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INTRODUCTION



An Overview

America's colleges are facing a challenge of a size and scope they have not encountered since they transformed themselves completely during the decades after the Civil War. In those years, colleges felt compelled to reform in order to meet the demands of a rapidly industrializing nation. Today significant changes in our society have given rise to new pressures that call for fresh thought about the content and instructional methods of undergraduate education.

Since the first great period of transformation, America has grown from an insular nation into a dominant power whose interests are increasingly affected by events in other parts of the world. Our economy has evolved from an industrial base to a knowledge-driven system that puts a growing premium on education and demands more sophisticated skills. Our companies compete in markets that have become more and more global, while using complicated methods that rely increasingly on computers, robots, and artificial intelligence. These trends have helped the economy to grow, but they have also widened the gulf between rich and poor to near-record proportions, created new challenges and risks for the workforce, and depressed the rates of upward mobility in this "land of opportunity" to levels below those of many other advanced countries.

Meanwhile, America has continued to evolve from a nation peopled primarily by whites to one in which a majority of the population will be minorities of color by 2050. Our citizens have become riven by partisan differences, assailed by political rhetoric of unusual hostility, and bombarded by news reports of questionable veracity, all of which have combined to produce exceptional levels of distrust toward government and politicians. Those who study the levels of well-being and satisfaction of entire societies find that Americans, despite their prosperity, have become less happy and less satisfied with their lives than they were in earlier decades.

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These developments have produced a daunting list of demands on the nation's colleges. Employers seek graduates who can adapt successfully to rapid changes in the nature of their jobs, solve problems creatively, work adeptly in teams, interact effectively with diverse groups of colleagues, subordinates, and customers, and be resilient enough to overcome the challenges and risks created by constant economic change. Parents want their children to possess the qualities they need to obtain good jobs, pursue successful careers, and, above all, live happy and satisfying lives. Those who worry about the troubled state of democratic politics call for college graduates who are conscientious about voting, think carefully about the issues of the day, and take an active interest in the affairs of their communities. In addition, concerned by growing signs that the basic norms of society are eroding, newspaper columnists and other social commentators are urging colleges to educate young men and women to be sensitive to ethical issues, capable of considering them carefully, and strong enough in character to act according to their principles.

Since colleges fill the largest part of the days and weeks of millions of young Americans during a critical stage in their development, academic leaders and their faculties have a responsibility to consider society's demands with the utmost seriousness. In the past, educators have assumed that many useful qualities of mind and behavior were fixed and immutable long before young people finished high school and hence were beyond the power of colleges to improve. In recent decades, however, psychologists, mental health experts, neuroscientists, and education researchers have found that almost all of the desired capabilities can continue to change at least through early adulthood, and that some actually tend to develop most during the traditional college years. These discoveries, together with the evolving demands of society, create a new world of opportunities for colleges to explore as they seek to respond to the hopes and expectations of society. At the same time, they also give rise to some fundamental questions:

- How successful are colleges today in developing the competencies and qualities their students will need to succeed and flourish in their careers and help our society meet the challenges it faces?

- Do educators know how to develop all of the qualities of mind and spirit that faculties are increasingly called upon to teach—creativity in solving problems; teamwork in carrying out assignments at work; skill in interacting with people; resilience and adaptability in the face of adversity; high ethical standards in public and private life; and wisdom enough to decide how to live purposeful, fulfilling lives?
- What adjustments would colleges need to make in their curriculum and instructional methods to respond to society’s demands? Can their faculties be persuaded to make the necessary changes?

These are the questions that this book will explore. Following a brief account of the evolution of the curriculum from the earliest colleges to the present day, chapter 1 summarizes the complaints that have been made in recent decades about the shortcomings of our colleges and closes by describing an exceptionally thorough effort by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) to present a new plan for undergraduate education. This proposal features a set of goals and learning objectives that incorporate the full range of demands that society is making on the educational programs of our colleges.

The next seven chapters consider the feasibility of developing the skills and qualities of mind and behavior that interested groups and the AAC&U would have our colleges teach their students. Some of these objectives are ones that colleges have long had difficulty in achieving, such as preparing students to be active and informed citizens, teaching them not only to understand ethical principles but to live up to them in practice, and helping them to discover a meaningful and fulfilling purpose for their future lives. Other chapters examine the feasibility of teaching undergraduates a number of the so-called noncognitive skills and habits of mind and behavior, such as conscientiousness, creativity, interpersonal relations (including an appreciation and respect for people who differ in race, gender, or sexual orientation), lifelong learning, collaborative skills, and resilience and perseverance (or “grit” as it is sometimes called). Chapter 8 discusses two unorthodox methods of teaching—meditation and positive psychology—that some proponents believe can help students achieve a surprising number of the goals just mentioned.

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Chapters 9 and 10 analyze the prospects for persuading colleges to make serious attempts to teach the skills, behaviors, and qualities of mind discussed in the preceding chapters. Chapter 9 examines the arguments that academic leaders and their faculties are likely to make against an effort of this kind and identifies the most serious problems that could impede progress. Chapter 10 presents some practical steps that colleges could take to surmount these obstacles and hasten the process of reform. A brief conclusion to the book explains why a determined effort on the part of colleges to accomplish a more ambitious set of goals could be important not only for students and society but for the future of higher education itself.



This book was written several months before the coronavirus plague disrupted our colleges and universities. As I write this postscript, it is still too early to tell what effects this catastrophe will have on the issues and opportunities discussed in these pages. On the one hand, colleges may be forced for a time to set aside all other reforms in their struggle to cope with the financial consequences of closing their campuses. On the other hand, the consequences of living through such a calamity may foster a greater interest in the nurturing qualities such as resilience, empathy, creativity, and teamwork that are discussed in the chapters that follow. The massive effort to create virtual classrooms may also bring a greater willingness to experiment with new ways of teaching students. Though colleges are often slow to embrace major changes in their academic programs, the inequities in our society that the pandemic has exposed may usher in a period of social reform that could envelop higher education as well.

Whatever the future brings, one thing is certain. The underlying conditions that have given rise to the issues discussed in this book are not going away. It is still as important as ever to consider how our colleges and universities should respond.

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