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Light, Truth and Whatever

By Michael S. Roth

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Andrew Delbanco must be a great teacher. A longtime faculty member at Columbia, he is devoted to the development of his students as individuals, and recognizes that their time in college should be formative: "They may still be deterred from sheer self-interest toward a life of enlarged sympathy and civic responsibility." Like most professors devoted to teaching, he has no interest in telling undergraduates what to think, but he does want to draw them toward a sense of skepticism about the status quo and to a feeling of wonder about the natural world. College, he tells us, is a time to learn to "make connections among seemingly disparate phenomena," to see things from another's point of view and to develop a sense of ethical responsibility. At a time when many are trying to reduce the college years to a training period for economic competition, Delbanco reminds readers of the ideal of democratic education.

In "College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be," he recalls this ideal's roots in English and American Protestantism. In this country, education was never supposed to be only about imparting information. It has long included character development — turning the soul away from selfish concerns and toward community. Delbanco cites Emerson's version of this turning: "The whole secret of the teacher's force lies in the conviction that men are convertible. And they are. They want awakening." Even secular teachers are trying to "get the soul out of bed, out of her deep habitual sleep."

By the end of the 19th century, this commitment to character formation, to sustaining "curiosity and humility," as Delbanco writes, was in sharp tension with a commitment to professionalization. Colleges were becoming universities, which meant they were getting into the business of research. Community took a back seat to expertise, and schools once exclusively devoted to undergraduate learning sought prestige through the development of graduate and professional schools.

With the substantial increase in the number of students wanting to pursue a college degree and the expansion of the number of fields of learning that schools were expected to cover, the dream of a "common learning experience" for undergraduates faded in favor of offering a plethora of courses from which to choose. Modern universities are meant to produce knowledge through specialization, and they often reward faculty members by giving them "relief" from teaching. Our best universities are adept at steering resources to their most productive researchers, but the undergraduate curriculum gets little more than lip service. "Very few colleges tell their students what to think," Delbanco notes, and "most are unwilling even to tell them what's worth thinking about."

Curiously, the elite universities' neglect of their core college mission has coincided with a frenzied competition to enter their gates. The desire for learning and character formation seems no longer to motivate a majority of college applicants (or their parents), but the desire to gain access to the schools with the highest rankings certainly does. Selective universities confer status, and their diplomas are thought to bring higher earnings. The wealthy have a much better chance of appearing qualified for admission; high schools for the rich know how to polish those résumés and pump up those SAT scores. At many schools, the so-called meritocracy in admissions is increasingly an excuse for reproducing economic inequality. The class divide grows ever greater; those with money and those without "know less and less about each other," Delbanco writes.

It's no wonder that politicians on the right are now exploiting resentment about higher education, even though their own economic policies would increase income inequality. Universities have become complicit in solidifying the class divide by instilling in their students a sense of entitlement: you got in because you deserved to, and once we certify your talent, you're entitled to whatever you can accumulate in the future.

Delbanco surveys this sad terrain, but he knows it's not the whole story. Over the last 40 years many highly selective schools have emphasized creating a diverse undergraduate student body in the belief that this results in a deeper educational experience. Liberal arts education has moved away from cultivating homogeneity and toward creating a campus community in which people can learn from their differences while finding new ways to connect. This has nothing to do with political correctness or identity politics. It has to do with preparing students to become lifelong learners who can navigate in and contribute to a heterogeneous world after graduation.

Selective colleges and universities ought to be shaping campus communities that maximize each undergraduate's ability to go beyond his or her comfort zone to learn from the most unexpected sources. To do so, and to deliver on the promise of our ideals, we must maintain robust financial aid programs and end the steep rise of tuition. If we're to become more affordable and more responsible, we must replace spending for cachet with investments in student learning.

Delbanco stresses that "one of the insights at the core of the college idea" is the notion that "to serve others is to serve oneself by providing a sense of purpose, thereby countering the loneliness and aimlessness by which all people, young and old, can be afflicted." Like John Dewey, he knows that education is a "mode of social life" in which we learn the most by working with others. Like William James, he prizes those "invasive" learning experiences that open us up to the "fruits for life." The American college is too important "to be permitted to give up on its own ideals," Delbanco writes. He has underscored these ideals by tracing their history. Like a great teacher, he has inspired us to try to live up to them.