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Andrew Delbanco, *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be*

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012. 229 pp. \$24.95. ISBN-978-0691130736

Geoffrey M. Vaughan

This book situates itself within the crisis in higher education and, as such, is engaging to read. Crisis books are often diverting, sometimes even because they are addressing a real problem. Everyone knows that higher education is in crisis. First, there is the looming financial crisis that could bring down the whole edifice. Student debt has overtaken credit card debt and is on the way to challenge mortgage debt in this country. We all wonder how long tuition can keep rising, especially when students seem to learn so little. And that is the second crisis: what are they studying, if they are studying anything at all? The author is no conservative nor is he some romantic longing for a bygone era. But he is honest enough to admit that something has gone wrong.

Among the many fascinating sections of this book is the author's account of vast efforts to reinvent the wheel of higher education. After detailing some of the more cutting-edge reforms he writes, "the most surprising thing about the findings is that they are presented as discoveries" (53). So many of our trendy innovations are simply practices we have lost and are now reinstating. For instance, living-learning halls imitate the intimate the college of old; interdisciplinary education tries to turn the clock back in the face of disciplinary triumph; and a focus on teaching tries to undo the introduction of the German research university. The author's historical perspective allows for the sober debunking of some contemporary claims to pedagogical superiority.

Indeed, Delbanco does an excellent job of bringing to light the achievements of this nation's colleges since the founding of Harvard in 1636. Their variety and purposefulness

transformed American society. And that is certainly what they were, purposeful. They were founded to impart a particular education, but not one of mere particulars. Quoting Jonathan Edwards, the students were led to appreciate the “beauties that delight us and we can’t tell why” (40). Those older educational goals, and the few institutions that cling to them, had an influence not only on the students, they educated the professors. Citing the case of his own experience at Columbia, the “Core also counters the provincialism of the faculty” (30). There was a unity of knowledge as opposed to the strict disciplinary boundaries we hold to today. Faculty members could speak to one another about their classes and the curriculum without fear of committing an act of war. That largely had to do with the purposes of the institutions, which were almost exclusively religious. In the words of a graduate of Harvard (class of 1825), “There is one truth, even as one God” (41). Many academics will cringe reading these words. They likewise cringe if they are forced to remember the originally religious intentions of their institutions, even more so when they recall that nearly all were confessionally and unapologetically Christian. According to Delbanco, “many academics have a curiously uneasy relation with these origins, as if they pose some threat or embarrassment to our secular liberties, even though the battle for academic freedom against clerical authority was won long ago” (65). This brings us to what college is and, given the context of the book, the crisis we face in the present.

What is the crisis in higher education and specifically for the American college? Delbanco fears that subsequent generations will be less educated than their elders (26). But by what measure? Will they spend less time in school? Will they have fewer credit hours earned? Is this a concern about graduation rates? Or is this another giving-in to the assessment regime and its student learning outcomes goals (SLOGs), student learning action plans (SLAPs) and critical reviews of assessment plans (CRAP)? Delbanco is not the first to express the fear that the

education on offer is getting worse, but at least one earlier author was willing to state what was being lost. In 1954, C. S. Lewis pointed out that of all the centuries since the fall of Rome the one most likely to find a son who could not read his father's copy of Virgil's *Aeneid* was the 20th. In the 21st century the grandsons do not even know who Virgil was.

In a list of the challenges facing the contemporary college, the author ends with this, "perhaps most important, [is] the collapse of consensus about what students should know" (5). Anyone with the misfortune of being caught in a discussion about curriculum will know how true this is. Just try to suggest that there are some books students should read before graduating and the invectives will fly. It does not even matter which books you suggest, the idea of a list itself is anathema to, if not the largest, at least the most vocal parts of the academy.

Unfortunately, the author never returns to this, even though by his own admission it is the most important point. Instead, he prefers to focus on the affective of parts of the college curriculum, the part that used be called building character and is now understood a "raising consciousness." This turn, to be fair, is in keeping with his purposes. The author is interested in the small, residential college rather than the large and impersonal research university. That is, his book is about the peculiarly American liberal arts college. But even here it would be good to know what the liberal arts are and, just as important, what they are not. Many colleges follow Jeremy Bentham in believing that poetry is as good as pushpin, where the latter can be taken to mean blog entries, graffiti, or whatever falls under the proliferating departments of "studies."

The author's timidity in the face of a discussion of content may, indeed, be the better part of valor but it is characteristic of the collapse of any sort of consensus. We are at the point now where educators are more concerned with process than content. That is to say, liberal education is taken to mean a few classes in English, a few in history, and several more in the other

disciplines that are not immediately vocational. No one asks, no one wants to know, what is taught in these courses. Does it matter that many English courses do not study literature but engage in bad sociology? We just want boxes checked and constituencies placated. But do not blame the professors. This is all anyone expects from education. Credentialing is what we have now. A college degree, any college degree, is all you need. Although a Masters degree, what Delbanco calls "a de facto fifth college year" (159), will serve you better.

One result of credentialing is to scare good students away from hard subjects. A 4.0 in the latest fad is still a 4.0, or so it believed. I know of one excellent student who chose not to study Latin only because he feared it would lower his GPA. He knew it would be good to study, that it would help him in future years, and that his education was the worse for avoiding it. But will graduate admissions boards and scholarship committees reward his courage and intellectual probity? Probably not. And so one more son is cut off from Virgil *because* of our system of higher education, not despite it. To reinforce Lewis' point, you cannot say that about education in the 13th century, for instance. Our attention to the process of education rather than its content, and the assumption that any subject is as good as any other, promotes cowardice on the part of students and timidity on the part of faculty.

I am, perhaps, being unfair to the author. He offers many compelling suggestions of what should be in a college curriculum. In a moving account of the possibilities of an education in the humanities he notes that "great works of art can be antidotes to loneliness" (100). On the next page he points out a timeless passage in the *Iliad*, concluding that "little boys on the shores of the Aegean three thousand years ago did the same thing that little boys do today at Jones Beach or the Hamptons." Here is someone who wants to make an argument for requiring Homer in a college education. In this same chapter on the transformation from colleges to universities he

drops more than hints that he is not happy with the changes. Yet in a telling passage he reassures his readers that he is not advocating for institutions that tell their students what to think, as if requiring the study of Virgil is indistinct from indoctrination. Rather, it remains a problem for him that “most [colleges] are unwilling to tell them what’s worth thinking about” (85). And this is *the* problem. Teaching does not so much direct the mind of the student as it directs the attention of the student. We require a subject like calculus not because we think we can actually lead everyone to proficiency. It has a special place in the curriculum because it is an important achievement and well worth knowing, even imperfectly. When we require it, if we require it, we do so because we can say with one voice that the better education directs students to calculus rather than Parcheesi. (Expect outraged letters from chairs of departments of Parcheesi studies.) How many colleges are willing to make this judgment about Shakespeare as compared to comic books? This reader gets the impression that Delbanco is ready, but cannot bring himself to do so. Again, it may be prudent of the author under the current conditions not to push too hard and ask any of his colleagues to make that choice. He may hope, instead, that there are enough educated men and women outside the academy to understand him.

But what does the educated man or woman look like today? How, returning to Lewis, would we say that one person is educated and another is not? Perhaps the ability to read Virgil in Latin is an outdated standard, having only survived as such unbroken for about two millennia. (*O tempora, o mores!*) What would we put in its place as a standard? To illuminate this question, consider the contrast. Most undergraduates can tell you how they would like their abs to look. But who is willing to address the contents of a graduate’s bookshelves or (heaven forbid!) the state of one’s soul? Indeed, if I were to sing in class of arms and the man today, the first thought of most students would be their biceps.

Andrew Delbanco has given us a first rate account of the history and present state of the American college. What he has not done, yet what his title promises, is tell us what it should be. No doubt he will have a far larger readership because of this reticence. But it is a shame that he has backed off, because he has all the skill and knowledge, all the sensitivity and sophistication to do so. He comes across as a fine teacher, one of the best. I have recommended his classes, solely on the basis of this book, to a young man starting soon at Columbia. And I recommend this book to all who have been to any college or will go someday. This is a fine book. I only hope that there will be a second volume, one in which Delbanco truly does “articulate what a college—any college—should seek to do for its students” (8). I would be the first to read it.

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