

What Is College For?

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What . . . are today's prevailing answers to the question, what is college for? There are basically three. The most common answer is an economic one, though it is really two linked answers: first, that providing more people with a college education is good for the economic health of the nation; and second, that going to college is good for the economic competitiveness of the individuals who constitute the nation.

Politicians tend to emphasize the first point, as when Richard Riley, secretary of education under President Clinton, said in a much-quoted comment that we must educate our workers for an increasingly predictable future:

We are currently preparing students for jobs that don't exist using technologies that haven't been invented in order to solve problems that we don't even know are problems yet.

President Obama makes the same point more briefly: "countries that out-teach us today will out-compete us tomorrow."¹

As for the second economic rationale—the competitiveness of individuals—it's clear that a college degree long ago supplanted the high school diploma as the minimum qualification for entry into the skilled labor market, and there is abundant evidence that people with a college degree earn more money over the course of their lives than people without one. One authority claims that those who hold a BA degree earn roughly 60 percent more, on average, over their lifetime than those who do not. Some estimates put the worth of a BA degree at about a million dollars in incremental lifetime earnings. More conservative analysts, taking account of the cost of obtaining the degree, arrive at a more modest number, but there is little dispute that one reason to go to college is to increase one's earning power.²

From *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be* by Andrew Delbanco, the Mendelson Family Chair of American Studies and the Julian Clarence Levi Professor in the Humanities at Columbia University, New York, NY. © 2012 by Princeton University Press. Excerpted by permission.

For such economic reasons alone, it is alarming that the United States has been slipping relative to other developed nations as measured by the percentage of its younger population with at least some postsecondary education. There are differences of opinion about how much we have slipped, but there is general agreement that American leadership in higher education is in jeopardy and can no longer be taken for granted. For the first time in our history, we face the prospect that the coming generation of adult Americans will be less educated than their elders.³

Within this gloomy general picture are some especially disturbing particulars. For one thing, flat or declining college attainment rates (relative to other nations) apply disproportionately to minorities, who are a growing portion of the American population. And financial means has a shockingly large bearing on educational opportunity, which, according to one authority, looks like this in today's America: if you are the child of a family making more than \$90,000 per year, your odds of getting a BA by age twenty-four are roughly one in two; if your family's income is between \$60,000 and \$90,000, your odds are roughly one in four; if your parents make less than \$35,000, your odds are one in seventeen.⁴

Moreover, among those who do get to college, high-achieving students from affluent families are four times more likely to attend a selective college than students from poor families with comparable grades and test scores.⁵ And since prestigious colleges (prestige correlates almost exactly with selectivity) serve as funnels into leadership positions in business, law, and government, this means that our "best" colleges are doing more to sustain than to retard the growth of inequality in our society. Yet colleges are still looked to as engines of social mobility in American life, and it would be shameful if they became, even more than they are already, a system for replicating inherited wealth.

Not surprisingly, as in any discussion of economic matters, one finds dissenters from the predominant view. Some on the right say that pouring more public investment into higher education, in the form of enhanced subsidies for individuals or institutions, is a bad idea. They say that the easy availability of government funds is one reason for inflation in the price of tuition. They argue against the goal of universal college education as a fond fantasy and, instead, for a sorting system such as one finds in European countries, where children are directed according to test results early in life toward the kind of schooling deemed suitable for them: vocational training for the low-scorers, who will be the semiskilled laborers and functionaries;

advanced education for the high-scorers, who will be the diplomats and doctors, and so on.⁶

Others, on the left, question whether the aspiration to go to college really makes sense for “low-income students who can least afford to spend money and years” on such a risky venture, given their low graduation rates and high debt. Such skeptics point out, too, that most new jobs likely to be created over the next decade will probably not require a college degree. From this point of view, the “education gospel” seems a cruel distraction from “what really provides security to families and children: good jobs at fair wages, robust unions, affordable access to health care and transportation.”⁷

One can be on either side of these questions, or somewhere in the middle, and still believe in the goal of achieving universal college education. Consider an analogy from another sphere of public debate: health care. One sometimes hears that eliminating smoking would save untold billions because of the immense cost of caring for patients who develop lung cancer, emphysema, heart disease, or diabetes—among the many diseases caused or exacerbated by smoking. It turns out, however, that reducing the incidence of disease by curtailing smoking (one of the major public-health successes of recent decades) may actually end up costing us more, since people who don’t smoke live longer, and eventually require expensive therapies for chronic diseases and the inevitable infirmities of old age. Yet who does not think it a good thing when a person stops smoking and thereby improves his or her chances of living a longer and healthier life? In other words, measuring the benefit as a social cost or social gain does not quite get the point—or at least not the whole point. The best reason to end smoking is that people who don’t smoke have a better chance to lead better lives.⁸ The best reason to care about college—who goes, and what happens to them when they get there—is not what it does for society in economic terms but what it can do for individuals, in both calculable and incalculable ways.

The second argument for the importance of college is a political one, though one rarely hears it from politicians. “The basis of our government,” as Thomas Jefferson put the matter near the end of the eighteenth century, is “the opinion of the people.” And so if the new republic was to flourish and endure, it required above all, an educated citizenry—a conviction in which Jefferson was joined by John Adams, who disagreed with him on just about everything else, but who concurred that “the whole people must take upon themselves the education of the whole people, and must be willing to bear the expense of it.”⁹

This is more true than ever. All of us are bombarded every day with pleadings and persuasions, of which many are distortions and deceptions—advertisements, political appeals, punditry of all sorts—designed to capture our loyalty, money, or, more narrowly, our vote. Some say health-care reform will bankrupt the country, others that it is an overdue act of justice; some believe that abortion is the work of Satan, others think that to deny a woman the right to terminate an unwanted pregnancy is a form of abuse; some regard nuclear energy as our best chance to break free from fossil fuels others describe it, especially in the wake of the tsunami in Japan, as Armageddon waiting to happen. Any such list could be extended indefinitely with conflicting claims between which citizens must choose or somehow mediate, so it should be obvious that the best chance we have to maintain a functioning democracy is a citizenry that can tell the difference between demagoguery and responsible arguments.

About a hundred years ago, a professor of moral philosophy at Oxford, John Alexander Smith, got to the nub of the matter:

“Gentlemen,” he said to the incoming class (the students were all men in those days, “Nothing that you will learn in the course of your studies will be of the slightest possible use to you in after life—save only this—that if you work hard and intelligently, you should be able to detect when a man is talking rot, and that, in my view, is the main, if not the sole purpose of education.”¹⁰

Americans tend to prefer a two-syllable synonym, bullshit, for the one-syllable Anglicism, rot—and so we might say that the most important thing one can acquire in college is a well-functioning bullshit meter.¹¹ It’s a technology that will never become obsolete.

Putting it this way may sound flippant, but a serious point is at stake: education for democracy not only requires extending educational opportunity but also implies something about what kind of education democratic citizens need. A very good case for college in this sense has been made recently by former Yale Law School dean Anthony Kronman, who now teaches in a Great Books program for Yale undergraduates. In a book with the double-entendre title, *Education’s End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life*, Kronman argues for a course of study (at Yale it is voluntary; at my college, Columbia, it is compulsory) that introduces students to the constitutive ideas of Western culture. At Yale, relatively few students, about 10 percent of the entering class, are admitted

to this program, which is called “Directed Studies.” At Columbia, the “Core Curriculum” is required of all students, which has the advantage, since they are randomly assigned to sections (currently capped at twenty-two), of countering their tendency to associate mainly with classmates from the same socioeconomic or ethnic background, or in their own major or club or fraternity house. The Core also counters the provincialism of the faculty. Senior and junior professors, along with graduate student instructors, gather weekly to discuss the assigned texts—a rare opportunity for faculty from different fields, and at different stages in their careers, to consider substantive questions. And, not least among its benefits, it links all students in the college to one another through a body of common knowledge: once they have gone through the Core, no student is a complete stranger to any other.

Whether such a curriculum is an option or an obligation, its value is vividly evident in Kronman’s enumeration of the ideas it raises for discussion and debate:

The ideals of individual freedom and toleration; of democratic government; of respect for the rights of minorities and for human rights generally; a reliance on markets as a mechanism for the organization of economic life and a recognition of the need for markets to be regulated by a supervenient political authority; a reliance, in the political realm, on the methods of bureaucratic administration, with its formal division of functions and legal separation of office from officeholder; an acceptance of the truths of modern science and the ubiquitous employment of its technological products: all these provide, in many parts of the world, the existing foundations of political, social, and economic life, and where they do not, they are viewed as aspirational goals toward which everyone has the strongest moral and material reasons to strive.¹²

Anyone who earns a BA from a reputable college ought to understand something about the genealogy of these ideas and practices, about the historical processes from which they have emerged, the tragic cost when societies fail to defend them, and about alternative ideas both within the Western tradition and outside it. That’s a tall order for anyone to satisfy on his or her own—and one of the marks of an educated person is the recognition that it can never be adequately done and is therefore all the more worth doing.

Both of these cases for college—the argument for national and individual competitiveness, and the argument for inclusive democratic citizenship—are serious and compelling. But there is a third case, more rarely heard, perhaps because it is harder to articulate without sounding platitudinous and vague. I first heard it stated in a plain and passionate way after I had spoken to an alumni group from the college in which I teach. I had been commending Columbia’s core curriculum—which, in addition to two yearlong courses in literary and philosophical classics, also requires the study of art and music for one semester each. Recently, a new course called “Frontiers of Science,” designed to ensure that students leave college with some basic understanding of contemporary scientific developments, has been added. The emphasis in my talk was on the Jeffersonian argument—education for citizenship. When I had finished, an elderly alumnus stood up and said more or less the following: “That’s all very nice, professor, but you’ve missed the main point.” With some trepidation, I asked him what that point might be. “Columbia,” he said, “taught me how to enjoy life.”

What he meant was that college had opened his senses as well as his mind to experiences that would otherwise be foreclosed for him. Not only his capacity to read demanding works of literature and to grasp fundamental political ideas, but also his alertness to color and form, melody and harmony, had been heightened and deepened—and now, in the late years of his life, he was grateful. Such an education is a hedge against utilitarian values. It has no room for dogma—only for debate about the meaning, or meanings, of truth. It slakes the human craving for contact with works of art that somehow register one’s own longings and yet exceed what one has been able to articulate by and for oneself. As the gentleman reminded me, it is among the invaluable experiences of the fulfilled life, and surely our colleges have an obligation to coax and prod students toward it.

If all that seems too pious and earnest, I think of a comparably personal comment I once heard my colleague Judith Shapiro, former provost of Bryn Mawr and then president of Barnard, make to a group of young people about what they should expect from college: “You want the inside of your head to be an interesting place to spend the rest of your life.” What both Judith and the Columbia alum were talking about is sometimes called “liberal education”—a hazardous term today since it has nothing necessarily to do with liberal politics in the modern sense of the word. (Former Beloit College president Victor Ferrall suggests scrapping that troublesome adjective and replacing it with something bland like “broad, open, inclusive” or simply

“general.”)¹³ The phrase *liberal education* derives from the classical tradition of *artes liberales*, which was reserved in Greece and Rome—where women were considered inferior and slavery was an accepted feature of civilized society—for “those free men or gentlemen possessed of the requisite leisure for study.”¹⁴ Conserved by medieval scholastics, renewed in the scholarly resurgence we call the Renaissance, and again in the Enlightenment, the tradition of liberal learning survived and thrived in Europe, but remained largely the possession of ruling elites.

Seen in this long view, the distinctive American contribution has been the attempt to democratize it, to deploy it on behalf of the cardinal American principle that all persons, regardless of origin, have the right to pursue happiness—and that “getting to know,” in Matthew Arnold’s much-quoted phrase, “the best which has been thought and said in the world” is helpful to that pursuit. This view of what it means to be educated is often caricatured as snobbish and narrow, beholden to the old and wary of the new; but in fact it is neither, as Arnold makes clear by the (seldom quoted) phrase with which he completes his point: “and through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits.”¹⁵ In other words, knowledge of the past helps us to think critically about the present.

Arguably the most eloquent defense of liberal education remains that of Arnold’s contemporary John Henry Newman in *The Idea of a University* (1852), where, in a definition that encompasses science as well as what is customarily called the “humanities,” he describes liberal knowledge as “knowledge which stands on its own pretensions, which is independent of sequel, expects no complement, refuses to be *informed* (as it is called) by any end, or absorbed into any art, in order duly to present itself to our contemplation.”¹⁶ In today’s America, at every kind of institution—from underfunded community colleges to the wealthiest Ivies—this kind of education is at risk. Students are pressured and programmed, trained to live from task to task, relentlessly rehearsed and tested until winners are culled from the rest. They scarcely have time for what Newman calls contemplation, and too many colleges do too little to save them from the debilitating frenzy that makes liberal education marginal or merely ornamental—if it is offered at all.¹⁷

In this respect, notwithstanding the bigotries and prejudices of earlier generations, we might not be so quick to say that today’s colleges mark an advance over those of the past. Consider a once-popular college novel

written a hundred years ago, *Stover at Yale* (1912), in which the young Yale declares, "I'm going to do the very best thing a fellow can do at our age, I'm going to loaf."¹⁸ Stover speaks from the immemorial past, and what he says is likely to sound to us today like a sneering boast from the idle rich. But there is a more dignified sense in which "loaf" is the colloquial equivalent of what Newman meant by contemplation, and has always been part of the promise of American life. "I loaf and invite my soul," says Walt Whitman in that great democratic poem *Song of Myself*, "I lean and loaf at my ease observing a spear of summer grass."

Surely, every American college ought to defend this waning possibility, whatever we call it. And an American college is only true to itself when it opens its doors to all—rich, middling, and poor—who have the capacity to embrace the precious chance to think and reflect before life engulfs them. If we are serious about democracy, that means everyone. 🌐

ENDNOTES

1. Riley, quoted in Mildred Garcia, "A New Model of Liberal Learning for the 21st Century," *DailyBreeze.com*, November 23, 2009. Garcia, a staunch defender of liberal education, is president of California State University at Dominguez Hills, a community college serving a large minority population. President Obama, quoted in *Politico*, February 24, 2009.
2. Alison Wolf, *Does Education Matter? Myths about Education and Economic Growth* (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 18: "The more educated you are, the more likely you are to be in work, to stay in work, and to enjoy stable, long-term employment on a permanent contract." There is also evidence that an associate's degree from a two-year college, or completing even a year or two at a four-year college, has measurable economic value. Relative to their starting point, students who gain the most in economic terms seem to be those from poor families, or from families where no one has previously attended college, or from minority groups with lower college-going rates. See David Glenn, "Disadvantaged Students May Benefit Most from Attending College," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 1, 2010. Recent data are available in "The College Payoff: Education, Occupation, Lifetime Earnings," <http://cew.georgetown.edu/collegepayoff/>, released on August 5, 2011, by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, in partnership with the Lumina Foundation.
3. See Clifford Adelman, *The Spaces Between Numbers: Getting International Data on Higher Education Straight* (Washington DC: Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2009) and Jane V. Wellman, *Apples and Oranges in the Flat World: A Layperson's Guide to International Comparisons of Postsecondary Education* (Washington DC: American Council on Education, 2007).
4. Brian K. Fitzgerald, "Missed Opportunities: Has College Opportunity Fallen Victim to Policy Drift?" *Change* 36, no. 4 (July–August 2004): 14. The estimates of chances to attend college are cited, with permission, from a talk given on March 5, 2010, by Eugene Tobin, former president of Hamilton College, currently program officer on higher education at the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Tobin was drawing on Ross Douthat, "Does Meritocracy Work?" *Atlantic Monthly*, November 2005, p. 120; and William G. Bowen, Martin A. Kurzweil, and Eugene M. Tobin, *Equity and Excellence in American Higher Education* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), pp. 77–94.
5. Danette Gerald and Kati Haycock, "Engines of Inequality: Diminishing Equity in the Na-

- tion's Premier Public Universities" (Washington DC: Education Trust, 2006).
6. See, for example, Charles Murray, "Are Too Many People Going to College?" *The American* (Journal of the American Enterprise Institute) 2, no. 5 (September–October 2008): 40–49.
 7. Ann Larson, "Higher Education's Big Lie," *InsideHigherEd.com*, June 3, 2010; and Jacques Steinberg, "Plan B: Skip College," *New York Times*, May 14, 2010.
 8. Jan J. Barendregt et al., "The Health Care Costs of Smoking," *New England Journal of Medicine* 337 (October 9, 1997): 1052–57.
 9. In Lester J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), p. 480.
 10. Smith made this statement at Oxford in 1914.
 11. In a talk delivered at the National Convention for Teachers of English, published in Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (New York: Delacorte, 1969), Postman credited the phrase "crap detector" to Ernest Hemingway as a term describing the one thing necessary for good writing.
 12. Anthony Kronman, *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 172–173.
 13. Victor E. Ferrall Jr., *Liberal Arts on the Brink* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 8.
 14. Bruce Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education* (1986), quoted in Francis Oakley, *Community of Learning: The American College and the Liberal Arts Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 51.
 15. Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), ed. Samuel Lipman (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 5.
 16. John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (1852), ed. Frank M. Turner (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 81.
 17. My impression is at odds with that of Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), who estimate that today's college students, on average, spend only twelve hours per week studying (p. 69). Arum and Roksa suggest that students at highly selective colleges spend somewhat more—around fifteen hours. Other studies such as that of Philip Babcock and Mindy Marks, summarized in *Leisure College USA: The Decline in Student Study Time* (Washington DC: American Enterprise Institute, 2010), conclude that study time has declined by roughly 50 percent over the half century since 1961. For a more nuanced view, see Alexander C. McCormick, "It's About Time: What to Make of Reported Declines in How Much College Students Study," *Liberal Education* 97, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 30–39 (published by the Association of American Colleges and Universities). McCormick calls attention to such factors as "efficiency gains due to new technologies" (by which he means word processing versus the longhand writing or mechanical typewriting of fifty years ago), as well as to the different meanings of "week" that students have in mind (some mean five days, others seven) in responding to survey questions about their study habits.
 18. Owen Johnson, *Stover at Yale* (1912; Boston: Little, Brown, 1926), p. 234.