

DECLINING BY DEGREES: HIGHER EDUCATION AT RISK
A LANDMARK PBS DOCUMENTARY SPECIAL
EXAMINES THE QUALITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN AMERICA

Premieres June 23, 2005 from 9–11 PM on PBS

A Production of Peabody Award-Winners John Merrow and Learning Matters, Inc.

Companion Book – With Foreword by Tom Wolfe – And Web Site To Expand Impact

How good is higher education in America today? The competition for admission into certain highly selective colleges and universities may be greater than ever, but the vast majority of American college students don't attend those schools. And, even if they did, the same question arises: Does the reality of higher education measure up to the dream of millions of individuals and to the educational needs of the nation?

On Thursday, June 23, 2005 on PBS from 9–11 p.m. (check local listings), a thought-provoking documentary special, *Declining by Degrees: Higher Education at Risk*, sets out to answer these questions, taking viewers behind the scenes of American higher education to experience college through the eyes of students, parents, professors and college administrators. Reported and narrated by Peabody Award-winning correspondent John Merrow, the documentary illuminates crucial issues about the quality of higher education in the United States. Set on four very different college campuses across the country – a private liberal arts college, a major state university, a regional public university, and a community college – this two-hour special examines both the promise and the peril in higher education today.

Declining by Degrees: Higher Education at Risk premieres in the midst of a growing national concern about quality, fueled in part by an increasing preoccupation with college rankings, grade inflation, declining academic standards, and overall concerns about the quality and readiness of America's workforce. Until very recently, America led the world in educating its young, but today about a dozen countries send a higher percentage of their youth to college.

The documentary follows 30 students and teachers, as it explores the road between admissions and graduation – a route that is no longer linear. Going beyond what Americans believe about the college experience, *Declining by Degrees* exposes the disappointment, disorientation and deflation that so many college students feel, and the struggles they face, regardless of the schools they choose to attend. “I didn't have anything that really kept me wanting to come to campus,” says college senior Britney Schmidt, reflecting on her first year at a large public university. “I wasn't being challenged, I wasn't really thinking about things. ... It was just high school over again.”

The top 25 private liberal arts colleges, including **Amherst College**, profiled in this special, typically represent the popular image of higher education. Yet, despite the intense competition to be admitted to such top-ranked colleges, these institutions represent only a fraction of America's higher education system, educating less than .3% of all those attending college, about 47,000 out of the total national enrollment of 13.7 million undergraduates. More than 5.3 million students attend large universities with 15,000 or more students.

Declining by Degrees examines the drama of elite college admissions, the battle over merit versus need-based financial aid, and brings to light the crucial “sink or swim” conditions that many college freshmen face, often with disappointing results. “It's like somebody comes along with a pin right after high school, pops your bubble, picks you up, throws you naked in some college, and you've got to figure it out,” says Mike Morefield, an undergraduate from the **University of Arizona**, which is the setting for portions of the program. Though Mr. Morefield did “figure it out” and is on track to make it to graduation day, more than 1,200 of his classmates did not return for sophomore year.

Some freshmen may not be emotionally or academically prepared to make the transition from the rigid structure of high school to a college life with few rules. “We have students who don't read. Period. They don't read anything from newspapers to books, and they come here expecting to somehow get through their college course work without changing. It's a real problem,” says Nathan Phelps, history professor at **Western Kentucky University**. Other students simultaneously hold down full-time jobs to pay for tuition *and* raise children while attending college. Examples are drawn from interviews at WKU and the **Community College of Denver**, the other institution profiled.

What is less well-known is how many students merely “tread water,” getting little education, and putting little energy into their studies, but still managing to receive diplomas. They prefer binge drinking to preparing for class and remain disconnected from college, spending four years on campus without engaging in the curriculum or participating in cultural events.

Declining by Degrees offers commentary from leading experts and scholars, including:

- **Patrick M. Callan**, president, National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education;
- **Lara K. Couturier**, director of research, The Futures Project: Policy for Higher Education in a Changing World;
- **Frank Deford**, senior writer, *Sports Illustrated*;
- **Richard H. Hersh**, former president, Trinity College (CT);
- **George Kuh**, project director, National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE);
- **Kay M. McClenney**, director, Community College Survey of Student Engagement, Community College Leadership Program, University of Texas at Austin; and
- **Lee Shulman**, president, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

Declining by Degrees looks at some of the issues affecting quality of teaching, including professors who are more interested in their work outside of the classroom; low standards, which allow students to coast through with minimum effort; teaching assistants with little experience teaching introductory courses; large lecture classes, which have become the norm at most institutions and often leave students feeling anonymous; and a reluctance to incorporate new teaching techniques into the classroom. It goes on to closely examine the challenges of higher education budget and funding cuts, which underlie the disturbing trend towards hiring part-time faculty; and the increasingly competitive higher education marketplace, in which institutions spend inordinate amounts of time and energy in efforts to polish their images and improve rankings in college guides, rather than improve student learning.

The impact of *Declining by Degrees: Higher Education at Risk* will extend well beyond the television screen. In conjunction with the PBS program premiere, Palgrave Macmillan will publish a companion book of the same name, featuring a foreword by **Tom Wolfe** and chapters by the nation’s leading experts on higher education, including among others: Former Brown University President

Vartan Gregorian; Bard College President **Leon Botstein**, and Teachers College (Columbia University) President **Arthur Levine**.

Additionally, Learning Matters, Inc. has launched a Web site, www.decliningbydegrees.org, with educational materials and additional information to enhance further the impact of the PBS special.

Major funding for *Declining by Degrees: Higher Education at Risk* is provided by the Lumina Foundation for Education. Other funders include the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, the Park Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Christian A. Johnson Endeavor Foundation and the Spencer Foundation.

Declining by Degrees: Higher Education at Risk is a production of Learning Matters, Inc. The Executive Producer is John Merrow. Senior Producer is John D. Tulenko. Producers are Carrie Glasser, John Heus, Shae Isaacs and David Wald. Edited by David Wald. Associate Producer is Hillary Kolos. Additional Production Research by Valerie Visconti.

Learning Matters, Inc. has a 10-year history of producing outstanding reportage about American education that has informed, and continues to inform, the general public, educators and policymakers about critical issues. Their reports air regularly on the *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, and their full-length documentaries have appeared on *Frontline* ("Testing Our Schools" and "Public Schools, Inc.") and as stand-alone specials on PBS. In 2001, Learning Matters earned the prestigious George Foster Peabody Award for "School Sleuth: The Case of an Excellent School." Their most recent documentary, "First to Worst," brought the harsh decline of California's public schools squarely into the spotlight and hastened settlement of a long-standing lawsuit in favor of the plaintiffs, California schoolchildren. That program was awarded the CINE Golden Eagle. The not-for-profit organization is led by John Merrow, a former teacher who spent eight years with National Public Radio and five years as Education Correspondent for the MacNeil/Lehrer *NewsHour*.

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