

INTRODUCTION

Imagine a list of American innovations that would convey some sense of our nation's distinctiveness in the world. Depending on the list-maker's mood, it might include the atom bomb, jazz, the constitutional rights of criminal defendants, abstract expressionism, baseball, the thirty-year fixed rate mortgage, and fast food. Everyone would have a different version; but unless it included the American college, it would be glaringly incomplete.

At least in a vague way, we all know this. Americans, particularly those in or aspiring to the middle class, talk about college all the time—from the toddler's first standardized test, through the nail-biting day when the good or bad news arrives from the admissions office, to the “yellow, bald, toothless meetings in memory of red cheeks, black hair, and departed health,” as Ralph Waldo Emerson described his twentieth college reunion nearly two centuries ago (men aged more quickly in those days). The best week of the year for your local news vendor is probably the week *U.S. News & World Report* comes out with its annual college rankings

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issue. Rival publications from *Playboy* to *Princeton Review* peddle their own lists of best party colleges, best “green” colleges, best for minorities, best for cost versus value, and, of course, their versions of the best of the best. If you Google the word “college”—even if you screen out such irrelevancies as “electoral college” or “college of cardinals”—you run the risk of overloading your computer. When I tried it not long ago, I got 52,800,000 hits.

Most of the chatter does little, however, to answer the question of what a good college is or ought to be. In fact, the criteria we use to assess the quality of a college—number of publications by its faculty, size of endowment, selectivity in admissions, rate of alumni giving, even graduation rates—tell very little about what it does for its students. In a *New Yorker* article not long ago, Malcolm Gladwell pointed out that faculty compensation, which is one standard measure of college quality, may actually have an inverse relation to faculty engagement in teaching—since the best-paid professors are likely to be at research universities, where undergraduate teaching tends to be a sideline activity.¹

Yet we use the terms “college” and “university” interchangeably. “She went to Michigan,” we say, or “he goes to Oberlin”—not bothering with the noun that follows the name, as if a college and a university were the same thing. They are not. They are, to be sure, interconnected (most college teachers nowadays hold an advanced university degree), and a college may exist as a division or “school” within a university. But a college and a university have—or should have—different purposes. The former is about transmitting knowledge of and from the past to undergraduate students so they may draw upon it as a living resource in the future. The latter is mainly an array of research activities conducted by faculty and graduate students with the aim of creating new knowledge in order to supersede the past.

Both of these are worthy aims, and sometimes they converge, as when a college student works with a scholar or scientist doing “cutting-edge” or “groundbreaking” research—terms of praise that would have been incomprehensible before the advent of the modern university. More often, however, these purposes come into competition if not conflict, especially as one moves up the ladder of prestige. As the man who created one of the world’s great universities, the University of California, acknowledged with unusual honesty, “a superior faculty results in an inferior concern for undergraduate teaching.” It has been nearly fifty years since Clark Kerr identified this “cruel paradox” as “one of our more pressing problems.” Today it is more pressing than ever.²

But what, exactly, is at stake in college, and why should it matter how much or little goes on there? At its core, a college should be a place where young people find help for navigating the territory between adolescence and adulthood. It should provide guidance, but not coercion, for students trying to cross that treacherous terrain on their way toward self-knowledge. It should help them develop certain qualities of mind and heart requisite for reflective citizenship. Here is my own attempt at reducing these qualities to a list, in no particular order of priority, since they are inseparable from one another:

1. A skeptical discontent with the present, informed by a sense of the past.
2. The ability to make connections among seemingly disparate phenomena.
3. Appreciation of the natural world, enhanced by knowledge of science and the arts.
4. A willingness to imagine experience from perspectives other than one’s own.
5. A sense of ethical responsibility.

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These habits of thought and feeling are hard to attain and harder to sustain. They cannot be derived from exclusive study of the humanities, the natural sciences, or the social sciences, and they cannot be fully developed solely by academic study, no matter how well “distributed” or “rounded.” It is absurd to imagine them as commodities to be purchased by and delivered to student consumers. Ultimately they make themselves known not in grades or examinations but in the way we live our lives.

Still, encouraging and fostering them should be among the aims of a college education, and in the pages that follow I will have critical things to say about how well we are doing at meeting this responsibility. I have been reluctant, however, to join the hue and cry that the condition of our colleges is dire. Everywhere, and all the time—or so, at least, it seems—we hear about “administrative bloat, overpriced tuition, overpaid teachers, decadent facilities, and subpar educational experiences.”³ This cry of crisis is very old. As early as 1776, Abigail Adams was writing to her husband that college students “complain that their professor . . . is taken off by public business to their great detriment,” and that education has “never been in a worse state.” More than a century later, the president of Stanford University declared that “the most pressing problem in American higher education is the care of underclassmen, the freshmen and sophomores.”⁴ It would not be difficult to compile a list of similar laments stretching from the colonial period into the present.

So anyone who writes about the state of our colleges today has a boy-who-cried-wolf problem. But that does not mean that the wolf is not at the door. The American college is going through a period of wrenching change, buffeted by forces—globalization; economic instability; the ongoing revolution in information technology; the increasingly evident inadequacy of K–12 educa-

tion; the elongation of adolescence; the breakdown of faculty tenure as an academic norm; and, perhaps most important, the collapse of consensus about what students should know—that make its task more difficult and contentious than ever before. For now, let me pause on just one of these forces—what is sometimes called the “casualization” or “adjunctification” of the faculty—by way of the CEO of a high-tech company who offers an ominous analogy.

Once upon a time, he says, thousands of pianists provided live music in America’s movie theaters; then, one day, the technology of the soundtrack arrived, and suddenly all those musicians went out of business except for “two piano players [who] moved to L.A.” to produce recorded movie music. By analogy, course “content” (readings, lectures, problem sets, quizzes, and the like) can now be uploaded onto interactive websites, and instructors hired, essentially as pieceworkers, to evaluate students’ work online. People who, in the pre-digital past, would have been teachers in college classrooms will have to “go and do more productive things”—just as those obsolete piano players had to do.⁵

It is no accident that science-oriented institutions such as MIT and Carnegie Mellon are leading the way in developing new technologies for “online” learning; and while, as former Princeton president William Bowen puts it, these technologies have already proven their value for fields “where there is a ‘single right answer’ to many questions” (Bowen’s example is statistics), the jury is out on whether they can be successfully adapted as a means to advance genuinely humanistic education. As the British education scholar Alison Wolf writes, “we have not found any low-cost, high-technology alternatives to expert human teachers”—at least not yet.⁶

This specter, though it is spreading across the landscape of higher education, will be only a shadow edging into view on the

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periphery of the story to be told in this book. That is because my focus is on the so-called elite colleges, which have so far been relatively immune to the gutting of the faculty that is already far advanced at more vulnerable institutions. Yet the role of faculty is changing everywhere, and no college is impervious to the larger forces that, depending on one's point of view, promise to transform, or threaten to undermine, it. As these forces bear down upon us, neither lamentation nor celebration will do. Instead, they seem to me to compel us to confront some basic questions about the purposes and possibilities of a college education at a time when there is more and more demand for it and less and less agreement about what it should be. In the face of these uncertainties, this book is an attempt to state some fundamental principles that have been inherited from the past, are under radical challenge in the present, and, in my view, remain indispensable for the future.

Before the story begins, I should say a bit more about my choice of emphasis. As one scholar puts it, over the history of American higher education, "the pattern set by Harvard, Yale, and Princeton . . . became that of colleges all over the country."⁷ Along with a handful of others, these institutions have established curricular norms, admissions procedures, financial aid principles, and even the rites and ceremonies of college life. However unhealthy the public obsession with them may be, or how disproportionate the attention they command (a gross disproportion considering their relatively small enrollments), it remains the case that it is these institutions through which the long arc of educational history can best be discerned. And if they have peculiar salience for understanding the past, they wield considerable influence in the present debate over which educational principles should be sustained, adapted, or abandoned in the future.

But if my institutional focus is relatively narrow, I have also tried to keep in view the enormous diversity, as one writer puts it, of the “widely varying instances of what we call college.”⁸ One of the great strengths of America’s educational “system” is that it has never really been a system at all. There are roughly four thousand colleges in the United States: rural, urban, and suburban; non-profit, for-profit; secular, religious; some small and independent, others within large research institutions; some highly selective, others that admit almost anyone who applies and has the means to pay. Over the last twenty years or so, I have visited more than a hundred colleges of many kinds, which has helped, I hope, to mitigate the risk of imagining them as close variations of the ones I know best.

Even a quick scan of this landscape reveals how radically the meaning of college is changing, and how rapidly the disparities among institutions are growing.⁹ For a relatively few students, college remains the sort of place that Anthony Kronman, former dean of Yale Law School, recalls from his days at Williams, where his favorite class took place at the home of a philosophy professor whose two golden retrievers slept on either side of the fireplace “like bookends beside the hearth” while the sunset lit the Berkshire hills “in scarlet and gold.” For many more students, college means the anxious pursuit of marketable skills in overcrowded, underresourced institutions, where little attention is paid to that elusive entity sometimes called the “whole person.” For still others, it means traveling by night to a fluorescent office building or to a “virtual classroom” that exists only in cyberspace. It is a pipe dream to imagine that every student can have the sort of experience that our richest colleges, at their best, provide. But it is a nightmare society that affords the chance to learn and grow only to the wealthy, brilliant, or lucky few. Many remarkable teachers

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in America's community colleges, unsung private colleges, and underfunded public colleges live this truth every day, working to keep the ideal of democratic education alive.

And so it is my unabashed aim in this book to articulate what a college—any college—should seek to do for its students. A short statement of that obligation can be found in John Updike's last novel, *Terrorist*, about the son of an absentee Egyptian immigrant father and an Irish American mother growing up in Rust Belt New Jersey. The boy is persuaded by a local imam that he should learn the pieties and purities of his father's faith rather than expose himself to moral corruption in an American college. For different reasons, the boy's mother also sees no need for her son to extend his student days beyond high school. When the college counselor disagrees and tries to change her mind, she asks, "What would he study at college?" The counselor replies, "What anybody studies—science, art, history. The story of mankind, of civilization. How we got here, what now?"

In the pages that follow, these two questions will be asked about college itself: "How we got here, what now?"