

## Book Review: The College Dropout Scandal by David Kirp

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### Recommended Citation

Sneed, John T. () "Book Review: The College Dropout Scandal by David Kirp," *International Social Science Review*. Vol. 95 : Iss. 3 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr/vol95/iss3/11>

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**Kirp, David. *The College Dropout Scandal*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019. 142 pages. Hardcover, \$24.95.**

David Kirp is a professor at the University of California at Berkeley, a contributing writer at *The New York Times*, a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and a member of the National Academy of Education. Hence he is the right academic to write a book on the scandal that is the percentage of people who start college and leave never having earned their degree. However, rather than simply report the problem, he offers suggestions about how to fix it.

Kirp argues that there are certainly people who know about the scandal of those who leave college or university without graduating, but this information is not generally known among the wider public. He diagnoses the problem and posits that the solution has also been known for many years but has not been widely applied. Colleges and universities work hard to enroll a diverse student population, including many from lower income and marginalized groups. Yet, once these students are enrolled, they are often left to figure out the system themselves, so to speak, and to assimilate into the college or university culture. This tendency to leave new students on their own does not affect white, affluent students the way it affects lower income students or those not familiar with the way universities, loans, deadlines, and paperwork operate. This causes confusion and a sense of “non-connectedness” with the university. These students are at-risk of dropping out. This results in students enrolling in two-year colleges and not graduating, sometimes even after six years. This failure to connect with the university means that 40 percent of freshmen will never make it to graduation.

Kirp’s diagnosis of the problem is meticulous and beyond refutation. He offers a number of solutions that can help students connect with their respective universities and, in so doing,

increase their chances of graduating. The solutions he offers are things that are already available to the college or university and can be done for no or little additional operating cost. The majority of the body of the book is a tour of universities and colleges that have implemented plans and programs to address the drop out problem. While the ideas they use are similar, the applications of the solutions are as varied as the universities. This tour of various colleges and universities working to solve the high dropout rate demonstrates that a single idea can have a myriad of applications. These solutions can range from the mundane to the innovative: among the common-sense solutions offered are providing information to talented students from poor families to make them aware of the opportunities available to them. Other solutions include utilizing text messages to send encouraging notes or to remind students of up-coming deadlines, data-mining to help administrators identify student who are struggling or are at-risk, allowing timely interventions to assist at-risk students, brief experiences rooted in psychological insight to make students more resilient, revamping classes (like remedial math and writing), and building connections to the college community. All these things will help students connect to the college's culture, to develop confidence in their ability to navigate the college experience, and provide a purpose for remaining within the educational system that can open opportunities for the students' success.

This book is a welcome addition to the literature in the field of college reform. It is a pragmatic book, in that, it accurately presents the details of an existing problem and then offers an equally detailed solution to the problem. The book is welcome because it is data based. In a time when much that passes for scholarship is opinion or simply a sound bite, that is not the case with this book. Kirp's analysis of the dropout scandal is reinforced at every point with data from federal and national entities and from the universities themselves. So are the solutions that are

offered to the scandal. Kirp says, rightly, that the first step in helping students graduate is ensuring that they get to the campus. He notes that, in some school districts, that as many as 40 percent of students who have been accepted to a college never arrive. What is the reason? They did not know what steps to take once they were accepted. A university in Virginia uses text messages to prompt new students about important upcoming dates. Another university uses AI via a hotline that students can call to get their questions answered. Georgia State University has stepped out as a leader in data mining to identify struggling students early and to provide the guidance necessary to rectify problems and guide students through difficult times, resulting in more students retained.

At a time when educational administrators are trained in transformational leadership, more and more leaders are equipped to lead their organizations in the type of change needed to combat the dropout scandal. Kirp concludes that any organization with the fortitude to implement change for the betterment of their students can make the changes necessary to raise the graduation rate of their university.

This book ought to be in the hands of every administrator at every college and university in the nation. Educators, who work to provide the best education they can to every student, should be familiar with this book. Education is the doorway to opportunities and heightens the chances of success in life. Kirp's work shows a way those opportunities can be given to students who otherwise might drop out before they can take advantage of these programs. This book is therefore highly recommended.

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