



Advertisement



Views

Waiting for the Incredible Hulk

November 16, 2010

By [Angel B. Pérez](#)

If K-12 education is waiting for Superman, then higher education in America must long for the Incredible Hulk. In the movie "[Waiting for Superman](#)," Davis Guggenheim highlights the problems that plague elementary and secondary education in this country, and illustrates how a system challenged with systemic injustice and bureaucratic red tape is obstructing students from attaining the American dream -- a shot at college.

But what happens when those students who make it arrive at the doorstep of the ivory tower and realize (like Geoffrey Canada, the educator in the movie whose childhood awakening inspired the documentary's title) superheroes don't exist? Higher education leaders paint images of colleges and universities in America that we don't live up to. Like the fictional characters we grow to admire in our infancy, postsecondary education can often disappoint.

Of the students who enter college in America, 43 percent don't graduate, and those who do typically don't complete in four years. Between 1971 and 2009, the gap in bachelor's degree attainment between white and Hispanic students grew from 14 to 25 percentage points. At public four-year colleges, less than half of the recipients of Pell Grants -- our lowest-income students -- graduated with a bachelor's degree. For African-American students, the proportion is even smaller.

We have a for-profit college sector that preys on low-income and first-generation students who are not savvy about the college application and financial aid process. These schools have produced the highest student loan default rate in the country and amongst the lowest graduation rates in the nation.

There are students who attend universities where they have little contact with actual professors because professors are so busy doing research. You can't blame the faculty, since promotion and prestige in academia is based on research and publication outcomes, not teaching and student engagement. Those who lose are our students, who experience education from a factory, instead of a second home where they are nurtured and cultivated.

In the world of elite colleges and universities, institutions compromise their values to compete for top ratings in *U.S. News & World Report*. They don't always engage in student's best interests; rather institutional policies are shaped to ensure climbing a few numbers on a report that earns a magazine millions of dollars and tells students and parents nothing about a college where they will thrive

Most shocking of all are the unethical practices of college enrollment offices that disguise information in financial aid packages to enroll as many students as they can -- at the lowest price. Since our government does not require colleges and universities to provide certain basic information in a financial aid package, colleges sometimes provide the minimum amount, knowing that naïve students will enroll, even if they really can't afford it. We have a multibillion-dollar student loan industry and the highest rate of default in our history. Some would argue it's the consumer's fault, but colleges and universities that hide total cost of attendance and don't counsel students about the implications of borrowing are just as much to blame.

Higher education is an industry at risk. We focus on opening the doors for students, but we have not done a good job of making sure they persist. We are moving further away from our values, and if the pendulum does not swing drastically in the opposite direction, we will be the focus of the next documentary that shakes a nation and inspires a movement. We should not set our educational agenda around the egos of faculty and administrators, or the hopes of gaining prestige. We should do what's ultimately best for students. If a

college education is the dream our young people reach for, it's up to those of us who lead it to create a system that embodies the strengths of the superhero they truly deserve.

Angel B. Pérez is director of admission at Pitzer College and a fellow at the Bowen Institution for Higher Education Policy at Claremont Graduate University.

© Copyright 2011 Inside Higher Ed