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# Editors' Pick—Book Review: *Cultivating Inquiry-driven Learners: A College Education for the 21st Century*

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Conard, C., & Dunek, L. (2012). *Cultivating inquiry-driven learners: A college education for the 21st century*. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP. 132 pp. ISBN 978-1-4214-0598-8

**H**ishman Matar, a Libyan novelist and essayist, is a man whose work is laced with a sense of urgency. As a contemporary to the events unfolding in the Arab Spring, and whose family's past is embedded with events both immediate and political, he is understandably an author whose books are written because he had no choice but to write them. They are written out of fire.

In the preface to *Cultivating Inquiry-Driven Learners: A College Education for the 21st Century*, Clifton Conrad and Laura Dunek introduce Matar as a source of inspiration for their equally urgent book and consider their work to be one also written out of fire. Convincingly, they describe a disconnect between a growing knowledge-based economy and the role that higher education plays in fostering this growth that is at odds with the glaring and steady defunding of our colleges and universities at Federal and State levels. The question that vexes and challenges these authors, and a question they invite their readers to consider, is one that has always been at the center of public higher education: *How do we support an education that is both meaningful and productive?*

At the heart of the book is the idea that there is an absence of a fundamental purpose underlying college education in the 21st century. Taken literally, this seems hard to believe; in fact, if asked, most students would reply automatically that the purpose is to get a well-paying job, to advance themselves into a career of their choice. But no one works seven days a week or 24 hours a day, and many college graduates are far divorced from their initial aspirations and the work that pays their way through life.

Early in the book, Conrad and Dunek provide several examples of the soaring rhetoric espoused by advocates of a liberal arts education and why this rhetoric no longer carries the authoritative currency of past eras. A gradual decanonization or erosion of core knowledge has come about because of the rise of other voices in the culture. This, per se, is not the problem, but this shift in conversation, a conversation of ideas that universities must always encourage, has occurred at the same time as a rapid rise in the practical arts and the prominent role they have begun to play in the traditional liberal arts education. It's as if a few interested people at a party devoted themselves to boutique cooking skills, while the rest of the crowd headed for the buffet line. The importance of liberal arts has been eclipsed by the practical arts, so much so that the authors feel that real erosion has occurred on our campuses—erosion that is leading to poorly educated graduates who know a great deal about how to pass a test or a course, but who are woefully deficient in the kind of critical thinking skills needed in a knowledge-based economy.

This is a stinging criticism, one that carries weight and which is important for understanding the central idea of the book: that the rise of the practical arts is undermining undergraduate education through the substitution of vocational training. One needs only to look at the exponential growth in online for-profit higher education to see the drift that is happening in educational markets, a point the authors take pains to examine.

A concomitant question posed in this shift towards "practicality" is one that asks whether state universities and colleges serve a *public good* or *market forces*. The authors cite the example of changes in health care as a clarion call to the dangerous shifts that could befall higher education in terms of cost and accessibility. The Affordable Health Care Act notwithstanding, hospitals and other health care centers were once seen as a public good and are now perceived as profit centers. The same changes could befall higher education and, indeed, are at work in the online sector.

It is a daunting picture concerning the state of contemporary higher education in the United States, especially if one believes in the ideal of engaged lifelong learners competent in their fields and comfortable in the world of ideas and change. Nonetheless, *Cultivating Inquiry-Driven Learners: A College Education for the 21st Century* is a thoroughly and deftly-argued work. The book is divided into four sections. The first is a concise overview on the purpose of a college education, both historical and contemporary. The second examines why the contemporary model is in imminent danger of obsolescence. The third and fourth sections are the solution driven responses to the problems surveyed and articulated in the first part of the book.

Learning, as Conrad and Dunek define it, should be both dynamic and recursive, a phrase that is used repeatedly throughout the book. The authors argue, however, that becoming “learned”—as an ideal in and of itself—is no longer relevant in today’s decentered, hyper-linked world. They posit four signature capabilities of an inquiry driven learner: core qualities of mind; critical thinking skills; expertise in divergent modes of inquiry; and the capacity to express and communicate ideas. For many readers, this may be the most interesting part of the book as these capabilities are then explored and defined. An interesting subchapter on teaching students to frame their own burning questions should find resonance with anyone who has faced the cavernous silence of undergraduates in a survey course.

As a practical manifesto, the book winds up its analysis in the fourth and final section devoted to ideas for developing inquiry- driven learners. The authors examine initiatives at eight institutions, ranging from the development of First Year Interest Groups (FIG) devoted to fostering interdisciplinary learning at the University of Wisconsin-Madison to a digital Critical Thinking Resource developed by the Nursing faculty at University of New Mexico. The range of the ideas cited are no doubt meant to serve as a springboard to action; they are also evidence that movement towards a more relevant undergraduate experience is already underway. *Cultivating Inquiry-Driven Learners: A College Education for the 21st Century* is an impassioned book, one written with a sense of urgency that fulfills its introductory mandate as a book written out of fire. It is also a highly disciplined work whose readers will find its content both rewarding and relevant.