**Discussion Questions for *Declining by Degrees* (the movie)**

These questions go into more detail than the ones I had you write about in class. We probably won’t be able to discuss them all in class, but reading them and thinking about them will help you do better on the diagnostic in-class essay you will take the second day of the second week of class. If you didn’t see the film, there’s a copy in King Library, and much of it is on You Tube.

1. **Helping underprepared students:** Some students who were profiled found themselves to be unprepared for the rigors of college-level work once they got there. One ended up dropping out and going to work, another got help from a study group in time. What do you think SJSU should do for the students who find themselves in the same situation here? (I believe about half of the students admitted here need remediation in math, English, or both.)
2. **Assembly-line teaching:** The “part time” professor who taught 11 courses said he hoped students didn’t realize that he was teaching on an “assembly line” basis, that he had standardized his courses so that all of them learned the same thing, rather than “tailoring” the classes. Do students care about that?
3. **Multiple-choice tests versus essays:** The young tenure-track professor of economics who had to do his own research and publish it to get tenure said it meant he would assign far fewer essays and give mostly multiple-choice tests that he could grade quickly. Do students mind this? Do any actually prefer classes that have nothing but multiple choice exams? Do any of you wish you had to write more papers in more of your classes?
4. **Students who won’t do the reading:** This same young, tenure-track professor also had given up on trying to get the students to buy a textbook, making the one he chose for his class optional. (He did try to get them to read articles from *The Economist*, a very challenging and well respected journal about international affairs, though he admitted that he didn’t really expect most of them to do that, either.) Do you think this is a good response to the situation? Should all professors try to teach without expecting the students to do any reading? If not, what should be done about the tendency of students to come to class unprepared to discuss the material, even in a “discussion” section?
5. **The value of “extraordinary peers”:** An official at Amherst College (the small, exclusive, expensive, private school) said one of the main benefits of such a school was that students get to study with “extraordinary peers,” presumably meaning that students would feel motivated and intellectually stimulated by their classmates/dorm mates and that this intellectual environment would encourage everyone to challenge themselves to do their best, grow their minds to their fullest potential. Does that sound appealing to you?
6. **Segregating the honors students:** At Arizona State University (a place more like SJSU), on the other hand, the honors students are segregated in their own dorm and their own classes, and they are given large financial incentives to study there (not “bribes,” though!) An official said that having these high-powered students there attracts other students. Do you think that’s true?
7. **The party-hearty culture:**
8. How do you feel about the opposite kind of student, the ones who want to party through college with as little work as possible, and who might try to find ways to get the professor to go easy on the class (wasting class time, for instance, by dominating the class discussion even though they obviously didn’t do the reading, or deliberately drawing the professor onto a sidetrack or dragging out a question about something they should have read)? How do you feel about students who try to get you to help them cheat?
9. One student profiled at ASU, Robin, managed to graduate and even get a job after college, even though he had partied and drunk heavily four nights a week and got through his classes largely by depending on his short-term memory (“browsing” the course readings just before the tests at the end of the semester) and cheating. Do you think he will be a success in the world with this background?
10. **Treading Water:** At colleges like ASU and the University of West Kentucky, most of the classes were presented as being dominated by students who were just “sleepwalking” or “treading water” rather than challenging themselves. Do you think colleges should let students slide by? Do you think it is possible for a mature, motivated student to get a good education even when stuck in an environment where a majority of students are content to just slide by?
11. **Students who just can’t afford a university education:** Considering that there are academically qualified, hard-working students like Ceylon (the one who had to work 48 hours per week at a factory to support her schooling) who are getting squeezed out of college by unmet financial needs, what do you think should be done to help her?
12. **Funding sources:** During a discussion of how colleges get funding, the film’s narrator says that colleges see students as their “customers,” because tuition accounts for about half of a publicly funded school’s income. Taxes account for another large (but increasingly diminishing) portion. For some schools with very successful sports teams, athletic revenue is another source of income (though for most colleges sports are actually a drain on income.) Do you know where the rest of the financial support for colleges and universities comes from? [Hint: one major source is research funding.] Do you think the film should have gone into that? [Note: different kinds of schools have different sources.]
13. **Lecture Hall problems:** We all can agree that the astronomy class with the cool special effects technology had the most engaged students of all the lecture-sized classes we saw, even though it was “just a gen ed class” for most of them. However, even after the professor presented the information in a lively way with great visuals and then let the students discuss it among themselves, only half of them got the material for the one example we saw. What do you think this shows? Are large lecture-sized classes ever effective? What should/can be done about them?