

Excellence Without a Soul: How a Great University Forgot Education by Harry R. Lewis, Public Affairs, 2006, \$26.00 cloth, ISBN 1586483935.

According to an old Italian folk saying: only a true friend will tell you if you have a dirty face. Harry Lewis is “a true friend” of Harvard, having served indefatigably as Dean of Harvard College for eight years, and as Gordon McKay Professor of Computer Science and Harvard College Professor for more than thirty years. His book *Excellence Without a Soul: How a Great University Forgot Education* is an informed insider’s critique of Harvard’s “dirty face” in terms of its vitiated undergraduate educational mission in recent years.

In the past decade scores of books criticizing American higher education have been published, and Lewis cites many of them in his text, but his book is unique in that his focus is exclusively on Harvard, the oldest, richest, and most famous institution of higher learning in the United States. Harvard is acknowledged as the premier research university in the world, with the faculty and academic resources appropriate to such an institution. But Lewis seeks to examine what has been happening to Harvard College, whose “fundamental job of undergraduate education is to turn eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds into twenty-one- and twenty-two-year-olds, to help them grow up, to learn who they are, to search for a larger purpose for their lives, and to leave college as better human beings.”

From his vantage place as Dean of Harvard College, Lewis could enumerate the basic problems as “how and what we teach, and how and why we assign grades to students, how we do not help students develop a sense of responsibility for themselves, and how money affects students generally and college athletes in particular.” During his administrative

tenure, he witnessed a major undergraduate curricular review undertaken by the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, yet the review was doomed from the start because it was skewed by a bias to the sciences and globalization at the expense of other disciplines, notably the humanities.

Similarly, grading practices of the faculty, especially the widespread public perception of grade inflation, are addressed in terms of their “educational purpose” by Lewis: “In fact, faculty members cannot decide how to grade because they do not agree on the purpose of grading”

The shifting role of the college to its students is examined by Lewis in terms of personal responsibility. The old *in loco parentis* role of the college “is increasingly that of a consumer to a vendor of expensive goods and services.” Rather than helping undergraduates adopt a code of personal integrity and probity, Lewis finds “that role of moral education has withered, conflicting with the imperative to give students and their families what they want for the money they are paying.” And in the thicket of date rape and student sex, an outmoded disciplinary system treats students “like children” rather than “responsible adults.”

The cash nexus prevalent today has resulted in undergraduate education offering students “more and better amenities and services” instead of a better curriculum. The ideal of a liberal arts education has become superseded by a materialistic careerism, and Lewis observes that “something is wrong with our educational system when so many graduating Harvard seniors see consulting and investment banking as their best options for productive lives.” Athletics are very much a part of the financial and educational issues facing Harvard, as in other Ivy League colleges, in terms of competition for talented athletes, the loose definition of amateurism, and the implicit conflicts between educational and athletic commitments for student athletes.

Lewis devotes some probing examination to the insidious influences of competition and consumerism on undergraduate education and the need for enlightened leadership at the top to return to the core values of its academic mission. A major value of Lewis’ approach is his historical perspective on Harvard’s undergraduate education from the founding of the college in 1636 to its evolution today. The basic question governing the curriculum remains: “Will the university be run for the benefit of students, faculty, or society?” Likewise, his chapter on “Meritocracy and Citizenship” explores the basic tenets of Harvard’s curriculum historically, particularly the role of general education, of the Core Curriculum, and of the stalled current curricular review, which Lewis faults: “But instead of promoting learning about America, Harvard’s twenty-first-century review insists that students learn more about the rest of the world.” Readers may find Lewis’ Harvard- and America-first position too elitist and insular for the new global century.

Despite Harvard's residential House system and attempts to improve the advising system, undergraduates still complain about the lack of contact with senior faculty and the lack of social life they experience. Despite a protracted curricular review in recent years, no faculty consensus has been reached. According to Lewis, Harvard "pays lip service to liberal education," yet fails to define what it means, with the result that general education has become transmogrified into "the emperor's new clothes, they signify nothing except that Harvard no longer knows what a good education is."

In his conclusion Lewis attributes to societal forces the predominance of "the consumer culture" and the high cost of an elite college education, but he argues that universities have chosen not "to resist societal forces where resistance would be right and proper." The fault with Harvard has been the lack of enlightened leadership, "ideas and idealism" from the top. "Harvard can again inspire its students to develop a philosophy of life that brings dignity and honor to human affairs if it signals those values in everything it does." Lewis writes with a commendable concision, clarity, and conviction. Readers will not agree with him on all his points, and some will find his attention to detail on specific topics such as grades and date rape excessive, but on balance his book should be read as a canary in the mineshaft, a salutary warning that Harvard is at risk and needs to act wisely in righting its undergraduate educational endeavors.

—Michael Shinagel