



Redefining Higher Education: How Self-Direction Can Save Colleges

Melvyn L. Fein

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Higher education is in trouble. Commentators of all stripes bemoan escalating costs and diminishing quality. Solutions have been offered from all quarters, but tend to be piecemeal and all too often ideological. In this tough-minded look at the history, current climate, and future of university education in the United States, Melvyn L. Fein reexamines the mission of higher education and outlines what institutions can do to better prepare students for an ever more complex techno-commercial society.

Fein argues that students must have the opportunity to explore and discover what works for them, and that the most important tool for institutions of higher education is self-direction. Professors must be allowed to teach in their own ways, bringing their own experience into the classroom. Since university missions differ, both universities and professors need the freedom to make decisions independently.

The imminent need is for a "democratic elite" consisting of self-directed leaders who possess technical and social expertise, as well as personal motivation. The tools for change are appropriate curricula, communities of learners, and a genuine marketplace of ideas. While there is no magic bullet, Fein contends that we can and should build on the achievements of the past so as to evolve more responsive educational institutions—those that promote merit, responsibility, and universalism.

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