

Philanthropy and Higher Education

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Sarah Reckhow, *Follow the Money: How Foundation Dollars Change Public School Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. 240 pp. \$39.95. ISBN: 978–0199937738

Jeffrey J. Selingo, *College (Un)Bound: The Future of Higher Education and What it Means for Students*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013. 256 pp. \$26.00. ISBN: 978–0544027077

Ken Stern, *With Charity for All: Why Charities Are Failing and a Better Way to Give*. New York: Doubleday, 2013. 272 pp. \$26.95. ISBN: 978–0385534710

In the late spring of 2012, in a warm, sunny room on the Queens College campus of the City University of New York, I asked the students in my Sociology of Philanthropy class, “Who is in favor of a political system that lets people buy votes in an election?” Every hand shot up. I have been teaching for over a decade; every year hundreds of students take my Sociology 101 class. I thought I knew a baiting question when I asked one. I had expected some students to argue in favor of selling votes on free market grounds and others to argue against the idea because it is undemocratic. I assessed the room: roughly 20 students, most of them college-aged women. As in most of my classes, many of the students were immigrants—the majority of whom were the first in their families to go to college.

I rephrased the question several times to make sure I had been clear. Each time I asked, hands shot up. “Let’s have a few people buy all the votes and get rid of elections altogether.” I pressed to make clear the Swiftian nature of my proposal. The

discussion, which I had thought would be a debate, only gathered steam. It was fine with my students if votes were sold because, as they patiently explained to me, the people with the most money are the smartest, and they will make the best decisions.

Each of the three books under review here grows out of isolated debates. There has been some discussion of how K-12 education and higher education should be more strongly connected and what philanthropy can do to promote this. Even here, however, the discussion is largely logistical. How can K-12 education feed students more seamlessly into higher education? In turn, how can higher education feed students more seamlessly into the workforce? And finally, what “best practices” in education philanthropy will help achieve these goals? There is little discussion of the relationships among our systems of education, social structure, and democracy or the proper role of the wealthy to shape what is taught and learned through their giving.

Sarah Reckhow’s *Follow the Money* is a smartly written book based on empirical research that illuminates the ways in which foundation funding for education can either undermine or bolster local participation in—and, really, democratic control of—public schools. It should be required reading for anyone who works in education reform or cares about its outcome. Reckhow details case studies on how foundations’ grant making has shaped education politics and policy in New York and Los Angeles. She is fully aware that her two case studies are not representative of education reform across the United States. Still, her selection is strong. Both examples are large, urban targets of reform with complex politics and students who are underserved. They are, in other words, primary targets of the new education reformers, whom Reckhow dubs Boardroom Progressives.

The strength of *Follow the Money* is its specificity. Reckhow takes the reader through the ins and outs of how foundation money was used to involve or, in New York, to

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disengage parents and other stakeholders. She uses network analysis to document education reform and funding networks are in both cities and then extrapolates on the impact that she thinks the differences make. By the end, it is clear that in Reckhow's assessment, foundation money has had a more positive effect in Los Angeles than in New York because the former used its funding to develop a core of varied organizations and thus created a more flexible and diverse set of reforms. New York, in contrast, has a very centralized reform system headed by Mayor Bloomberg that often seems to go out of its way to alienate parents and other stakeholders.

My quibble with Reckhow is that she loses the forest for the trees. She states early on that "scholars should devote greater attention to foundations as political actors" (11), and then backs away from that a bit by the time she reaches her conclusion. In the end, we are given a choice between two existing models of government-via-philanthropy (or what I have termed philanthro-policymaking) but little real critique of it. Nor do we even get a full discussion of the pros and cons of this new reform style. With that small caveat, however, I highly recommend this book. It possesses that rare combination of readability and rigor.

For anyone who does not know much about recent developments in higher education or philanthropy, Jeffrey J. Selingo's and Ken Stern's books are good introductions. The drawback of each book, which is almost inevitable given the strong point of their readability, is that they are superficial narratives. In both books, there are examples of innovative new ideas, such as MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) and, in philanthropy, the movement to create a system to rate the efficacy of nonprofits led by Charity Navigator. To those who have been engaged in the discussion about reforming higher education and philanthropy over the past few years, these examples are not new, and their treatment in the books is not particularly thorough or deep; Selingo and Stern gloss over well-known problems with admittedly interesting ventures. Yet the books are very adept surveys of critically important areas written by experts in their fields and are both well worth reading.

Jeffrey J. Selingo is an editor at large for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. In *College (Un)Bound*, he outlines the major trends in American higher education from sky rocketing tuition costs, to online learning, to decoupling credentialing from traditional college courses. It is a sweeping overview of how—and sometimes why—the institution is changing. The breadth of Selingo's knowledge is impressive, and he clearly set out to provide an evenhanded assessment of higher education today. I doubt there is anyone who would not glean something from this book.

At points in the book, particularly when Selingo is discussing new philanthropic and for-profit innovations aimed at transforming higher learning, I wish he had been more skeptical. Selingo has a wonderfully discerning, skeptical and, at times, even humorous approach to a recent trend,

which he calls an arms race, in luxury accommodations for students. If only he had brought the same appreciation to the impact of big philanthropy in driving trends such as MOOCs or a new software that turns academic advising into a Netflix-like set of recommendations for courses that "students like you" have enjoyed. I know what Netflix thinks I would like, but I am not ready to surrender liberal education to such a process.

Although Selingo notes the important role of philanthropy in transforming higher education, he does not really question it. He treats the current involvement of major philanthropists and their often affiliated for-profit partners as a given. No book can cover all relevant issues, but discussion of the appropriate role of philanthropy is a notable omission in an otherwise comprehensive book.

Ken Stern's *With Charity for All*, as the title suggests, focuses on philanthropy. In many ways, it is philanthropy's equivalent to *College (Un)Bound*. It is a highly readable overview of philanthropy today. Stern is a public affairs executive who worked at National Public Radio for a decade. This background gives him wonderful insight into the world of nonprofits and philanthropy. It also gives him a distaste for emotion-based philanthropy and a desire to see a more rational system of giving take hold. Luckily for Stern, the trend has been toward "rational" giving. I use quotes because it is not clear to me that emerging giving is more rational than older forms, although it certainly does rely more on data and metrics.

What Stern does not do is look at how the changes in philanthropy that he describes have an impact on broader social institutions such as education. He boils philanthropy down to being "good" if it "works" (e.g. meets a benchmark). That is a fair criterion, but I don't think it should be the only one. Philanthropy shapes and is shaped by a broader social context. We cannot understand it in isolation.

What none of these books put together is that the changes in primary and secondary education, higher education and philanthropy are all profoundly interweaved and that together they are shaping America's future just as much as any political or economic shift does. This is the heart of my concern. New trends in philanthropy are dramatically shifting our educational system at the K-12 level and within colleges and universities. Yet we look at the trends within each of the three areas as if they are unrelated.

As each of these three outstanding books makes clear, America is at a turning point with respect to education and philanthropy, each of which must adapt to a changing world. My hope is that we can wisely guide these changes, and to do that, we must start with a more explicit understanding about how shifts in one area create ripple effects elsewhere, which may not always fall neatly into the categories of success and failure.

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