HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE
The Higher Education Exchange is founded on a thought articulated by Thomas Jefferson in 1820: I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.

In the tradition of Jefferson, the Higher Education Exchange agrees that a central goal of higher education is to help make democracy possible by preparing citizens for public life. The Higher Education Exchange is part of a movement to strengthen higher education’s democratic mission and foster a more democratic culture throughout American society. Working in this tradition, the Higher Education Exchange publishes case studies, analyses, news, and ideas about efforts within higher education to develop more democratic societies.
in 1927, that does not make grants but welcomes partnerships with other institutions (or groups of institutions) and individuals who are actively working on problems of communities, governing, politics, and education. The interpretations and conclusions contained in the Higher Education Exchange, unless expressly stated to the contrary, represent the views of the author or authors and not necessarily those of the foundation, LWVWUXVWHHVRURIÀFHUV. Copyright © 2012 by the Kettering Foundation.
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WHAT IS COLLEGE FOR?
THE PUBLIC PURPOSE
OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Edited by Ellen Condliffe Lagemann and Harry Lewis
Elizabeth Hudson, Reviewer

In the last 15 years, higher education has more frequently articulated the importance of its civic mission. A new edited collection may interest HEX readers as an indication of how higher education frames its public role. What Is College For? The Public Purpose of Higher Education is edited by Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, a professor of the history of education, and Harry Lewis, a professor of computer science—both affiliated with Harvard University. They frame the book as an unapologetic critique of the growing economic discourse that characterizes higher education policy conversations and are especially troubled that an economic end for higher education is “widely agreed upon and therefore not in need of analysis or debate” (p. 2). The volume reflects the perspectives of many individuals in higher education who seek a stronger emphasis on and understanding of institutions’ public role—that is, a role that extends beyond solely the preparation of students for their careers.

Taken individually, the authors may further the existing conversations about the public good in higher education. The chapters employ diverse points of views about how higher education functions—and could better function—for the public. Several chapters interrogate aspects of the curriculum. The authors look to higher education—with a chapter each about nonelite education, the liberal arts, professional schools, and graduate education—as the place where individuals are given tools to act as responsible citizens. Another chapter encourages the framing of science and education as public goods in order to overcome pervasive antiintellectualism. By examining conversations about the public good from these multiple vantage points, the authors explore some new territory in the field and imply that if higher education institutions can change what they do or what they say about what they do, these institutions will be better justified with the public.
In the first chapter, “Renewing the Civic Mission of American Higher Education,” Lagemann and Lewis highlight the importance of civic education. They detail their charge to renew higher education’s civic mission:

[Higher education institutions] will not have fulfilled their public obligations simply by adding to the national stock of human capital, no matter how well they achieve that goal. They must recognize a direct responsibility for the civic learning of their students, spread across the curriculum (p. 12).

To accomplish this, colleges and universities must not only promote civic attitudes among students, but also attend to the nation’s problems, from education to the environment. These charges to higher education have been gaining momentum for more than a decade, but Lagemann and Lewis are careful to incorporate a deliberate message that can reach across diverse scientific fields, and it is captured in a “civic lesson” for students that they think should permeate the content of curriculum: “You are responsible for not only your own future, but also for the future of the world” (p. 39, emphasis in original).

From the perspective of a scientist, a chapter by Douglas Taylor captures the tension of how institutions can stay connected to a public purpose despite an increasingly antiintellectual public. Higher education institutions are facing a time when antiintellectualism has a “surprising effect on college and university faculty” (p. 46). Taylor offers evidence from his own experience as a faculty member in evolutionary biology and chair of the biology department at the University of Virginia. In the classroom, Taylor confronted a shifting public understanding of science that had him briefly apologize for any potential offense to the beliefs of students when he presented evolutionary theory. Through this narrative, he recognized that higher education “must accept some responsibility for the current state of affairs” (p. 60). He defends higher education’s contributions to “pure knowledge and [capturing] the imaginations of the brightest minds” as service to a public good and argues that scientific discoveries are public goods because of the potential benefits of fundamental advances. Education, as well, is presented as a public good, with its potential to generate a collectively more educated citizenry, with a
special emphasis on the benefits accrued from further education of the brightest students. By extension, Taylor sees higher education as a public good, and public acceptance of this premise as essential to combating antiintellectual sentiments.

A contrast to Taylor's reflection on science and society is presented in a chapter by Paul Attewell and David E. Lavin entitled “The Other 75%: College Education Beyond the Elite.” The authors accuse scholars of higher education of “parochialism,” by attending closely to the development of traditional college students, and ultimately ignoring the majority—more than three quarters—of degree seekers in the U.S. who are older and/or part-time students. They cite problems in federal financial aid policy, which considers students as dependents into their mid-twenties. “[For] the nontraditional undergraduates who predominate today, college life is no time-out but rather an obstacle race of economic stress and cross pressure between family, work, and education” (p. 89). These are considerations for many working-class students at nonselective community universities, but they also exist at more selective institutions. In essence, the authors contend that higher education’s public purposes, which they define as “developing students’ civic courage, moral judgment, critical thinking, and scientific and global awareness” (p. 101), should be considered essential to all students regardless of the type of institution.

In another chapter, William M. Sullivan writes powerfully about the need to align professional education with public purpose. He notes that the migration of professional training from apprenticeships to university-based professional study aligned it more with meritocratic values. Post-World War II, technocratic knowledge production and quantifiable accountability resulted in the exclusion of educational outcomes that were less conducive to mathematical calculation, such as the connection of knowledge with public responsibility. As Sullivan argues, “the relative isolation of academic research and training from public concerns, while it fosters some kinds of intellectual development, has pushed the professions’ social contract into the background during the critical years of schooling” (p. 119). The result is an imbalance of the “three dimensions of professional training”—intellectual training, skill-based apprenticeship, and ethical-based apprenticeship. He says that clinical education based in Dewey’s concept of practical reasoning
should be modeled through a process of learning while doing, which is more complex than the common practice of learning followed by doing. Sullivan argues that educational processes should integrate the public purpose holistically, never losing sight of the artificial distinctions between theory and practice.

Other chapters highlight important considerations within the higher education system. Catharine R. Stimpson, dean emerita of the Graduate School of the Arts and Sciences and professor of English at NYU, provides insights about the nebulous history and purpose of graduate education in the United States. Elaine Tuttle Hansen, former president of Bates College and current executive director of the Center for Talented Youth at Johns Hopkins University, writes about the role of liberal arts education in the context of a national agenda for higher education institutions that pushes increased levels of enrollment and completion. She focuses on the values of liberal arts education that run contrary to consumerism and embrace a process that highlights slowness, complexity, focus, and contradictions.

What Is College For? The Public Purpose of Higher Education is another in a list of works over the 15 years highlighting a crisis of higher education’s public purpose. Calls for higher education to reclaim, renew, or reinvigorate its civic purpose grow louder with each year of state funding cuts. Perhaps, though, to higher education’s detriment, these calls may not be framed in a way that the public can appreciate. They read as reactionary and defensive responses to economic policy language in higher education, rather than as deep and deliberate calls for reflection on the emergent challenges and tensions of enacting a multifaceted institutional relationship with the public. If looking to foster a rich institutional discussion—through the authors’ emphasis on defining a civic curriculum and interrogating who has access to it—the book gives dimension to the public purpose conversation for higher education leaders, policymakers, and faculty members. If the editors aim to foster a necessary inclusive conversation with the public about its purpose, this text will fall short. Perhaps, though, recognizing and delimiting the internal tensions of higher education’s purpose is a necessary precursor for a conversation with any broad cross section of the public. From this text, it remains unclear whether or not higher education institutions want a public conversation about their purpose that extends into communities.
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Democratizing Deliberation
A Political Theory Anthology

Edited by Derek W. M. Barker, Noëlle McAfee, and David W. McIvor

Democratizing Deliberation brings together recent and cutting-edge political theory scholarship on deliberative democracy. The collection reframes deliberative democracy to be sensitive to the deep conflicts, multiple forms of communication, and aspirations for civic agency that characterize real public deliberation. In so doing, the book addresses many of the most common challenges to the theory and practice of deliberative democracy.

Kettering Foundation Press | 2012
$15.95 • 184 pages

To read excerpts and purchase this book, visit www.kettering.org.
Are you concerned about the rising cost of higher education? Are the nation’s colleges and universities doing a good job preparing students for the future? How does higher education benefit society as a whole?

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How should higher education help us create the society we want?

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