

DECLINING BY DEGREES: Higher Education at Risk
Q&A With John Merrow

John Merrow is a Peabody Award-winning education correspondent for the NewsHour with Jim Lehrer, a former teacher and executive producer of Declining by Degrees: Higher Education at Risk.

Q: How and why did you decide to produce *Declining by Degrees: Higher Education at Risk*?

JM: I've spent two decades as a reporter in schools and other places where young people are educated. I knew that higher education trained our teachers, and I wasn't very impressed. I also saw, first hand, how disconnected colleges were from elementary and secondary schools—even the ones right down the street from their campuses. I became curious about the state of American higher education, and the more I read the more curious I became. Luckily for us, a number of foundations, particularly the Lumina Foundation for Education, felt that the time was right for a careful examination of the state of teaching and learning on our campuses.

Q: How would you describe this special? What does it set out to accomplish?

JM: It was originally conceived of as a five-part series, but in the end we decided we could tell the central story—teaching and learning—in a single two-hour program. We really are asking ONE question: what happens between admission and graduation? What, in education-speak, is the 'value added' of going to college?

We spent our time on four campuses, but what we learned applies to most of higher education. That is, this program is NOT about the University of Arizona or Western Kentucky University or Amherst College or the Community College of Denver. It's about our 4,200 colleges and universities and 14 million undergraduates.

We would like viewers to understand that one can get a great education at virtually every college, but also to realize that very often standards are low and demands are minimal. Too little attention is being paid to what should be higher education's central purpose: learning.

Q: What are the most shocking discoveries you made about higher education?

JM: NOT that students are binge drinking, NOT that athletics is a business, and NOT that most students don't seem to have to work very hard to get good grades, because we knew those things. What came as a surprise was what one of our experts calls 'the non-aggression pact' between professors and students. It amounts to an unspoken compact: don't ask too much of me, and I won't expect much from you. This allows the faculty members to concentrate on what their institution values: publications, research and getting grants. And it means that students get good grades and can float through college with plenty of time for socializing, networking and other activities. Few complain, even though to an outsider it's pretty clear that the emperor has no clothes. That came as a shock.

Q: What do you hope people will learn from watching *Declining by Degrees*?

JM: That learning matters, if you will excuse the pun. That our nation is at risk, if we allow the decline to continue. That change is possible, because we are showing viewers what good teaching looks like, and we are showing viewers how even the largest universities can create ‘neighborhoods’ and ‘learning communities’ and other opportunities for success.

It is important to say that we are NOT arguing for a return to some vague ‘good old days.’ There probably are no ‘good old days’ to yearn for. But today the stakes are higher because the rest of the world is not standing still, and we are declining.

Q: What are the most important changes that you feel need to be made to reverse the decline in the quality of higher education today?

JM: Let students know that learning is Job #1. While it’s not 24/7, it certainly has to occupy more of their time and energy than it seems to on most campuses.

Elevate the status of teaching. Provide opportunities for professors to learn how to be effective teachers.

Re-invent the social contract so that low-income students have access to college and a piece of the American dream.

Q: Why is this documentary relevant now?

JM: I think *Declining by Degrees* is relevant in several important ways. American families are spending a large share of their income on tuition and other college expenses. They deserve to see what their dollars are buying. Their dollars may not be buying much. We saw a lot of students who are treading water as they go through college and ending up with diplomas. That can be changed, if colleges will raise their standards and challenge students, and if colleges will elevate the importance of teaching and learning.

The social contract that said, in effect, “if you have the talent, the nation will see that you get to go to college,” is rapidly disappearing. Today one’s economic status is his or her educational destiny, which means that we are creating an America which contradicts our ideals. If more Americans understand this, we can reverse the trend.

Finally, if we don’t act now, our national prosperity is threatened. We have prospered because of our brains, not our brawn, but these days other nations are investing more in higher education and producing far more engineers, physicists, computer scientists and medical specialists. In the language of the street, they are going to eat us for lunch.