. However, some students are not as fortunate. State governments are under constant pressure with the budgets every year, and higher education tends to receive the biggest cuts. As was stated in the video, we have tuition, so we can afford to have our government budgets cut. The video also tells us, though, that when these budgets are cut, it hurts the poorest students and the poorest schools (*Declining by degrees*, 2005). Community colleges have the lowest tuition and therefore generate the lowest income. This lack of funds, in turn, affects the students and their education.

The culminating effect of all the above stated issues, as well as many others, on our community colleges impacted me the most. When I graduated high school at 18, I went straight into a four-year institution, becoming a "typical" college student. I graduated in 4 years, like I was "supposed to do," and got a job. After working in admissions and seeing a lot of burn out, I have always resided in the school of thought "college is not for everyone." After viewing this video I now believe, more specifically "a traditional college experience is not for everyone, but access to education is." Community Colleges are a stepping-stone for more students into a four-year degree, but the population of students there are not all on the same path. Community Colleges, in my opinion, are the most important pieces of the higher education puzzle, but they get very little recognition. Many of the students have higher education goals and dreams, but circumstances that differ from the "typical" college student. They should not be punished for taking a different route to a degree, but they are. Their budgets are the first to be cut and their students the most likely to suffer (*Declining by degrees*, 2005). I was very surprised by my "change of heart" on this issue. I didn't want to think of myself as an educational elitist, but this video brought this realization to the foreground, and now I can no longer deny it. We cannot force students into the typical college student mold, because some will not fit. Instead of forcing a square peg into a round hole, we should try to make a new square hole. Education may not look the same to everyone, but the resulting degree will have the same effect on their lives, and who are we to hold that out of their reach?

Morrow, J., Tulenko, J. D., Glasser, C., Heus, J., Isaacs, S., Wald, D., (Producers). (2005). *Declining by degrees: higher education at risk*. PBS Special. Available from <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL8444A104D8113F85>.