What Is College For?

The Public Purpose of Higher Education

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Introduction

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What is college for? What roles do colleges and universities play in American education and American society? Preparing individuals for success in their chosen lives, of course. But should higher education serve a larger public interest? The chapters in this book address these questions. Each chapter is devoted to a different sector or component of higher education and all are joined by a focus on what higher education does well and poorly, and what it might do differently or better. The book grew out of our shared interest in higher education, and the certainty that institutions of higher education are vital to the current and future health of this and other nations. It is grounded in our belief that attention to questions of purpose is critical to any commitment to strengthen the colleges and universities that serve the people of this country and the world.

The public and private purposes of higher education have not been central to debates about higher education in recent years. Writing about colleges and universities is not in short supply. Almost every former college president writes a memoir, and studies abound of one or another aspect of the vast U.S. postsecondary system. Some works are quite technical, detailing problems of access and quality and, especially since the onset of the "Great Recession," calling attention to a wide range of financial problems. Some are concerned with the inordinate expense of college and the implications of cost for equal access. Others simply add another chapter to what one long-time higher education watcher has characterized as "long litanies of failure along with generalized prescriptions for making right what has gone horribly wrong."[1] But few assert, as we do here, that a lack of wide public consideration of matters of purpose is itself a problem—not only for the nation's roughly 4,500 colleges and universities, but also for U.S. society in general.[2]

There are several standard explanations for indifference to matters of purpose. Some people presume that the goals of higher education are well

known and widely agreed upon and therefore are not in need of analysis or debate. According to this line of argument, the purposes of higher education are economic: Going to college boosts an individual's prospective earnings over a lifetime. For example, a September 2010 College Board survey indicates that college graduates earn on average 40% more than high school graduates.[3] Society also benefits from the research carried out at universities, which feeds innovation and supports economic growth. That is all true, but the narrow logic of higher education's quantifiable economic value for individuals and society at large has eclipsed discussion of other purposes and other benefits and responsibilities. It is time for a deeper and wider conversation that engages not only those directly involved in higher education, but all people interested in the future well-being of American education.

How and to what extent should colleges and institutions of higher education foster a more expansive sense of public responsibility among, for example, young people headed for careers in finance or real estate development? How, if at all, should institutions of higher learning be asked to foster in their students a more active engagement in politics? In what ways should institutions of higher education be asked to participate in public controversies–for example, those currently swirling around immigration policies? To what extent do colleges and universities have responsibilities to contribute to sustaining the arts in America? Why should public authorities from the federal to the local levels of government invest in higher education? Are productivity gains and other stimulants to economic growth all that taxpayers and elected representatives should ask and expect? What about honesty, ethical judgment, intellectual curiosity, aesthetic appreciation, and civic literacy?

In earlier eras, college presidents mobilized discussions of higher education while they were still in office and in a position to shape the future of their institutions. Few do so today. Each year, college and university presidents collectively give many thousands of speeches. Their rhetoric is polished, but their words tend to be ceremonial rather than searching, anodyne rather than provocative. They speak of excellence, human capital, and innovation. They promise great teaching, outstanding research, and service to the poor and needy–something for everyone, benefits for all. Modern presidents aim to leave the audience confident in the institution's leadership, not disturbed or confused about its place in society. Their public statements are bland so as not to offend any of an institution's multiple, varied constituencies, especially people who might make significant gifts. As managers of large and diffuse businesses, they may also fear that almost any consequential generalization will leave someone feeling left out. Most likely, too, presidential rhetoric reflects diminished public willingness to regard college presidents or other once revered figures as moral and intellectual leaders. Not being expected to discuss the public problems that confront us all, they shy away from the

difficult and contentious. Whatever the causes, college presidents today have not stirred public involvement in questions about the ways in which colleges and universities have and have not served the general welfare. We seek to ask the questions that the presidents no longer raise.

Doing that is important because in the absence of public engagement in discussions of purpose, private purposes tend to trump public purposes. Unlike private interests, public priorities do not emerge spontaneously, but must be deliberately defined through discussion, reflection, and debate. The collective benefits of higher education will not be asserted unless the public can be engaged in defining them. A student's future returns on his or her personal investment of time and money will seem more critical than the public benefits to be derived from ensuring that all students become people of character as well as of competence. An institution's prowess in potentially lucrative lines of scientific research will seem more essential to its mission than its participation in the development of an aesthetically engaged and broadly humane society. Unless there is public discussion that can help support the balancing of public and private priorities, colleges and universities will dance only to the private ambitions that ensure continuing high levels of enrollment and high ratings in the various surveys of satisfaction that give institutions a boost in national rankings.

Public indifference to matters of purpose, and especially to questions of public purpose, threatens the excellence of American higher education and all that depends on higher education. Questions of purpose are always essential in mission-driven institutions. They help to ensure that an institution will be effective in pursuit of its particular ambitions as well as responsible and deliberate in its response to external pressures and opportunities.

We do not have a simple remedy for public indifference to matters of purpose. We believe it is deeply rooted in circumstances that are undermining public engagement in many aspects of American life. We see it as linked to increasing assertions of the primacy of all things private. Indeed, we would suggest that current disinclination to engage in reflection and debate about the multifaceted roles and responsibilities of American higher education may reflect a slow atrophy of faith in American society. Historically, national aspirations have often been advanced in discourse about higher education. New programs and policies opening higher education to more and more Americans have tracked American optimism about possibilities for realizing democratic dreams. There are few signs of such optimism today, as talk of higher education seems to become ever more narrowly caught up in worry about personal and national economic competitiveness. In response to all this, we have chosen to take up the problem of purpose in and through higher education somewhat indirectly, hoping that the chapters that follow will entice other people to join with us in asking for whom and for what higher education does and should exist.

We should make explicit several assumptions implicit in our interest in questions of purpose. First, we are advocates for higher education. All the contributors to this volume have spent their professional careers as scholars, teachers, and administrators. We cherish the values that have made American higher education great, including academic freedom, collegial governance, and diversity. We admire historic trends toward increasing democratization and recognition that excellence comes in many forms. We value the range and variety of institutional types that exist in the United States. In pointing to problems or shortcomings, we are doing so as "loving critics,"[4] people who find fault in order to strengthen institutions they cherish.

Second, this is an unabashedly normative book, full of prescriptive "oughts" and "shoulds." Though not devoid of statistics, it is informed by historical analysis, educated intuition, individual experience, and personal values. All of us deeply respect inferences drawn from carefully marshaled evidence, but the chapters in this book were written to speak frankly from convictions we hold as individual citizens. The matters about which we write are controversial–the importance of civic education and scientific analysis, the distinctive value of both 4-year liberal arts colleges and the larger enterprise enrolling "the other 75%" of college students, and the need for reoriented professional education and graduate study in the arts and sciences. They are much more controversial, we suspect, than current discussions might lead one to think. We speak in normative voices, then, in the hope that doing so will encourage debate.

The book opens with a chapter we wrote entitled "Renewing the Civic Mission of American Higher Education." We are respectively a historian of education and a computer scientist, and former colleagues at Harvard University. Coming from very different orientations, we found common ground in our concerns about higher education, especially its continuing commitment to common aims and ideals.

Even though we are deeply skeptical of historical accounts that confuse change with decline, we believe there has been a slow, steady erosion of civic concerns in American higher education. As a result of the decline of moral philosophy and of the professionalization of the professoriate, among other developments, civic education is no longer a priority at American colleges. It is now regarded as a matter for K–12 education, and it is often peripheral there as well. The erosion of civic education at the postsecondary level has been countered by a variety of reassertions of civic interest, and we sketch four: programs of general education at Columbia, Chicago, and Harvard; the student movement of the 1960s; the so-called culture wars of the 1980s; and the service learning that began in the middle 1980s. Drawing from these historic examples, we argue that plans for civic education must suit the circumstances of different institutions, though all must involve three elements:

intellect, morality, and action. In addition, we recommend that civic education be integrated into the major or core field of all undergraduate programs, be designed to promote long-term, global perspectives, and be reinforced by institutional policies and practices that incorporate civic values. We are, of course, aware of the obstacles to heeding our call for a restoration of civic purposes and turn in conclusion to the matter of incentives. Like all those that follow, we hope this initial chapter will help initiate discussion and debate.

In the next chapter, University of Virginia evolutionary biologist Douglas Taylor takes up the challenge of sustaining democratic processes in a society where, as he notes, "the fraction of the electorate that believes in flying saucers is as large as the fraction that accepts evolution." Pointing to the common belief that anti-intellectualism is the primary cause of this situation, Taylor argues that academics should spend less time blaming other groups, notably businesspeople and representatives of the mass media, for holding such attitudes and more time confronting them. This will require acknowledgment that all views are not equal about all things–there is scientific knowledge that validates the fact of evolution regardless of theological beliefs to the contrary. It will also require that, despite competitive marketing challenges, colleges and universities avow their intellectual priorities rather than the facilities and programs that, however appealing to potential applicants, may misrepresent their *raison d'être.* The bottom line for Taylor is that standing firm against anti-intellectualism is central to the public purpose of American higher education.

Having considered two intellectual commitments–to civics and to science–that we believe essential to higher education, the focus of the chapters turns to different types of institutions. The chapter by Bates College president Elaine Hansen argues that contrary to arguments concerning the irrelevance and even the possible withering away of this relatively small sector of the higher education enterprise, traditional liberal arts colleges provide models of undergraduate instruction that should shape our thinking about every other sector. For Hansen, liberal arts colleges help their students become "liberated consumers," living an enlightened life in a material world. To survive, she points out, all of us–both as individuals and as members of larger communities–must consume food, natural resources, and information. A liberal education enables one to do so in mindful, responsible ways. Traditional liberal arts college are especially well-suited to achieve this outcome, she claims, because all are designed to encourage five kinds of competence: They help students recognize and cope with complexity, difficulty, and time in making decisions; they teach habits that help focus rather than fragment attention; they privilege active making and doing rather than passivity; they emphasize sustaining friendships and human connections; and they encourage people to embrace contradictions. Traditional liberal arts colleges, as

Hansen sees them, are "misaligned" with dominant cultural values, which may challenge those involved in sustaining them, even though this "misalignment" surely accounts for their success in helping people learn both to participate in and stand against the grain of modern society.

Paul Attewell and David E. Lavin, fellow sociologists at the City University of New York, take a fundamentally different tack. They observe that selective colleges like the ones Hansen champions enroll only a small minority of the 17 million undergraduates attending college today (that number is expected to grow to 19 million by 2019, they report). Presenting rich data detailing how different the experience of most college students is from that of the relatively small number attending more "elite" institutions, Attewell and Lavin counter the most common criticisms of the non-selective institutions that serve 75% of the student body. For example, to the critics who claim that graduation rates are too low for such students, Attewell and Lavin counter that graduation rates would not be low if proper account were taken of the fact that most students require more time to obtain a degree than students enrolled in selective institutions, often for reasons beyond their control. Many students who are considered to be "at risk" when 6-year time to degree is taken as the measure actually move on postgraduate work. Because access to higher education is of such clear advantage to the "other 75%" and has not reduced returns to investment for students who attend selective institutions, Attewell and Lavin argue strongly against recent curricular, tuition, and tax policies that threaten the relatively open access that has been achieved in recent decades. The United States is at risk of abandoning as failures, due to statistical mischief, policies that have actually been successful.

After two chapters concerned with the importance of undergraduate education, philosopher William M. Sullivan turns our attention to professional education at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Since most students are enrolled in professional or pre-professional courses of study, it is in relation to vocational questions that Sullivan believes higher education can have the greatest effect. It is here, he contends, that "the practical imagination" is shaped, and with it, our individual and collective sense of "what we can make of our lives, and the things we may hope for." However, for professional education to realize its potential, Sullivan contends that it must undergo fundamental reform. Taking aim at the emphasis on expertise over and above ethical behavior that has become all too common in many professions, Sullivan argues for a reintegration of knowledge, skill, and ethics. This could help foster a more "democratic professionalism" in which public service is regarded as an integral component of professional practice.

The final chapter is by Catharine R. Stimpson, who has served as graduate dean of arts and sciences at both NYU and Rutgers. From her perspective, the graduate school is the "nerve center" of research universities, uniting

in its aims teaching, research, and the preparation of the next generation of scholars. Despite its vital importance to all parts of the universities, Stimpson believes graduate schools are not well understood. After a sketch of the evolution of the graduate school, intended to demystify its aims and operation, she turns to the consequences of growth and expansion and how the best aspects of graduate education can be preserved amidst myriad forces of change, including globalization as well as the very American penchant for "re-engineering, re-setting, re-booting, reseeding, and experimentation."

This final chapter is a sage reminder that we live at a time when financial, political, and social circumstances here and around the world must compel us to distinguish between what is essential about higher education, and therefore must be sustained, and what might be relinquished or reformed. The costs of higher education cannot continue to grow unchecked. Matters of cost, of course, bring us full circle back to questions of aims and goals, and most of all, to questions of purpose, public and private.

Across different chapters, questions of purpose arise over and over again as they do–even when unrecognized and un-discussed–in any and all conversations about higher education. As we have said, they are ever present in worries about the financing of higher education, from financial aid to endowment policies; but they are also inherent in debates about the substance of the curriculum, the meaning of academic freedom, and approaches to academic accountability. They are implicit, too, in consideration of the extra-curriculum, including everything from the robust American institution of intercollegiate sports to an array of clubs, publications, and issue-oriented organizations. Without a conception of the purposes of higher education, there can be no sensible assessment of historic decisions about who can and cannot go to college, such as the 1994 exclusion of incarcerated men and women from eligibility for Pell Grants, or the 2003 Supreme Court decisions countenancing the use of affirmative action in admission. Without considering the questions of "for whom and for what," it does not make sense to speak, as so many do, of "college for all."

Higher education matters a great deal to our collective wellbeing as citizens of the United States and the world. But if we do not know where we want higher education to take us, it makes no sense to complain that we are not getting there. By stimulating discussion and debate about what we want and expect our colleges and universities to do, this book is intended to put solid ground under judgments about whether these institutions are succeeding.

The book does not include a conclusion. Since our hope is to raise questions and promote conversation, a conclusion seemed out of place. Had we included one, it would have reiterated our belief that sustaining the vitality of the American higher education will depend on intelligent thinking and

talking about matters of priority, aim, and direction. Because we also believe that the overall diversity of the American "system" of higher education is an important source of strength, any conclusion we might have written would also have noted that we would hope that each institution will design its own institution-appropriate process for raising questions of goal and mission. There will not be quick or easy consensus on matters of mission, within faculties or among institutions as varied as Reed College, Evergreen State University, Bennington College, and Bob Jones University, to name just a few. Our contention is simply that there must be discussion. Finally, in such a conclusion, we would have reiterated a simple claim. Higher education exists for the public good. The question to which we hope to have recalled all who believe in the importance of higher education is how to articulate and advance that good with more deliberate intent. We believe that question deserves our best care and most searching reflection.

NOTES

1. Robert Zemsky, *Making Reform Work: The Case for Transforming American Higher Education* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 22.

2. There are exceptions, of course. For example, Martha C. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), argues that a misguided conception of purpose is threatening American democracy in the United States and around the world.

3. Sandra Baum, Jennifer Ma, and Kathleen Payea, *Education Pays 2010* (New York: The College Board, 2010), http://trends.collegeboard.org/files/Education_Pays_2010.pdf

4. A term we attribute to the late John W. Gardner.