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## Novel Ideas

by Elizabeth Griego, NASPA President



Marking the beginning of a new academic year, a spate of new books are out about higher education. Some of the books are about us. And they are not complimentary. Professors Andrew Hacker and Claudia Dreifus in *Higher Education? How Colleges are Wasting Our Money and Failing Our Kids and What We Can Do About It* bemoan that much of what happens in higher education is not education and there is certainly nothing higher about it. Their thesis is that administrators are building universities on the loan indebtedness of their students, which students will never be able to repay since most of the three million freshmen arriving on campus this month will not graduate or will waste their time in vocational courses that do not lead to careers lucrative enough to repay the investment in loans.

In a similar vein, in *The Five-Year Party* (such an arresting title), author Craig Brandon accuses colleges of trying to win applicants by using student tuition money to turn campuses into expensive resorts for young adults, with everything from hot tubs to water parks to luxury dorms in an effort to attract students. Brandon, a former writing instructor and education reporter, claims insider knowledge that colleges dumb down the curriculum and inflate grades, prod students to take out loans they cannot afford, and cover up date rape and other undergraduate crimes. He claims that the administration lowers academic standards to keep students in school and members of the faculty go along out of fear of losing their jobs. "I think we're really shortchanging our students today by letting them just have a good time in college and coming out with a diploma without really learning anything," Brandon said recently when interviewed on ABC news.

Even Bill Gates is implying that student affairs could become obsolete and universities as housed entities will become less important as course materials are increasingly posted online, accessible to everyone. In 5 years, Gates predicts, "you'll be able to find any lecture on the web for free. . . . It will be better than any single university."

The above context for my fall reading made me even more appreciative of the find of a new book just out by two of my favorite thinkers, Parker Palmer and Arthur Zajonc: *The Heart of Higher Education*. The book was written as a response to what was perhaps the most impactful conference I have attended, "Uncovering the Heart of Higher Education: Integrative Learning for Compassionate Action in an Interconnected World," held 3 years ago in San Francisco, sponsored by the California Institute of Integral Studies, the Fetzer Institute, and NASPA, among other partnering organizations. In this book, Palmer and Zajonc cut through the hype, sensationalism, and negativity that characterize what is often written about higher education today, and instead go to the heart of what should concern us most deeply and centrally as student affairs educators in higher education: reflections on our opportunities and possibilities to educate the whole person—mind, heart, and spirit—and to do so in ways that will awaken the deepest potential in our students (and in ourselves). In *The Heart of Higher Education*, Parker and Zajonc explore how student affairs professionals work most effectively with faculty to integrate learning through shared pedagogies like experiential learning and living learning communities. And they discuss how we might build intentional communities of relationship that move our students from independence to interdependence and foster our shared responsibility for our future on this fragile planet. I hope you can

take time from your hectic opening of school activities to settle in with this book on a weekend. Immersing yourself in Parker and Zajonc is like having a good back rub or a refreshing long soak in a hot spring. I am grateful for the opportunity to lean in to the conversational perspectives offered in the writing of these two remarkable thinkers, and I am appreciative of the thoughtful good practice examples provided, many from presenters at that 2007 conference I was so fortunate to attend.

And now I have to go prepare my university's hot tubs, water parks, and luxury dorms for this fall's freshmen.

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