

# HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE



## Institutions and the Public: A Troubled Relationship

### Articles

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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.

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# CONTENTS

Derek W. M. Barker and Alex Lovit	Institutions and the Public: A Troubled Relationship? (Foreword)	1
Byron P. White	Toward the Community-Centric University	6
John J. Theis	Civic Engagement Contributes to Culture Change at a Community College	22
Katie Clark	Treating an Ailing Society: Citizen Nursing in an Era of Crisis	36
Jonathan Garlick	The Pandemic, Trustworthiness, and a Place for Civic Science in Higher Education	50
Timothy J. Shaffer and David E. Procter	Learning to Become a Civic Professional: Using Deliberation in Community Engagement	64
Chris Gilmer	“Attention, Attention Must Be Finally Paid”: A Case for Reinventing Liberal Arts Education	75
David Mathews	A Call for Academic Inventiveness (Afterword)	86
	Contributors	92

# “ATTENTION, ATTENTION MUST BE FINALLY PAID”

## A Case for Reinventing Liberal Arts Education

Chris Gilmer

Even as I faced the first class of my academic career, I somehow knew that Shakespeare purely for Shakespeare’s sake was not going to appeal to a millennia-spanning new generation of college students. I had to make the Bard of Avon relevant to the lives of young people who grew up in the impoverished Mississippi Delta and on the bayous and backwaters of the Mississippi River.

The year was 1999. Today, more than two decades later, it looks as though I was right. The assumption has become a well-tested hypothesis that now drives my entire approach to providing a liberal arts education as the foundation for career success and informed citizenship. I make the case herein that the most fundamental disconnect between American higher education and those it intends to serve—the institutions competing for a shrinking pool of students and families trying to find the best way forward for their children and grandchildren—is a growing lack of belief in the basic value proposition of higher education.

When my grandfather, who quit school in the first grade and could not read or write, watched me walk across the stage as the first college graduate in his family, he did not care or even try to imagine what I would do with my college degree. He cared only that I had earned it. Education was “sacred” to him, the education of his grandchildren especially. My grandfather was not unique in this generational belief. He saw education as the great equalizer and the only means for his grandchildren to know a larger world than he had known. Many Americans today, most I would argue, no longer regard higher education as sacred—important, necessary, desirable, or optional, perhaps, but not absolutely essential to function in society or even to achieve the elusive and changing American dream.

We can no longer sell the value proposition of higher education, especially to the historically underserved students, who have been and will continue to be my greatest passion, based simply on its intrinsic value. We must sell it based on its economic value and its value to produce the qualities necessary for informed

citizen service. In my role as president of West Virginia University at Parkersburg, I speak often to the employers who hire both our liberal arts graduates and those graduating from our technical programs, and this is what they tell me: They want employees who have at least the basic academic content knowledge necessary to perform their jobs, but much more than that, they want employees who possess what we often call the “soft skills.” These included the ability to work in teams; to be self-directed; to be punctual, mutually respectful, and

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empathetic; to assess a problem quickly and to think critically about solutions; to honor commitments when made; and to defer the need for immediate gratification. I submit that these are not “soft” skills at all.

These are the skills that our students who are the future employees of a global workforce can learn from exposure to and exploration of the great themes of the liberal arts. In my view, there is no better way to teach these skills, perhaps no other way at all. Employers tell me that if they have to accept an educational deficit in new employees, they would prefer that it be a deficit of content knowledge because they can teach that knowledge on the job more easily and successfully than they can teach the less tangible workforce skills.

Certainly most employers have good intentions for their employees. With exceptions, employers want their employees to balance job satisfaction with the ambition to grow professionally, preferably within the company. Many companies have an active interest in improving their communities, both to enhance the quality of life for their current employees and to better attract new employees.

I will go so far as to say that the best employers have an inherent concern for the happiness and personal fulfillment of their employees. At the same time, many of these employers also answer to boards of directors and shareholders, whose principal demands relate to satisfactory returns on their investments.

Many employees are loyal to their employers as well, but, for a number of complex reasons, employee loyalty to and longevity with employers has diminished since the World War II generation left the workforce. For employers and employees to successfully engage with each other and with the public they

serve, the old so-called soft skills must now expand to include higher-level and more complex skill sets necessary both in the contemporary workplace and in a functional democracy: the ability to work in teams across significant sociopolitical and cultural divides; the willingness to consider points of view diametrically opposed to one's own and to do so with tolerance and mutual respect, if not acceptance; the maturity to know when to speak and when to be silent in judging whether an unwavering principle has been violated or whether the offense is of lesser magnitude, and most important, what, if any, actions of protest are appropriate; the emotional intelligence (and empathy when it applies) to at least try to understand how others feel and why; and the humility to understand that we are all stitches in a delicate tapestry, not tapestries unto ourselves. Exposure to Mozart, Madam C. J. Walker, and Ta-Nehisi Coates can help us to develop these skills, as can an illiterate grandfather, such as my own, who is a lifelong learner. The challenge for traditional academic programs, however, is that the liberal arts must be framed and taught in an applicable, practical manner, not just as a collection of philosophical or abstract concepts.

In my current role, I speak to many prospective students and their families, and this is what they tell me: At the most basic level, families with very limited socioeconomic means need me to prove to them that a higher education will help their children pay the electric bills. Let that sink in for a moment. How can I convince these families as they are struggling to keep a roof over their heads and to put food on their tables, that they should defer immediate earning potential in favor of a

longer investment that might lead to a lifetime of greater economic security? Those families with fewer concerns about immediate needs, want me to prove to them that a higher edu-

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cation will help their children build longer-term wealth while endowing them with the essential qualities of service to some greater purpose and to citizenship. More often than not, when given the chance, I can still make these arguments in a compelling manner, but spokespersons for higher education are often not even given the chance to make that case, these days. Certainly, the old argument of Shakespeare for Shakespeare's sake or my grandfather's belief in the sacredness of education would be unlikely to compel these families to enroll

their children in college or persuade the students themselves to defer immediate gratification and to put forth the necessary effort once enrolled.

The value proposition of higher education still exists, but it has changed considerably over the last 50 years. If we are to restore confidence in American higher education and transcend the significant cultural rifts in the broader American society, and between that society and higher education, as Linda Loman says in *Death of a Salesman*, “Attention, attention must be finally paid. . . .” One way that attention can and should be paid is through the reinvention of our approach to teaching the liberal arts.

As a junior faculty member, I turned a few heads with my nontraditional techniques of student engagement; senior colleagues were, at best, amused, at worst alarmed. A student came to my office, one day, deeply concerned because an internationally acclaimed scholar, whom I deeply respected and respect still, had told a classroom of our shared students that I was “teaching down” to them because they were African American and I am White. She was dismayed and disillusioned. She did not feel taught down to. She felt heard and uplifted, but she needed and deserved to be convinced that I was teaching her just as I would teach any student, regardless of race or any other personal factor. The truth set me free that day as I told her I was teaching her the only way I knew how, the only way that made any sense to me, and she left my office smiling.

My career began at a private liberal arts college, a Historically Black College (HBCU). Since then, I have served as a faculty member or administrator at three HBCUs, one Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), and now as president of

***The liberal arts must be framed and taught in an applicable, practical manner, not just as a collection of philosophical or abstract concepts.***

an Appalachian college with many first-generation students still overcoming, as I overcame, the vestiges of multigenerational poverty. For many years working through the ranks to become a tenured professor of humanities, I have

brought Broadway to the Bard, often singing show tunes, loudly and off key, which related the themes of misogyny in *Othello* to the plight of prostitutes explored in the Tony-winning show *The Life*. I climbed on desks and repurposed sport coats as head wraps to appear a bit more ominous and mysterious as I combined speeches of the witches from *Macbeth* into one soliloquy. Yes, I had a slightly different voice for each witch. No, I was not a particularly good actor,

but I accomplished at least three things: I humanized myself to my students, I proved to them I was willing to do almost anything to get their attention, and I got their attention.

Having accomplished that foundational goal, we then went on to talk about iambic pentameter in the sonnets and the Renaissance history that framed Shakespeare and his contemporaries. We got to the academic part—just by a circuitous route,

which at the time I thought of as a means to an end. Twenty years later, I think of it still as a means to an end but

***Everyone needs to understand the timeless themes and be able to apply them.***

now also as a worthy end in itself. People training to be teachers, college professors, librarians, and others who seek knowledge simply to build virtue need to understand the subtlest nuances of language and history, but *everyone* needs to understand the timeless themes and be able to apply them. My grandfather was a master storyteller, and while he had not read *Beowulf* or the poems of Emily Dickinson, his mother had told him the stories of the religious text of his family, the *Bible*, which contains some of the best literature ever written. And somewhere along the way, he had memorized most of *Aesop's Fables*. Obviously, he did not acquire this knowledge in college, but he did spark my fascination with words and with learning, and he had been exposed to the great themes of the liberal arts such as good versus evil, fate versus free will, right versus wrong, and the vagaries of human nature. He applied these concepts to his daily life and created metaphors and analogies that became the moral and ethical values of our family. He used to say, "Son, any job is noble as long as you do it honestly and with pride. It's just as good to be a farmer as it is to be an astronaut, and we need a lot more farmers than astronauts. What I want you to believe is that you are good enough to do anything you want to do and that there is nothing you are too good to do." Simply put, my wise and humble grandfather taught me that no one should be exempt from having an informed worldview. In my estimation, we do not cheapen the liberal arts by making them accessible and relevant to all; indeed, we add value.

I will go a step further and risk alienating the purists. Through this philosophy of teaching, we ensure that a large portion of this generation of students and the next does not choose to disengage with the classics entirely. We ensure that the trials of Odysseus, the poems of Sappho, and the slave narratives of America's unsung storytellers remain a part of our broader cultural narrative

and not just part of the narrative of those with the resources and interest to earn a more traditional liberal arts education.

A liberal arts education has the potential to lift not only individuals, but groups of people who have been marginalized based on sex, race, sexual orientation, gender, or status as a veteran or first-generation student. For example, many minority-serving institutions have emphasized a liberal arts education, recognizing that the next generation of leaders needs the skills embedded in such an education to attain civic as well as economic advancement. In Mississippi, where I was born, the child of a sharecropper, and first enrolled in a community college 38 years ago, and in Appalachia where I serve today, first-generation college students, some of them barely 18 years old, feel the same weight I felt to lift their families from poverty. I do not understand from lived experience what it is like to have my ancestral lands stolen or to be separated from my parents at the border of the United States and Mexico. I do not understand from lived experience what it is like for my ancestors to have been brought to these shores on slave ships. I do not understand from lived experience what it is like to be denied leadership opportunities or equal pay based on my sex. I do not understand what it feels like to have my life threatened and to be abandoned by family members and friends as a gay man, to grow up with holes in my shoes and only cornbread in my school lunch box, and to be taunted relentlessly by my peers because of childhood obesity. I know what it is like to be smart and talented and ambitious, and to live within a culture that thought I should be none of those things. I know what it feels like to hear my spouse tell the stories of his childhood—nearly drowned in a middle school toilet and stuffed into an elementary school garbage can because he was not like the other boys. I share these truths with you not as an exercise in self-indulgence, but so you can more clearly understand that my life, like many others, is a case study in the transformative power of education not just for individuals, but for families and entire communities.

Education is the great equalizer, and the shoulders of those of us who call ourselves educators are broad enough to lift an entire generation that will define our future, not just to lift those at the highest level of preparedness who would likely make the climb on their own. Education must not be simply a privilege of those to whom access comes easily. It must not be tailored to serve the needs of only those prepared to excel. It must be a right of every person willing to work hard for it. It is less the job of the student to meet higher education fully prepared than it is the job of higher education to meet each student wherever she, he, or they might be along the continuum and to serve

as a bridge to opportunities for a lifetime of professional service. Only when this vision is realized will the promise of equality and social justice for all, made so long ago by this nation, be kept.

Double consciousness, a term once used by W. E. B. DuBois to describe the life-experience of African Americans in a segregated society, has become multiple consciousness now as we all struggle to understand, live into, and sometimes rebel against the multitude of consciousnesses placed upon us by others or assumed by ourselves.

Here are a few thoughts about how the liberal arts can be reimagined to ensure continuing relevance and how the colleges and universities of this nation can reassert themselves as fully credible instruments of community service and civic education.

- Institutions not founded with the primary purpose of serving historically underserved populations can actively partner with Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs), such as HBCUs, HSIs, Tribal Colleges and Universities, and others. There are many excellent examples, such as the Tougaloo College/Brown University exchange program, which has been successful for decades. Exchanging best practices in teaching and student engagement, as well as cross-cultural understanding, can move in both directions. Along with a group of colleagues from across the nation, I have founded the National Institutes for Historically-Underserved Students for this purpose and to move underserved students to the front of the discussions most relevant to their future.
- We must own our individual and collective history rather than constantly working to rewrite it. Allow me to clarify. Revising the way we tell it to our children to ensure its accuracy and inclusiveness is essential, but pretending it never happened to make some of us feel better about it is dishonest and counterproductive. The pages of history need to be inclusive, and they need to tell the truth. One of my colleagues in the national institutes, the patriarch of a large and prominent Latino family, said these words with tears in his eyes, voice trembling with emotion, to 75 family members and friends gathered in his barn for a holiday meal right after Donald Trump was elected president of the United States: “I walked on picket lines so that my children would not have to. Now it seems my grandchildren will have to do it all over again.” It is important to note that the national institutes is a nonpartisan organization and that it includes colleagues and students with voices from across the political

spectrum. Still, the words of my friend and colleague are no less relevant to us all.

- The COVID-19 pandemic has taught us many things and, if the landscape of higher education has not been forever changed, it has certainly been changed for its next long phase. While remote and online learning do not take the place of face-to-face interaction, the technology to do it well has greatly improved during the pandemic, as has the capacity of faculty members to utilize it effectively. Furthermore, the great majority of college and high school students embraced technology even before COVID-19 and will not give it up as a meaningful part of the college experience moving forward. Students will demand more hybrid approaches, and it will not help for colleges to rebel against these approaches, which are expected by the population we serve.
- Community colleges are not private liberal arts colleges, are not research universities, and are not regional universities. Each is equally noble. Each has a mission, and while we should explore how those missions overlap and deliberately build as much overlap as possible, we should not try to make one fill the role of the other. That does not mean that the liberal arts, broadly defined, should not form the core of all of these institutions or even be infused into workforce and technical programs to the degree it is practical and relevant or that all students should not be welcomed and served well by all institutional types. Of course, this should be the case. It simply means that there is room and need for us all to live fully and cooperatively into the purposes for which we were formed, even as those purposes evolve and cross traditional boundaries.
- Some students come to the academy ill prepared, most of the time through no fault of their own. People do not choose to be born poor or in geographical locations without the tax base needed to provide the highest-quality college-preparatory education. They do not choose to be born into a historically disenfranchised or persecuted group or into families with no culture of higher education and without even the most basic knowledge about accessing financial aid. This does not mean that historically underserved students are or should be ashamed of their heritage. I am one of them, and I am immensely proud of the accomplishments and sacrifices of my ancestors.
- Allow students to blend the personal with the academic and to use the personal as a bridge to the academic. First-year English composition

might need to end with a well-conceived, documented research paper, but what is the harm in letting it begin with a journal entry focusing on what new students know and understand best—their own personal narratives? Why not let them build ties to timeless academic themes through the lens of personal experience?

- Here is a radical idea. What if the students were involved in helping to redesign our general education curriculum? I am not suggesting turning it over to them entirely because I recognize they do not yet have the necessary content or pedagogical knowledge, and surely I am not disrespecting the faculty who have spent a lifetime amassing their knowledge and credentials. I am suggesting only that the end-user might have some useful, even insightful, ideas about how the curriculum could be built and delivered.
- It is time that our equity and inclusion programs in higher education finally move beyond simply arranging events during Black History Month or Pride Month, and even beyond providing safe spaces for students to come together on our campuses. These functions are surely necessary, but they are insufficient, and I respect that many such programs have moved far beyond these basic functions. The next step, however, is proactively embedding equity and inclusion directly into the curriculum, as its foundation, not as an afterthought. For example, some years ago I led a team that redesigned the first-year English composition sequence at an HBCU to include more culturally relevant prose models. Is it not reasonable to assume that Margaret Walker Alexander or Richard Wright might be more accessible to

students at an HBCU in Mississippi than Samuel Johnson would be? We all did “Writing across the Curriculum” for

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a season. Some still do. Why not “Equity across the Curriculum?” With all respect due to Johnson, there is time for him later. Let equity and inclusion be part of the main course of the meal rather than only the seasoning.

- Is the “core curriculum” still core? I suspect that in most cases the answer is yes, but is it possible that different majors and different career tracks call for a personalized rather than a standardized core curriculum? To some degree this kind of academic innovation is already happening, and to some

degree it is frightening to the establishment. What is the harm in exploring different ways to reach different students if we could agree on a baseline of the content and the skills everyone needs to learn?

- Few times in the history of our nation and our world have seen greater sociopolitical tension, overt prejudice, and both civil and uncivil disobedience. Colleges and universities still have both the opportunity and the obligation to educate citizen leaders who graduate well versed in the responsibility and even the joy inherent in civic service. Higher education should not attempt to indoctrinate students in belief systems, but we should expose students, frequently and deliberately, to a wide diversity of ideas and new ways of thinking within an environment that is made safe and welcoming to all people. Our job is not to tell them what to think so much as to teach them how to think and how to draw responsible, socially conscious conclusions. Colleges and universities must not abdicate their leadership role in educating for informed citizenship.
- Internships and learning by doing are more important than they have ever been, and many institutions of higher learning are doing wonderful work in this area. In many if not most competitive professions, it is no longer enough to show up with a degree or certificate. Our graduates must also show up with a portfolio of professional work and the ability to demonstrate that they already know how to successfully contribute in the workplace. These work-study programs can directly benefit the institutions as well.

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As part of the new experiential learning program we are building at the university here, I more or less turned the marketing of the university over to

the students enrolled in our strategic communications major, under the supervision of their faculty and professional staff. This decision was met with audible, campus-wide gasps, but the community soon came to see that our marketing has never been better or more relevant to the students we are trying to recruit. And its success was affirmed in two years by 12 national marketing awards and an uptick in enrollment. It was a risk that now is paying big dividends, but it was equally a risk for a 55-year-old

president to presume what messages would market most effectively to a pool of potential students 30 years and more his junior.

- Finally, institutions must be willing to take risks even to the point of failure. Again, I should clarify. I am not suggesting we should be satisfied with broad institutional failure or repeated failure in ourselves or others. I am sug-

gesting that those entrusted with positions of leadership must create cultures of ambition rather than cultures of fear, cultures that become

***For trust in American higher education to be rebuilt, the value proposition of higher education must be reconsidered.***

leadership incubators in which colleagues trust that risk, even when well-conceived, sometimes takes a sojourn in the temporary failure of innovative ideas and that they are safe in those moments. If we learn from those moments rather than fear or lament them, most of the time we can repurpose them into success.

For trust in American higher education to be rebuilt, the value proposition of higher education must be reconsidered by the academy from within because, be assured, it has already been reconsidered by the current generation of students, potential students, and employers. It has been found lacking. They are watching to see whether we will catch up to them. I humbly submit that a reinvention of the way we approach the liberal arts is perhaps the best tool that we have.



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