

The Public Value of Higher Education

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There has been a renewed debate about the crisis of higher education, particularly about American public institutions, although the nature of this crisis and how best to address it remains unclear. Some critics of higher education have followed the concerns laid out in the 2006 Spellings Commission’s Report, *A Test of Leadership*, that finds the American workforce is increasingly ill-prepared for a globalized “knowledge economy” because of the marginalization of undergraduate learning in American colleges and universities.¹ Works like *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* and *We’re Losing Our Minds: Rethinking American Higher Education* confirm these fears that American higher education is not providing the requisite skills for a twenty-first-century workforce.² According to these critics, the crisis of American higher education is its inability to deliver an education for the United States to remain competitive in a globalized economy.

A second and related concern is the decline of liberal education as economic considerations have overtaken the primary mission of American colleges and universities. Books like *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, *Why Choose the Liberal Arts*, and *Education’s End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given up on the Meaning of Life* defend the need of liberal education in an academic environment that is increasingly being defined by economic utility.³ Although these authors differ in their reasons as to why liberal education is essential to American higher education, they all agree that liberal education, particularly the humanities, should return to the center of colleges’ and universities’ curriculum—a similar argument that was made more than thirty years ago in Allan Bloom’s *Closing the American Mind*.⁴

A third set of concerns have looked at the organizational and administrative structure of American higher education.⁵ Faculty need to return to the primary mission of colleges and universities in teaching undergraduate students rather than specializing in arcane scholarship and conducting courses on esoteric topics. Whereas faculty need to be encouraged and motivated to focus on teaching, public colleges and universities need to show their communities they exist for

the common good. American higher education needs to change the public's perception that it is like any other business that looks out only for its own interest and instead demonstrate to people that it is public good for society.⁶

Fourth, questions about access to American higher education has raised concerns about its value: the costs of colleges and universities no longer outweighs its economic benefits.⁷ The 2011 PEW Research Center Report shows that a majority of Americans (57%) say that higher education fails to provide students the good value for the money they and their families spend and even a larger majority (75%) say college is too expensive.⁸ Nearly half of college graduates (49%) say that paying off debt makes it harder to pay for other bills and a quarter says it has had an impact on their career choice.⁹

Finally, there is increasingly political polarization about the value of American higher education. Republicans have grown increasingly negative about the impact of colleges and universities on the U.S.¹⁰ 58% of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents say that higher education have a negative effect on the way things are going in the country, while just 36% says the effect is positive. By contrast, 72% of Democrats see colleges and universities having a positive impact on the country. Recent events—such as the controversy over free speech and race on college campuses—have given the impression that American colleges and universities are bastion of liberal ideologies, values contrary to Republicans and Republican-leaning independents.¹¹

It is evident from the concerns listed above that a crisis exists in higher education but there is no agreement about the nature of this crisis or how to address it. Perhaps another way to examine this problem is to ask how public colleges and universities can be relevant to their communities. What role and mission should these institutions adopt to show the public its value? But before exploring possible answers to these questions, it would be worthwhile to review the history of higher education in the United States.

The American Founders desired an educated and self-governing citizenry to keep the new republic intact.¹² Education was to instill the republican values of liberty and self-government and make American youth future civic leaders. At least ten of the nation's founders also were founders of academic institutions, with the most famous being Thomas Jefferson's University of Virginia (established in 1819, opened in 1825). As a nondenominational place of higher learning, the

University of Virginia was “to establish in the upper & healthier country, & more central for the state an University on a plan so broad & liberal & modern, as to be worth patronizing with the public support.”¹³

Although Washington, along with other prominent founders, favored the creation of a national university, a system of many state-supported institutions emerged.¹⁴ Rev. Manasseh Cutler, an author of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, successfully negotiated with Congress for setting aside two square miles for a public university. Ohio University in Athens (founded in 1804) became the first state university west of the Appalachian Mountains. When new states entered the Union, they also received public land for the endowment of a university.¹⁵ When the 1862 Morrill Act was enacted, land grant colleges and universities extended to the west coast with twenty states already having state universities.¹⁶

Prior to the Civil War, the primary mission of colleges and universities was teaching undergraduates to become good democratic citizens and leaders. These institutions offered a liberal arts curriculum because it was believed that a well-rounded individual was necessary for democratic citizenship.¹⁷ However, there also emerged institutions that emphasized technical education in agricultural and industrial sciences. The Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 provided land grants and federal funding that stimulated state legislatures to establish agricultural and mechanical colleges and universities. Influenced by the German research-oriented university, these types of universities started after the Civil War with some of them later becoming leading institutions in American higher education.¹⁸

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, American colleges and universities continued their mission of serving the nation of making democratic citizens and leaders through liberal and technical education. But they also expanded opportunities to previously excluded groups as the concept of democracy itself widen to include equal treatment of students and equal access for all people, including the poor, women, and racial and ethnic minorities.¹⁹ Adult education programs were established in such places like Chautauqua University (1883–92) that pioneered summer sessions, correspondence courses, and extension services. These ideas would in turn influence other institutions, culminating into what would be known in 1904 as the “Wisconsin Idea.”²⁰

The democratization of American higher education continued throughout the twentieth century with the community college movement, the G.I. Bill, the California Plan, the Civil Rights Movement, and other federal programs. But it was the emergence and dominance of graduate

institutions around 1900 that redefined the mission of American higher education as teaching, research, and public service.²¹ Teaching was a legacy from the American Founding of creating democratic citizens and leaders, while research was influenced by German-style universities and comported well in the practical culture of the United States in the belief that the great research universities would advance basic knowledge and provide technical expertise required by a modern industrial society.²² Public service came from the Progressive political ideology that sought to combine the teaching and research missions of colleges and universities to transmit higher knowledge to the public through external activities like applied research, off-campus courses, and service learning.

The “Wisconsin Idea” was the most famous articulation of this public service mission and became a model for subsequent schools. The “Wisconsin Idea” was the University of Wisconsin’s commitment to serve the entire population of the state. Specifically, university faculty expertise was incorporated into state government planning and the university extension services were made available throughout the state.²³ Drawing national attention, the “Wisconsin Idea” influenced many other state universities to elevate public service as part of a university’s core mission.²⁴

Critics of this new mission argued that public service was in practice submission to business or state interests. Faculty also was concerned about business leaders involving themselves in higher education and universities, patterning themselves after the bureaucratic structures of corporations and the state.²⁵ Since this time, this threat of institutional autonomy whether from government or commercial pressures has remained a constant concern for American higher education.²⁶

Most of this concern has centered on the source of funding. Prior to World War II, funding for expensive and specialized research came from philanthropic foundations or business corporations. During and after World War II, the federal government became the dominant patron of major research universities, although private foundations continued to fund research in the social sciences. Most recently, starting in the 1970s, there has been a shift from basic and military research to civilian and commercial to meet the needs of a global economy.²⁷ This latest shift from a theoretical model to an entrepreneurial one under the rubric of public service has raised questions about what actually constitutes public service and its rationale.

Today the American multifunctional university still clings to its three-fold mission of teaching, research, and public service. When looking back at the history of American higher education, these three activities have fulfilled critical functions in society: teaching democratic citizens and leaders,

research for economic progress, and public service for the improvement of society. However, this mission has become increasingly questioned and criticized. This symposium about the role and value of public higher education is to examine what possible answers colleges and universities can provide to demonstrate their relevance to society.²⁸

The first article, “The Character Model for the American University,” is my proposal that colleges and universities return to a concept of character development, particularly the cultivation of practical and theoretical reason, in their students. Based on Aristotle’s understanding of *phronēsis* (prudence), I explain how the character model forces colleges and universities to rethink what constitutes their core mission. Recognizing this proposal is an ideal type, I then show how a general education curriculum could be adjusted to match the character model for higher education and conclude with some thoughts about how faculty and administrators can better align their roles with this model.

In “Public Higher Education and the Responsibility to Invite Students to the Political,” Carol McNamara argues that public universities must recreate Jefferson’s mission of civic engagement by first engaging students in a conversation about political questions and ideas, and then by involving students in a serious discussion about policy issues. Such an education constitutes a genuine civic education and prepares students to address the issues confronting them and their communities. A return to the Jefferson does not result in political polarization, for this type of civic education promotes a thoughtful combat of ideas rather than intellectual conformity.

The third article, Luigi Bradizza’s “The Political Role of the Public University,” continues this conversation about the role of the university as promoting conversation rather than ideological dogmatism. However, as creatures of the state, public universities are fragile and it is the task of faculty and administrators to recognize this fragility. Although their role and place in intellectual history is modest, public universities should be satisfied with the preservation and transmission of past knowledge to the next generation. For public universities to fulfill this mission, they rely upon liberal democracy’s culture of freedom of speech, inquiry, and the press; therefore, this task is inherently political. The university consequently must actively contribute to this culture of liberty to fulfill its mission.

Finally, Claudia Franziska Brühwiler examines a public European university as a point of comparison and contrast to American ones in her “‘We’ll Manage’?—European Public Universities

and the Refugee Crisis.” European public universities in Switzerland, Germany, and other countries have opened their lecture halls to refugees by facilitating admissions, offering stipends, and other accommodations. They have assumed responsibility for refugees who had to abandon studies in their home countries in the hope that refugees can continue their education, thereby raising the broader question of what constitutes a university’s civic duty and public responsibility.

As stated in the beginning of this article, higher education, whether in the United States or abroad, is facing a number of challenges that need addressing if colleges and universities wish to be valued and supported by society. Of course, the remedies will differ as specific institutions are confronted with different contexts; but still some generalizable proposals can be put forward as ways for administrators, faculty, students, and the public to reflect about the role and value of higher education in their communities. Doing just more of the same is no longer a viable option for most public colleges and universities: they need to reimagine and creatively rethink about their place in society to show their value to the public.

Notes

1. Spellings.
2. Arum and Roska; Keeling and Hersh.
3. Kronman; Roche; Nussbaum; Roth; Trepanier.
4. Bloom.
5. Taylor; Riley.
6. Apple; Giroux, “Neoliberalism, Corporate Culture, and the Promise of Higher Education”; Powers; Bok; Washburn; Hill and Kumar; Tuchman; Canaan and Shumar; King-White.
7. Hacker and Dreifus.
8. PEW, *Is College Worth It?* 5–6, 9.
9. Ibid.
10. PEW, “Sharp Partisan Divisions in Views of National Institutions.”

11. Villasenor: A fifth of American college undergraduates say it is acceptable to use physical force to silence a speaker who makes “offensive and hurtful statements.” For the most recent race controversy on college campuses, see Quintana.
12. Pangle and Pangle 4–5; Hellenbrand 11.
13. Jefferson 175.
14. Johnson 129, 147; Roseboom 57, 53.
15. Brubacher and Rudy 154.
16. Johnson 127.
17. Reading 4.
18. Brubacher and Rudy 61–64, 288.
19. Veysey 62–66.
20. Scott.
21. Veysey 444.
22. Brubacher and Rudy 177.
23. Ibid. 164–65; Veysey 108.
24. Brubacher and Rudy 166–168; Lucas 174–75, 292.
25. Barrow 7, 10; Perkin 20–29.
26. Hawkins xi; Axelrod 3–7; Giroux, “Critical Education or Training” and “Neoliberalism, Corporate Culture, and the Promise of Higher Education”; Gould.
27. Slaughter 62.
28. These papers were presented at the 2017 American Political Science Conference, August 31–September 3, San Francisco, California, sponsored by the McConnell Center for

Political Leadership. We would like the McConnell Center at the University of Louisville for sponsoring this symposium.

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