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DON'T LET REAL COLLEGE BECOME EXTINCT

A concise new book by Andrew Delbanco makes the case for preserving authentic liberal arts education — to preserve the nation. **Timothy F. Cook,** who is leading an effort to found a new college in Pittsburgh, cheers him on. But he wonders: Why do many critics of higher education fail to offer real solutions? (Just so happens, he has one …)

Democracy, as we know it, is in danger. In recent decades we have seen many great discoveries, but we have also seen the steady demise of one of America's most important democratic institutions: the college.

A new book by Andrew Delbanco, matter-of-factly titled "College: What It Was, Is and Should Be" (Princeton University Press) delivers a story that is part nuanced history, part "State of the University" address, and part swan song. College, he says, is close to extinction. He ends his story with a plea for the future of the college: "Democracy depends on it."

While Mr. Delbanco and others criticize the state of higher education, they have no real solutions. We need a new model that strikes a balance between tradition and technology; that reconciles theory and practice while improving quality *and* lowering costs.

Although more and more stu- dents are enrolled in institutions of higher education, Mr. Delbanco points out that fewer than 1 percent attend what he defines as the true and ideal college: a community of reflection where students live and learn together, asking questions of justice, beauty, truth and virtue.

"All students deserve something more from college than semi-supervised fun or the services of an employment agency," writes Mr. Delbanco, director of American Studies at Columbia University, where he has taught since 1985. He decries that students "scarcely have time for … contemplation"; they should have "the precious chance to think and reflect before life engulfs them."

In danger of becoming overly anachronistic at times, Mr. Delbanco smartly treads the line by valuing progress in higher education, while also finding great worth in the history of its founders. Perhaps Mr. Delbanco's greatest accomplishment in "College" is his careful assessment of its historical, religious foundation. He shows that, if even only by metaphor, the College must always be understood and informed by its original, spiritual purposes.

While colleges often are no longer tied to the church's mission, he alludes to a sort of teaching — a sort of community — that is concerned with inspiration, awakening the soul and a life of conviction.

The crux of "College" lies in the age-old divide between inspired reflection and production or, as Mr. Delbanco cynically describes it, the "marketable" and the "useless."

This divide is often seen in higher education as a conflict between the sciences and the humanities. The sciences, he admits, have "an enormous advantage in the competition for university resources" because of their "ability to demonstrate progress" while the humanities are more "concerned with preserving truth." Yet, as science builds cumulatively and impressively upwards, it can fail to ask questions of purpose and possible catastrophe. Mr. Delbanco notes that the modern university, with its imbalanced valuing of the sciences, has not helped us to deal with the loss of war, the ethics of our tactics, and the reconciliation with our enemies.

Certain things — humanity, goodness and peace — cannot always be valued monetarily as scientific progress is, but they do hold great value nonetheless. Liberal arts colleges develop an invaluable critical consciousness in their graduates. This "[nonsense] meter," as Mr. Delbanco puts it (using the barnyard epithet), is "a technology that will never become obsolete" and must always be taught. He references the powerful statistic that, in a time when only 2 percent of the country attended college, nearly 80 percent of leaders in the abolitionist movement had enrolled.

An evaluation of the antislavery movement according to its market worth would likely show a negative result: the free labor of slaves was a boon for the economy. Emancipation not only forced owners to restructure their businesses, but it also forced the country to begin — at great expense — confronting economic inequities we are still dealing with today.

Because pure market valuation would cause people to make consistently unjust choices (like choosing to perpetuate slavery), Mr. Delbanco argues that what is most valuable in the history of colleges is "their deliberate distance from the world of getting and spending in which young people are destined to spend so much of their lives." Unfortunately, Mr. Delbanco's caution concerning market valuation keeps him from ever putting a dollar value on the importance of the liberal arts college.

While obviously an advocate for the worth of the humanities, he does not do justice to their full value. Saying emancipation was bad for the economy is true, but only if we (like the slaveholders) have a very narrow view of economics. If, instead, we value emancipation in terms of economics for the common good, we will find that, since then, people have prospered and gained greater equity.

Perhaps a better, simpler example to express this point of division lies in more recent issues of production. The United States has tremendous capability to produce homes, market them (with the necessary loans) and sell them. We are great at production and likely produce the most and biggest homes per-capita of any country in the world. However, because of a lack of ethics, understanding and criticism, our housing market spiraled out of control, kicking off a global financial crisis.

We have no way to know if sending more students to liberal arts colleges could have changed this financial mess, but it is worth considering. If we had tripled the number of *college* graduates (in Mr. Delbanco's ideal, liberal-arts definition of the word) could we have averted global economic catastrophe? It seems likely that we would be better off if more loan-originators, home-buyers, developers, investors and bankers were asking questions of justice and virtue and engaging their work with a critical consciousness. Triple the graduates would unleash 200,000 "[nonsense] meters" into the world.

It seems likely that many of them, if functioning properly, would have found reason for alarm, caution and reform.

Scores of recent books have recounted the failures of higher education. One book bemoans the excess of the university and how kids are spoiled by having, in one example, "a chef who prepares butternut squash soup" in their cafeteria. This 2010 book, "Higher Education?" by Andrew Hacker and Claudia Dreifus, claims in its subtitle to tell us "what we can do about it." Unfortunately, "Higher Education?", along with many others, leaves us by posing only a list of problems — some of them not so problematic — and very few answers.

In one final section, Mr. Hacker and Ms. Dreifus do list some "solutions" to the college crisis. They argue that students should "Stop Relying on Loans," noting that it is "a system we would like to see dismantled." They do not, however, explain how — given the out-of-control costs they describe — attendance would be possible without these loans. This excess of criticism and lack of deep solutions has become a frustrating norm in higher education literature, so, in reading Andrew Delbanco's "College," there is great expectation for his final section entitled "What is to Be Done?"

Unfortunately, like so many of his contemporaries, Mr. Delbanco offers more dismaying anecdotes than constructive possibilities. He quotes the former director of America's largest college, the coast-to-coast University of Phoenix, who explains, "I'm happy that there are places in the world where people sit down and think. We need that. But that's very expensive. And not everybody can do that. So for the vast majority of folks who don't get that privilege, then I think it's a business."

Mr. Delbanco leaves us hanging with this damning quote by acknowledging that "this point of view is a surrender of America's democratic promise." He does not confront its troubling, pragmatic argument. As much as Mr. Delbanco upholds the liberal arts college as an experience that should be accessible to all, it is very expensive and few can afford it without taking on significant debt. He offers no retort to this difficult quote or an answer to his own question "What is to be done?"

These issues of cost and privilege remain and it becomes evident that, in addition to the economic cries of the Occupy Movement, there is yet another 1 percent or 99 percent inequality to address. According to Mr. Delbanco, very few people, actually less than 1 percent, will have the privilege of attending the ideal college where they can sit down and think.

Very few will have the privilege to escape what Megan McCardle called in The Atlantic this past February a "post-campus America." Soon, many envision that attending class in-person will soon be a rarity, let alone attending a class at an excellent, residential, liberal arts college. Even if lower-income students could afford a liberal arts *college*, why would they want to given the current economic climate?

There are few jobs to be found for humanities majors with no work experience.

So, what *is* to be done?

To assert that "it almost always is [good for society] when things get cheaper" as The Atlantic author does, is ridiculous. We must ask substantial questions of value and make good *colleges* accessible and affordable, regardless of privilege. What must be addressed is the issue of cost and, as part of that, the problematic dichotomy between "practical" and "intellectual" pursuits within our colleges.

Mr. Delbanco, eager to hold onto his side of the struggle, defines little ground for commonality. This divide, as described earlier, is the driving force behind the undoing of the liberal arts *college* and it must be reconciled. For too long a dualism has existed that separates not only our colleges, but our society. If the humanities and the liberal arts are to survive and prosper, we must dissolve this separation that requires us to choose either to study ideas or learn how to make things. As the poet William Carlos Williams puts it in his "A Sort of a Song": "Compose. (No ideas // but in things) Invent!"

Although Mr. Delbanco and others may be remiss to admit it, there is common ground where the sciences and the humanities — where theory and practice — can coexist without detriment. Our reflection and intellectual critiques are fully realized when they result in action and invention. In "Walden," Thoreau shouts, "[We] should not play life, or study it merely, while the community supports [us] at this expensive game, but earnestly live it from beginning to end."

Students should be engaged in a *productive inquiry.* As Wendell Berry writes, "Beside every effort of making, which is necessarily narrow, there must be an effort of judgment, of criticism, which must be as broad as possible." These broad judgments and efforts of making should not be undertaken by separate people. Rather, those of us who work in production should be trained to think critically and ask big questions about our work. Likewise, the academics among us must not be confined to the ivory tower; our critiques and artistic perspectives should be put into practice and grounded in the world of made things.

We must learn to make what is valuable and to question the value of what is made.

If we can begin to imagine col- leges where students both produce *and* inquire, the liberal arts ideal, though somewhat re-imagined, can be saved. Eliminating the dualistic attitude, and resolving the divide between the "marketable" and "useless" is a start, but it is only half the battle. Colleges must also face the crisis of cost that has been mounting for decades. There is little hope for an improved future unless we work with urgency and humility in re-imagining the economics of higher education.

Unfortunately, most recent innovations in higher education have been concerned with online tools or profit motives. Real reforms that focus on both quality of purpose and cost reduction are rare. We need to foster a community of socially minded, higher education entrepreneurs who embrace not just technology, but history, excellence and value. A liberal arts, residential, place-based college, with small in-person classes (in the way Mr. Delbanco imagines it), can be affordable — without loans — for more than just the privileged few. This sort of school, however, will have to look, act and spend very differently than the norm.

If we are serious about the common good — about equity and quality — then it is now or never. College, in all its messy grandeur and history, must be remembered, fully defined and recreated. It must become affordable, excellent and accessible to more than just the 1 percent. Democracy depends on college's capability to teach all of us how to make what is valuable *and* to question the value of what is made.

It must be a place where students ask: "What is the common good and how can I work to serve it?"

Timothy F. Cook *is founding director of The Saxifrage School, a Pittsburgh project to found a new college that eliminates debt, builds up neighborhoods, and reconciles theory and practice (***saxifrageschool.org***).*

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