Reviews


Reviewed by Eileen E. Schell, Syracuse University

_Failing the Future_ is a book about higher education “written for those who want to be a part of its future.” Eschewing the rhetoric of right-wing critiques and bottom-line business analyses of higher education, Annette Kolodny focuses readers’ attention on what must be done to educate students and support faculty in the coming century. Previously professor of American literature and feminist literary criticism at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Kolodny served as dean of the College of Humanities at the University of Arizona from 1988-1993, overseeing seven departments, five programs, two research centers, a thirteen million dollar budget, and an additional four to five million dispersed annually.

The eight chapters in _Failing the Future_ are united by Kolodny’s stance as a feminist “change agent,” who offers strategies, observations, and recommendations for public and private research universities. Her main focus is on public research universities because they train “most of the nation’s Ph.D.s and other professionals” and provide affordable undergraduate education. Throughout the book, she argues for investing more in postsecondary education, citing demographic information indicating that over the next two decades there will be a twenty percent increase in enrollment over current levels. Increasingly, students will come from racial and ethnic minority groups and from “poor families and even poorer school districts.” As a result, more—not less—funds will be needed for scholarships, loans, counseling, academic tutoring, and remediation programs. In addition, 85 percent of all undergraduates commute to campus, and two-thirds work to pay their tuition and expenses. Half are twenty-five years or older, and more than half attend part-time. According to Kolodny, these students will “need more professors, more classrooms, more computers, more foreign language instruction, and better equipped science laboratories if they are to receive a quality education and fulfill the employment needs of the coming century.” To accommodate older students and those juggling parenting as well as work and school, provisions must be made for distance learning, on-site specialized programs, and improved family housing. An advocate of socially responsible technology use, she argues that higher
education must teach individuals in an information society "how to analyze that information, recognize recurrent patterns or connections, and extract what is truly important." Faculty, too, she argues, will be increasingly diverse and will need tenure and promotion procedures, family leaves, adjusted workloads, and other measures to support the integration of their work and personal lives.

Kolodny’s plan for revitalized higher education is part of her larger social vision of a twenty-first century democracy where citizens engage in rebuilding communities, creating jobs, redistributing income via a progressive tax system, and revitalizing civic life. Yet, she recognizes the circumstances mitigating against that vision: slashed public funds for higher education, the corporate ethos applied to the educational paradigm, assaults on tenure, right-wing critiques of liberal professors, injunctions to make educational institutions “lean and mean,” and an increasingly skeptical public. Kolodny refuses, however, to give in to the logic of scarcity and to a “lean and mean” higher education. For those who have dedicated their lives to university life in the midst of increasingly dire predictions about its future, Kolodny’s voice is a welcome change. She refuses the “fruitless and ultimately frustrating discourse of decline and defeat, and in its place, offer[s] another set of questions altogether.”

The book can best be read as a series of clustered chapters. “A Personal Preface: Reflections on Five Years in a Dean’s Office” and Chapter One, “Facing the Future: An Introduction,” offer both a personal and theoretical overview of the challenges facing higher education and the strategies needed to address them. Chapter Two, “60 Minutes at the University of Arizona: The Polemic against Tenure,” defends the tenure system in response to an episode of 60 Minutes that criticized the tenure system and tenured faculty’s lack of involvement in undergraduate teaching.

Chapters Three, Four, and Five explicate changes in institutional policies needed to support women and minority faculty members and students. Chapter Three describes how the College of Humanities at the University of Arizona created a tenure and promotion policy that safeguards women’s advancement. Chapter Four, “Paying the Price of Antifeminist Intellectual Harassment,” gives case studies and poses remedies for “antifeminist intellectual harassment,” a practice whose “object is always to foreclose further feminist inquiry and, more generally, shut down women’s access to unfettered intellectual activity in any field or discipline.” While Kolodny’s definition is compelling, it is not clear how the phrase “antifeminist intellectual harassment” is distinct from Bernice Sandler’s analysis of the “chilly climate” for women and minorities in American colleges and universities. Perhaps a more detailed discussion of how “antifeminist intellectual harassment” differs from or resembles Sandler’s concept would be useful. Chapter Five, “Creating the Family-Friendly Campus,” explains the need for childcare and eldercare provisions for students and faculty, and it outlines how the University of Arizona established an Office of Child Care Initiatives and created family-friendly policies. Readers may be tempted to point out, however, that reforms in tenure policies, along with childcare and eldercare
initiatives, will mean little if increasing numbers of part-time and non-tenure-track faculty are employed in place of full-time faculty. Most of Kolodny’s reforms presume that faculty members are or will be tenure-track, and this presents a problem since many institutions increasingly elect to employ part-time faculty on short-term contracts that do not provide fringe benefits or other protections.

The final set of chapters muses on students’ different cognitive styles, academic leadership models, and the need for a K-12 and higher education partnership. Chapter Six, “Teaching and Learning in a World of Cognitive Diversity,” addresses how students’ different learning styles or “cognitive diversity” must be dealt with pedagogically. “Setting an Agenda for Change,” the seventh chapter, “is constructed as a loosely organized meditation on change,” addressing such diverse topics as graduate student training, administrative leadership models, shared governance, student advising, unionization, faculty incentives and rewards, and the College’s support of curricular change and innovation. The final chapter, “Failing the Future; or, How to Commit National Suicide at the End of the Twentieth Century,” analyzes the ways in which public universities can work with K-12 educators to develop programs that will ensure the successful entry into higher education of a new group of diverse students.

Throughout the chapters, Kolodny’s vision of reform is modeled on the shared governance concept where “inclusive and horizontal” teams of faculty, staff, and administrators work together to effect change. Readers may wonder how such consensus-based decision making is possible given Kolodny’s portrayal of the contentiousness and competing values of budget-cutting state legislators, suspicious governing boards, factionalized faculties, and bottom-line administrators. Kolodny admits that “the kind of leadership that can effect truly collaborative decision-making—involving faculty, staff, administrators, and governing boards—requires skills in which few academics have yet been trained.” In addition, she admits that faculty lack the knowledge of budget details and allocations that would allow them to grasp the necessity of financial decisions made by higher administrators. However, in Chapter Seven and elsewhere, she forges ahead and offers concrete strategies and cautionary advice about designing mixed leadership teams.

Kolodny hopes to compel female and minority graduate students and junior faculty to consider careers in higher administration. She wrote the book, in part, to encourage “women and others from previously underrepresented groups in academia to take on administrative challenges, at least for some period of their careers.” As she states early on, her decision to enter academic administration was prompted by a desire to put her feminist politics into action, to serve as a committed public advocate for educational quality, and to promote a diverse faculty. While she inspires readers with her “characteristic chutzpa” and measured reform tactics, she also sounds a cautionary note, detailing the intense public and personal costs experienced by administrators—especially women.
Characterizing the opposition she experienced from a vocal group of faculty members while dean, Kolodny wonders if “vicious antagonisms” against her were generated because she was “a change agent—a woman change agent—and [if] for some, that combination was intolerable.” In fact, the faculty resistance to her proposed reforms gives credence to her definition of antifeminist intellectual harassment. Her term as dean, she admits in the “Personal Preface,” also exacted a physical and personal price as her punishing eighty hour work weeks worsened her struggle with chronic rheumatoid arthritis, a condition that made simple activities like shaking hands intolerable and walking painful. The interjection of such personal details makes Kolodny’s change narrative even more compelling.

Yet, Kolodny’s progressive stance casts some doubt as to appropriateness of the book’s title. Why call it *Failing the Future* when the author avoids a rhetoric of failure and despair? Why not *Facing the Future*, an oft-cited phrase in the book, or *Embracing the Future*? Also a seamless quality pervades some of the change-oriented, how-to chapters, which may cause readers to wonder if conflict and dissension were suppressed in the writing of change narratives. The author seems surprisingly and refreshingly free of the self-reflexive doubt that is so often a ruling emotion for critics and commentators of higher education. One wonders, however, if the persistent and tenacious Kolodny was ever plagued by doubt, or if she had to compromise her sense of ethical conduct during her five-year term. These are minor quibbles with an otherwise inspiring and ambitious book. To her lengthy list of credits as a ground-breaking feminist scholar, Americanist, and dean, Kolodny can now add to her list of accomplishments that of feminist public intellectual and educational reformer. We are fortunate to have a voice sounding such a hopeful note above the doomsday tumult of commentators and analysts. Let us hope this book will succeed in its mission to encourage a progressive and diverse generation of higher education administrators. We certainly need them.


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Together and separately, Gail Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe have edited a large volume of work over the last decade and a half: fifteen volumes of the journal *Computers and Composition*; three editions of the *CCCC Bibliography*; at last count, seven edited collections since 1989—well over 5000 pages of edited material since 1986. Until now, however, only Selfe has authored monographs: two concise and practical guides to establishing computer writing programs. Thus, *Computers and the Teaching of Writing*, coauthored with Paul LeBlanc and Charles