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the quality of public life in the American democracy

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**REVIEW**

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# The Future of Higher Education: Colliding Visions

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by Jean Johnson

*“Not independent learners or thinkers or self-starters, they don’t really seem ready for college.”*

The lines are being drawn for an epic battle over the future of higher education, especially public higher education, even as the aims and intentions of the combatants remain murky to most Americans. At the leadership level, supporters and critics of higher education see starkly different problems besetting the system and use radically different frameworks to describe their goals. Typical citizens, including most college students and their families, bring their own set of distinctive concerns to the subject. In key respects, what’s at issue in higher education depends largely on whom you’re talking to. Confronting and sorting out these colliding perspectives—and understanding the values that shape them—will be an essential step in resolving the argument.

Among college presidents, faculty, alumnae, and others, the prevailing fear is that the quality and preeminence of the nation’s higher education system is at risk. Most see the country’s network of public and private colleges, community colleges, and universities as a great national achievement, a lynchpin of the country’s social, economic, and political progress. Yet according to this view, this irreplaceable asset is in jeopardy.

Taxpayer support for public higher education has fallen, dropping nearly 8 percent in 2011-2012 alone, and many state systems have cut services and raised tuition. In 2008, more than 50 university presidents, representing both public and private institutions, wrote an open letter to the president calling for more federal funding to ease the shortfall, and according to a 2011 study from Public Agenda, most college trustees see their top challenge as maintaining institutional quality “in the face of rising costs and declining financial resources.” Noting that systems have already cut millions of dollars from

budgets, one trustee said, “It’s reached the point where the fat is long since gone, and we are cutting muscle.”

But many in higher education see a second and equally troubling risk to quality—a generation of poorly prepared high school students. A 2011 study for the *Chronicle of Higher Education* found

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## If colleges were businesses, they would be ripe for hostile takeovers.

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that nearly 6 in 10 college presidents say public schools do a “worse job” preparing students for college than they did 10 years ago, and more than half say college students today study less than students from a decade ago. Among faculty, concerns about student preparation and motivation are close to the surface, emerging quickly and spontaneously in focus groups. “To some degree,” said one professor interviewed for a Public Agenda study, “it’s amazing that some of these students are actually given a high school diploma. You wonder what it was that they studied.”



Another pointed to a pervasive lack of maturity among incoming students: “They’re not independent learners or thinkers or self-starters . . . [they] don’t really seem to be ready for the college atmosphere.” These concerns about quality are often intensified by the strong push from government, philanthropy, and business to produce more college graduates. For many inside higher education, the goal of dramatically upping graduation rates seems impossible unless K-12 schooling improves or academic standards in college are lowered.

Others paint a radically different picture of higher education. They often depict the system as bloated, out-of-date, hidebound, arrogant, and inward-looking. For many critics, traditional American colleges and universities resemble a stodgy industry that needs bold, outside-the-box thinking and a thorough shake-up. Brian Kelly, who edits the *U.S. News & World Report* annual college rankings, makes this explicit comparison: “If colleges were businesses, they would be ripe for hostile takeovers, complete with serious cost-cutting and painful reorganizations.” Another critic, interviewed for a Public Agenda study, described the current system as operating on a 19th-century agricultural calendar and a 20th-century industrial model while “trying to produce a high-quality product in a 21st-century global, technology-infused environment.” In this reformer’s view, higher education will not emerge from its current malaise unless the existing model is completely “disrupted.”

For these critics, college presidents and faculty who complain about inadequate resources and poor student preparation are merely making excuses; and many believe that the public is growing impatient with the situation too. The Heritage Foundation’s Stuart Butler, for example,



argues that many Americans see four-year college degrees as “vastly overpriced” and that some are beginning to wonder whether what students learn on campus is really worth the spiraling cost.

So the battle among leaders rages around this central question: Is now the moment to preserve and protect traditional higher education, or is it time to disrupt the model and topple it? Both sides could easily cite selected survey results suggesting that most Americans agree with them. But a scan of the research overall shows the public’s current views do not fall squarely on either side of the argument. Majorities of Americans worry about rising costs and student debt, and many are suspicious of higher education’s claims of near poverty. At the same time, few seem to be calling for a revolution, especially one that would transform colleges and universities into more competitive, market-driven institutions—an approach recommended by many reformers. In focus groups conducted by Public Agenda and the Kettering Foundation, most typical citizens seemed unaware that such fundamental changes have even been broached.

Some prevailing themes in the public’s thinking about higher education do emerge from both surveys and qualitative opinion research. Americans increasingly regard graduating from college as a necessity in the workplace. In their

view, unless college is affordable, access for the middle class will be cut off. There’s not much dispute about the facts: College tuition costs have been rising faster than inflation, and costs at public universities have jumped 47 percent over the past decade. Meanwhile, Public Agenda research has shown that the public’s belief that a person needs a degree to find a good job has jumped from 31 percent in 2000 to 55 percent in 2009. Or, to look at it from another angle, those who believe there are “many ways to succeed in today’s world without a college education” has plummeted from 67 to 43 percent over the same time period. A 2011 Gallup poll found that nearly 7 in 10 Americans believe that “having a college degree is essential for getting a good job in this country.” Given that, it is hardly surprising that most

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## Americans believe that having a college degree is essential for getting a good job in this country.

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Americans are concerned about college costs. The vast majority say students have to borrow too much money to go to college, and a 2011 Pew survey found that only one in five Americans believes “most people can afford to pay for a college education.”

**S**uch concerns are breeding cynicism about higher education’s motives. The public’s fears about whether college is affordable seem to be stoking doubts about whether colleges and universities are really doing all they can to control costs. According to Public Agenda research, more than half of Americans say “colleges could spend less and still maintain a high quality of

education,” and similar numbers say higher education institutions could take in “a lot more students without lowering quality or raising prices.” Even more ominous, however, is the growing number of Americans who question higher education’s commitment to the well-being of its students. In Public Agenda’s

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## Colleges could spend less and still maintain a high quality of education.

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2010 *SqueezePlay* survey, 6 in 10 Americans said that “colleges today are like most businesses and care mainly about the bottom line.” Just 32 percent believed that “colleges today care mainly about education and making sure that students have a good educational experience.”

Despite this concern, however, there’s little evidence that most people want a complete transformation in how colleges and universities operate. The fault lines in the public’s trust in higher education should be worrisome to college leaders, if only because, in one especially potent warning sign, nearly half of Americans say their state’s higher education system should be “fundamentally overhauled.” On the surface at least, that is a finding that appears to reinforce the position of reformers. But the public’s interest in a sweeping overhaul may not be as far-reaching as it initially appears. For example, surveys show that most Americans reject proposals to reduce course requirements and allow students to graduate more quickly. Most oppose consolidating programs and “closing some branches of state colleges.” And most also seem hesitant fully to endorse another favored reform and cost-cutting strategy—more online learning. The Heritage Foundation’s Stuart Butler believes the need for transformational change

in higher education is manifest. He points out that “upstart institutions” are “perfecting radically new education technologies and business plans,” and he predicts that “quite soon, such new institutions will do to higher education what Sony did to radios and Apple did to computing.” For Butler, online learning will be a centerpiece:

Online learning changes the entire relationship between student and teacher; it enables information to be transferred, and student performance to be monitored, at a fraction of conventional costs. . . . Online education has the potential to completely upend today’s established universities.

**T**he public’s views, however, seem far less expansive and hopeful. There’s not a lot of good research on how the public thinks about cutting-edge ideas like that of a significant shift from classroom to online coursework. Relatively few people have much personal experience with online courses—especially the ground-breaking innovations Butler envisions. And there’s not much evidence that most people are especially optimistic about the prospect. In a 2007 Public Agenda survey, nearly three-quarters of the respondents said most college students would be better served by traditional classroom courses rather than courses



online (although some people in focus groups did believe online learning could be useful for older students who might want to update job skills).

Nor is there much evidence that younger, more tech-savvy Americans see online learning as a potential killer. In a Public Agenda survey of young adults asking them to rate a dozen proposals for helping students complete college successfully, the idea of offering more courses online came in at number 12. Roughly half of those surveyed supported it, but most saw improving financial aid and offering more child care as far more helpful.

**M**ost Americans in fact seem to value today's typical college curricula. Two-thirds of the public agrees that "colleges and universities are teaching students the important things they need to know." Despite intense fears about jobs and unemployment, most Americans still don't want to turn college into vocational training service. Nearly 6 in 10 say colleges should teach "general skills" that prepare students for any job, rather than specific skills for a particular job, according to Public Agenda surveys.

Some people also wonder whether "going to college" has become too important. Most Americans do believe that graduating from college is virtually prerequisite for a good job that provides a secure economic future. But beyond that, surveys are replete with findings showing that most Americans see college as an important aspiration for themselves, their children, for just about any young person coming out of high school. That's a major shift over time. In 1978, according to Gallup surveys, just 38 percent of Americans considered college "very important," compared to 75 percent today.

Yet, paradoxically perhaps, there's also a broad sense that making college such a universal and

indispensable job requirement may not be justified—and that it may not be fair. Two-thirds of Americans say a lot of employers hire college graduates for "jobs that could be done just as well or better by people without a college degree."

There are also widespread misgivings among some key groups about whether encouraging

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## Some people wonder whether "going to college" has become too important.

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all high school graduates to go to college is always beneficial. Public Agenda surveys of public school teachers show that only 4 in 10 strongly agree that "all my students, given the right support, can go to college if they choose." Focus groups with college professors show deep-seated concerns that too many of their students aren't really committed to academic work—they're basically going through the motions to get the degree. Even college students themselves appear divided on the topic. Most young adults say their parents, teachers, and mentors encouraged them to attend college, and although most agree that people with degrees



make more money they, like their teachers and professors, are not all convinced that college is for everyone. A 2009 Public Agenda survey shows that a solid 50 percent of young people who start college strongly agree that it “is not for everyone—some people just don’t like school.”

In the past few years, increasing college graduation rates appears to have become a national movement led by foundations, business groups, and elected officials; research among trustees suggests that this is a virtually universal institutional goal. Critics pushing for “break-the-mold” reforms often point out that one of their key motivations is to make going to college more widespread and affordable. But the general public appears to be somewhat less convinced of the wisdom of this goal.

Compared to countries like Germany, Denmark, and Austria, the United States does not have a robust or well-respected system of apprenticeships and certificate programs for students who are less academically inclined; and most Americans have not had the opportunity to deliberate about the advantages and trade-offs of moving to a more “European” model. There are certainly

## The United States does not have a robust or well-respected system of apprenticeships and certificate programs.

questions about fairness and equal opportunity that need to be weighed, yet the public-at-large does now seem more inclined to talk about whether going to college should be the default option for all high school graduates. The question for many people is whether some high



school graduates (and society as a whole) might be better off if they had a broader array of meaningful *non-college* options available to them, although the public’s starting point on higher education is less assured than that of most American leaders.

Relatively few people have thought deeply about how higher education operates today, much less about whether a vastly different system that emphasizes productivity, innovation, and competition would be better. As of now, most people seem not predisposed to enshrine higher education in its current form, yet they do not seem ready to jettison or “disrupt” the current system entirely.

What is clear is that most Americans see college as the key to some modicum of economic security, and they fear that rising costs will weaken their tenuous hold on the prospect of a life in the middle class. Most are still open-minded about the best path out of this dilemma. Most are still willing to listen and consider many ideas. Leaders, in contrast, appear to be hunkering down for a long and angry policy debate, with each side offering a starkly different diagnosis of the problem and radically different solutions. In its current form, the discussion among leadership is a near recipe for gridlock and lack of resolution.

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**T**he danger is that this crosstalk over the future of higher education comes at a particularly precarious moment for the country. The US workforce is no longer the best educated in the world, and major business leaders predict shortages of college-educated workers, which will imperil the country's economic future—and it's not just in science and technology, a concern that has attracted wide attention in both government and the private sector. Employers are looking for college graduates with a better grasp of the world, knowledgeable people who understand different cultures and speak other languages. They want workers with the sophistication and breadth of vision that will help their organizations thrive in a diverse, unpredictable global milieu. Surveys of employers suggest that many also value the traditional virtues of a liberal education—majorities want colleges and universities to put more emphasis on teaching critical thinking, problem solving, and ethical decision making. More than half want more attention to civic knowledge and engagement as well.

Throughout our history, the United States has recognized the role of colleges and universities in helping the nation move forward, and we have joined together to support remarkable transformations in higher education that proved to be turning points. In the 19th century, the government gave federal land to states to build colleges, so that more Americans would have access to higher education. Establishing these institutions

helped advance the country's economic, political, and social progress. During the Great Depression, extension agents from land-grant colleges worked with rural communities on soil conservation, electrification, and rural education. These public works helped hundreds of communities lift

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## The US workforce is no longer the best educated in the world.

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themselves out of poverty. After World War II, the GI bill made it possible for returning soldiers to attend college. Not only did this empower individuals to build good lives for themselves and their families, but it also gave the United States the best-educated workforce in the world—one that helped propel the country's astonishing post-war economic growth.

The question before us now is whether we can find a common vision that will sustain and remake "higher" education for the better, or whether our colliding perspectives will obstruct and paralyze us, leaving the entire country unprepared, and in various ways "undereducated," for the future.

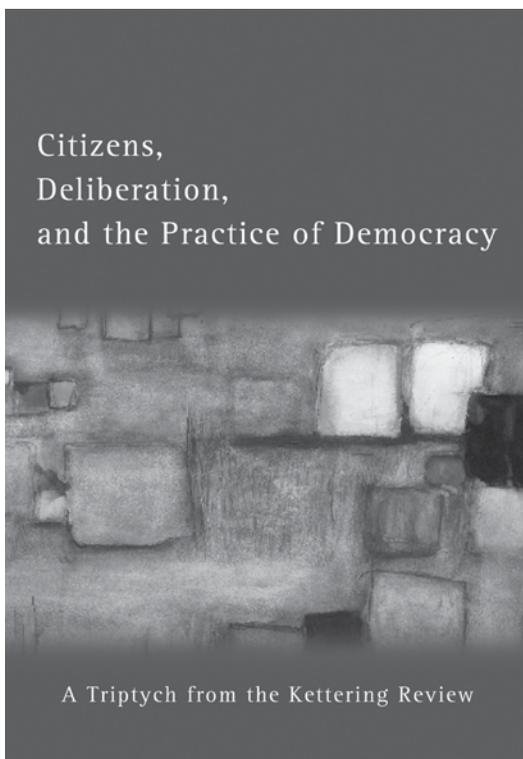
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*Jean Johnson is a senior fellow at Public Agenda. Her most recent book, co-authored with Scott Bittle, is Where Did the Jobs Go—and what Can We Do to Get Them Back (HarperCollins, 2012).*



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