

College: What it Was, Is, and Should Be

Steve Backer, Southeast Missouri State University

In *College: What it Was, Is, and Should Be*, Dr. Andrew Delbanco approaches the institution of college from a historical standpoint of where it has come from since the founding of Harvard in 1636, and often looks at the big picture of higher education through his lens as a former faculty member. According to the author, the book is “an attempt to state some fundamental principles that have been inherited from the past, are under radical challenge, and in [the author’s] view, remain indispensable for the future” (p. 6).

What it was

There is much criticism today against higher education, and in many respects, there is a fair argument against the utility of the attainment of a degree. The author notes the areas of today’s university that are virtually identical to some of the first universities that existed in America. A new college president learns quickly higher education is an industry that has changed sluggishly. If one walked on a college 100 years ago and then again today, they would notice several aesthetic differences but when looking at the style of teaching, would not see many innovations other than a PowerPoint presentation (p. 22).

Another area the author notes is several traditions we have today and from where they have come. For example, the phrase ‘liberal education’ comes from “the phrase *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.” It gave individuals the freedom to study a wide variety of areas to create civically engaged citizens (p. 33). More commonly today, universities are adding the phrase “interdisciplinary” to their mission statements, but are far less interdisciplinary than our earliest colleges which once combined all areas of study into one and no specific “disciplines” existed.

Where it is

Before answering the question of where college is (or where it is going), one must ask another question: What is the purpose of college? This inquiry could produce an infinite number of answers. Some might say the more citizens who receive the gift of a college education, the more educated society as a whole will be; college makes an individual more competitive in the job market; and a number of studies prove that one with a college degree often makes more money over the course of his or her lifetime. Many look at college as a means of improving social class, but the higher the household income the higher chance one has of obtaining a college degree. Additionally, low-income students “can least afford to spend money and years on such a risky venture, given their low graduation rates and high debt” (Larson, 2010).

Higher education funding from both the states and federal government has been going down and the trend is not looking to stop anytime soon; furthermore, most government grants are based on merit rather than need, which does not do much to help those from low income families. To justify this, public universities are raising tuition at a much faster rate than their

private counterparts. Another way publically-funded universities are tackling fewer funds is by recruiting more heavily out of state. However, if the graduates of these schools are not helping advance the state which the school resides in, what is the purpose is for a university to be given tax dollars from the state?

What it should be

There is no surprise that college looks different today than it did even 10 or 15 years ago. Enrollment at community colleges is higher than ever as many cannot afford a four-year university, and numerous others feel that they are too old to spend four years pursuing a bachelor's degree but still seek a degree to retain future employment.

With the growing popularity and necessity for a college education, the master's degree has become the new bachelor's degree. This means that ensuring employment in many fields requires another year or (often) more in pursuit of a more advanced degree, which might only be available to those who can afford it.

A popular criticism of higher education is the problem is not too few going to college, but too many. A growing number of students who are entering college unprepared. Perhaps, K-12 education is a part of the problem.

Although there is not one simple answer or call to action suggested, the author highlights several areas of success that have improved other universities. For example, the University of Maryland at Baltimore increased graduation rates by creating a culture of mentoring and increasing engagement between students and faculty. Valparaiso University is another example explained: they hold workshops each year to dispel trust and encourage "informed debate of policy and practice," where administrators meet with faculty members to help improve their relationship. All of the ideas addressed are simple and effective, not meant to act as a silver bullet, but as a way to fix individual problems at the universities.

Access & Student Affairs

Historically, college is more accessible now than ever before. Of the nearly 20,000 who immigrated to America in the 1630s, only 1 in 75 men graduated from college. Today, that number is exceedingly higher. We have come to know and recognize the college experience as more than just gaining pedagogic knowledge but also as an advancement of social and moral development. One study shows low income children are more likely to graduate if they are put into settings that encourage close contact among students and between students and faculty members (Bowen, 2009).

The other elephant in the room is the 'for-profit college.' The more popular this type of education becomes, the more threatened the student-affairs job appears. However, if access to higher education is as important as we say it is, perhaps there should be more acceptance to education outside of the traditional college campus. In the end, as hard as it is to gain access to higher education, in the past 30 years more people have been able to receive some sort of college education than in the past 300 years.

College: What it Was, Is, and Should Be offers a dynamic viewpoint of higher education. Delbanco is critical of higher education but is realistic in the sense that there are many areas that must be fixed by many different stakeholders. There is not one solution that will fix all problems, but several smaller areas that must be done one at a time. He concludes the fix comes from both focusing on the individual college student as well as the public good.

Universities must start working with community colleges, not just seeing them as a recruiting opportunity. Higher education is one of the oldest industries in the world and has potential to last much longer, but if it does not continue its tradition acting as a marketplace for ideas while adapting to the needs of the 21st century, it may not last.

References

- Bowen, W. G., Chingos, M. M., & McPherson, M. S. (2009). *Crossing the finish line: Completing college at America's public universities*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Delbanco, A. (2012). *College: What it was, is, and should be*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Larson, A. (2010, June 3). Higher education's big lie. *InsideHigherEd.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2010/06/03/larson>.