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“Our Universities: Why Are They Failing?”

The New York Review of Books

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By Anthony Grafton

[://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2011/nov/24/our-universities-why-are-they-failing/](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2011/nov/24/our-universities-why-are-they-failing/)

Summary: Are American universities still on top? Mr. Grafton’s review of several books and papers results in an answer with a resounding “No!” His critique examines issues of higher education’s decline, even while American universities are ranked highly world-wide.

On the negative side, American universities professors often entrust teaching to “underpaid graduate students and Ph.D.s on short-term contracts.” Adjunct and contingent faculty are often mistreated. The Collegiate Learning Assessment shows that many students lack critical thinking and writing after their first two years of college. One proposed reason is the lack of study time, on average only 12 hours a week, far less than in previous decades. Young students seem not to care much for academics and are merely at school to obtain a diploma and have some fun along the way. Older students, most of whom are not traditional university ages, often have full-time jobs and have to care for dependents. Disturbingly, only about 50 percent of college and university students persist to graduation, and almost half will not finish a bachelor’s program within six years. College costs are soaring and student loan debt is a huge burden for many.

Grafton groups the books and papers into two categories. In the first category, many blast professors or administrators, but do not offer multiple viewpoints or specific examples. In the second category, research is deeper and broader. “They excavate a world of ugly facts and unsatisfactory practices that has the gritty look and feel of reality—a reality that has little to do with the glossy hype of world university rankings.”

At the conclusion of the article, Grafton suggests the public dialogue could be more productive if writers, “find students who manage to do excellent work and many more cases of wasted possibilities, and they might gain some insight into why.”