

Chapter 8

Avoiding the Mediocrity Pact: Another Crisis in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter identifies a problem in higher education affecting all levels of participants from student to trustee. It is a condition where teachers pretend they are teaching, and students pretend they are learning. Brazilian anthropologist Darcy Ribeiro observed education in Brazil, identifying one of its maladies in coining the expression “O Pacto da Mediocridade” — the Mediocrity Pact. Cohen and March analyzed universities characterizing them as organized anarchies. The chapter conceptualizes the term and provides examples of the pact in action in the COVID-19 pandemic context. The authors identified problems challenging higher education management and suggested strategies to overcome the pact. Finally, they emphasize the higher education benefits of citizenship, better appreciation of culture and arts, and learning to live peacefully in a democratic and changing society.

INTRODUCTION

“Moving a university is like moving a graveyard. You get very little help from the occupants.” Barb Oakley

Since medieval time colleges and universities have been influential institutions in society. In return, society has recognized and valued the contributions and benefits of post-secondary education in research, teaching and public service.

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Avoiding the Mediocrity Pact

Over the centuries, higher education has generated individual and social benefits resulting in the improved quality of life in general. Many world-praised achievements had their origins in the university environment. Recent technological developments, originated from research within higher education institutions (Mazzucatto, 2015) are good examples.

Despite all the positive results that universities have presented during their existence, higher education management is still a challenge. The lack of specific methods and techniques leads to the use of managerial approaches imported from the business world.

Some of these approaches end up not being able to help higher education institutions to solve their managerial problems and to achieve the desired results. In this sense, recognizing managerial problems is central to develop the adequate strategies to reduce or eliminate them.

Over the past few decades, higher education has received mounting criticism that the quality of education is in decay. Teaching is usually the main target of criticism. The authors' purpose here is to examine evidence leading to the teaching flaw: The Mediocrity Pact. A Brazilian educator and anthropologist, Darcy Ribeiro observed education in Brazil, identifying one of its maladies in coining the expression "*O Pacto da Mediocridade*" — the Mediocrity Pact (Ribeiro, 1984). Simply put, this refers to the condition where teachers pretend, they are teaching, and students pretend they are learning. In fact, students are not learning teachers are not teaching well and schools are failing.

Authors have found creative approaches to study higher education management and its characteristics. For instance, Baldrige (1971) labeled higher education institutions as political systems. Cohen and March (1974, p. 33) analyzed universities characterizing them as organized anarchies, a metaphor of the condition described as "each individual in the university is seen as making autonomous decisions. Teachers decide if, when, and what to teach. Students decide if, when, and what to learn. Legislators and donors decide if, when, and what to support". Others, like Weick (1976), coined educational institutions as "loosely coupled systems" representing schools as loose assemblages with weak ties or connections among units.

We explore the meaning of the Mediocrity Pact, in this chapter, as it exists in higher education—including its symptoms and effects—and offer means to avoid or cure it. The main contribution of this chapter is to examine the presence of the Mediocrity Pact—a behavior malaise in schools—then to identify strategies forms to overcome the pact. Living with such a problem perpetuates unbearable low standards of education—with serious implications for generations of students to come as citizens, professionals, and leaders.

In times of COVID-19, we see the practice of the Pact tends disseminated in the academic world. We offer strategies for leaders to counter the effects of the Mediocrity Pact. Strategy is the overall work carried out by an organization through adaptations and changes seeking better performance, growth and sustainability, based on a complex interaction with a dynamic environment.

Our purpose in this chapter is to examine this long-lasting problem called the Mediocrity Pact. The Pact corrodes the heart of academic work, especially in the practice of teaching and learning—thereby threatening the quality of education and the management of higher education institutions.

In this chapter, we initially explain the concept of Mediocrity Pact in the context of higher education. Secondly, we present some of the most important challenges of higher education in the COVID-19 era. Thirdly, we discuss the problems that arise with the Pact in higher education. Finally, we propose managerial strategies to cope with this malaise.

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