

Review of
What is College For?
The Public Purpose of Higher Education⁵
Editors: Ellen Condliffe Lagemann and Harry Lewis
Publisher: Teachers College Press
\$55.00 hardcopy, \$28.20 paperback, \$17.02 Kindle

Review by
William Gasarch (gasarch@cs.umd.edu)
Department of Computer Science
University of Maryland, College Park, College Park, MD

1 Disclosure

I was a Harvard graduate student and Harry Lewis was my advisor. Note that he is a co-editor of the book and also a co-author of one of the chapters.

2 Overview

What is college for? Let's consider some answers you may have heard.

1. **Vocational:** College trains us for the workplace and gives us a certificate that we can show people to prove we are trained. (Perhaps the certificate is of polynomial length and the employer is a polynomial time verifier.) Many Computer Science and Engineering majors may be in college for this reason.
2. **Vocational but indirect:** College prepares you to go to a professional school, perhaps in law, business, or medicine. The most common pre-law majors are (according to Wikipedia) Political Science, History, English, Psychology, and Criminal Justice. The most common pre-med major (according to a guy named Joe at Yahoo Answers) are Biology, Chemistry, and Biochemistry. I was unable to find out what the most common pre-business school majors are.
3. **Better citizenship:** You go to college to learn things that will help you be a better citizen. If you understand economics and politics then you are a more informed citizen. Courses in civics (how the US government works and its origins) and ethics are appropriate here as well. Or perhaps such concepts should be embedded in many courses.
4. **Explore your creativity:** You go to college to hone yours skills as an artist. I suspect many English and Art majors feel this way. From talking to professors in English I have been surprised to find out, anecdotally, how many English majors are *not* passionate about their field, considering it is not lucrative.
5. **Leaving home:** The best way to move out of your parents house is to go to college.
6. **Staying home:** The best way to keep living with your parents is to go to college.

This book is a collection of essays written to address what college is for. The main focus is the tension between vocational and better citizenship (they do not address the leaving home/staying home divide).

⁵William Gasarch ©2015

3 Summary of Contents

Renewing the Civic Mission of American Higher Education by Ellen Condliffe Lagemann and Harry Lewis.

If I were to lament to my students that civics is no longer taught they would ask *what is civics?* It begins with the study of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, but it also is about fairness and justice in today's society. Such a course would encourage students to think critically about issues armed with the knowledge of history.

Why is it important? As citizens we are asked to decide on important issues and it seems that today's politics is mostly yelling without facts or content. A more knowledgeable electorate would help. The web (which is not mentioned) is double-edged; people can find out more but people can also get stuck in an echo chamber of their own viewpoints unchallenged.

This chapter gives a short history of the decline of the teaching of civics. The following quote shows how important it was in an earlier time. The quote is about the early 1800's.

For those relatively few Americans who continued their education in college, civic learning was encompassed within the subject of moral philosophy, a capstone course, usually taught by the college president, and required of all graduating seniors.

Some might say: *The college president? Isn't he the guy who begs corporations to give the school money?* Alas, at one time people would care what college presidents had to say on political and moral issues. Now college presidents are fund raisers.

What happened to civics? As more and more sciences got developed and taught, civics got crowded out. Also, faculty got more and more specialized and had more of an allegiance to their field than to their college. So it was harder to find someone to teach it or other core courses. In fact, it was hard to have a core (this was discussed more in Harry Lewis's prior book *Excellence Without a Soul*). The chapter does talk about the attempts at Columbia, Chicago, and Harvard to have a core that would include civics and values. The results were complicated and mixed, but, if anything, negative.

So what to do about this? Lagemann and Lewis recommend that civics be put back into the curriculum, not as a one-course-to-check-off, but as a part of many courses. In private email with Harry Lewis he has suggested that when I teach *Theory of Computation* I should bring up the fact that some women who did excellent work in theory were denied tenure solely *because they were women*. When I did this, one of my students insisted that I misspoke, and then asked, "*Don't you mean that they got tenure because they were women?*"

Today's students have no sense of this kind of recent history. Other biographical information could be embedded in courses to illustrate past discrimination against women, African Americans, and LBGT. For other courses there may be other things one can do. They are (wisely) not that specific, but recommend that we consider these issues.

They also recommend that colleges and universities themselves become exemplars of moral behavior to set a good example. Good luck with that.

Appealing as this may be, they also say what the problems would be. Professors are still over-specialized and hard to dictate to. Lewis and Lagemann have boxed themselves in—they do not want civics just to be a one-course-check-box, however, they also realize how hard it is to get professors to do anything to add civics to their courses. And it would be hard to monitor.

This chapter was fascinating for its history and idealism and I am glad they have brought up these issues; however, they simultaneously seem to say how hopeless it is to fix.

Science, Enlightenment, and Intellectual Tensions in Higher Education by Douglas Taylor.

It seems to be a given that contemporary America is anti-intellectual. The “Intelligent Design” movement, the climate change deniers, and the anti-vaccine movement are examples of this. I feel an obligation to give an example *on the left*⁶ so here is one: the movement against genetically modified food. Is my feeling that I must give an example on the left similar to when an evolutionary biologist feels he must mention intelligent design for balance? I honestly do not know.

Who is to blame for this? Dr. Taylor points out that colleges are usually not blamed as this viewpoint is thought to have originated in people before college. He disagrees and points out where colleges have outright promoted anti-intellectualism. There are two such places:

1. Some academics have promoted a relativism where we don’t know anything except from personal experience. This has led to absurdities like *Evolution is true for you but not for me*.
2. When colleges recruit people they sometimes do it with the same mentality as a late night TV commercial. This involves outright lying and hence damages credibility and the whole notion of truth.

What to do about this? For the first point he does not suggest much beyond *we should stop doing that*. For the second point he notes that the top colleges could all agree to have more honest and less aggressive marketing. In addition the ridiculous ranking system of US News and World report should be replaced by a more intelligent set of rankings. He didn’t mention Goodhart’s law, so I will:

When a measure becomes a target it ceases to be a measure.

The notion of a better ranking system or several of them, better in tune with what students need and want, is of course an excellent idea. Could it work? The top schools could make them work and could, in effect, call some sort of truce on aggressive marketing. But would it filter down to less elite schools? Of this I am skeptical.

Liberated Consumers and the Liberal Arts College by Elaine Tuttle Hansen.

Given the last two chapters one wonders if there is *any* college that has clarity of purpose and a reasonable consensus of what excellence in achieving that purpose looks like⁷. There are! The Liberal Arts Colleges!

This chapter praises liberal arts colleges for what they do. To give two key examples: (1) they call on students to think about complex ideas slowly rather than succumb to, what Lisa Simpson calls, our *instant oatmeal society*, and (2) Learning in close-knit communities based on friendship.

The article then goes on to what may be a problem: cost, rankings, narrowness-of-professors (a problem everywhere) and a lack of diversity. But the article is mostly upbeat.

The article does not mention the issue of college-as-job-training and how liberal arts colleges fit into that. Nor do they mention social media which is quite relevant to point (2) above. Nevertheless, the chapter does present us with a model which might be worth aspiring to.

The other 75%: College Education Beyond the Elite by Paul Attewell and David E. Lavin.

The first three chapters of this book, and especially the third chapter, talk about full time residential students at 4-year colleges who have no financial problems (either their parents or financial aid is paying for them). How many students actually fit this model? The title of the chapter might make you think that only 25% are of that type; however, the number is closer to 14% depending on how you count.

⁶The anti-vax movement is actually on the far left and the far right.

⁷That last sentence fragment was copied from this chapter.

Many of the “75%” students are at 2-year colleges trying to get a professional degree (e.g., Nursing) so that they can get a job. Many of them cannot afford even that so they have to work while in school. Some alternate work and school. This chapter’s main point is to not leave them out of the discussion. Also note that this chapter relies on hard data which is explained more at length in books the authors have written.

The authors take on some myths about such students. The statistics would seem to indicate that many of the other 75% don’t graduate at high rates. But this is a fallacy based on 2-year or 4-year rates (for 2-year and 4-year colleges). Since many are part time or alternating they naturally take longer *through no fault of their own*. If you look at those who graduate in 6 years the statistics look much better. Alas, decisions on how much money to spend on financial aid are often made by looking at the incorrect and misleading statistics.

Another myth is that such students go for vocational majors at a higher rate than the traditional student. This is false since even traditional students are also going for vocational majors at a high rate. This is interesting since the myth feeds into some people looking down on community colleges because they are vocational. This is an idiotic reason to look down on them; however, it’s still good to debunk the myth.

The authors are strong on more financial aid and on having remedial courses at community colleges. They argue their case well. The trend in the country now is for the government to spend less money; however, that could change. And teaching remedial courses is already happening; the authors defend the practice. So it seems plausible to actually take up the advice given here.

In the last part of this chapter they talk about a civics education for these students and are for it. They do not really discuss why they are for it, though perhaps that is supposed to be obvious—it’s good for everyone. This point may be discussed more in their books.

Professional Education: Aligning Knowledge, Expertise, and Public Purpose by William Sullivan.

Law School, Medical School, Business School, and Seminaries are all schools which train people directly for jobs. Or do they? In this chapter the author breaks down types of learning into three categories: (1) Academic, for example, someone in Medical School learning biology, (2) Practical, e.g., someone in Law looking at actual cases, and (3) Professionalism (ethics, common practice of the field), e.g., if you are in a business and you can do something which is good for your company but absolutely awful for society, do you do it?

This chapter looks at how these three aspects have competed over the years and how it looks now. As you may have guessed, academic and practical have eclipsed ethical over the years. Even in Seminary!

What to do about this? At the end of the chapter he gives a description of an excellent course required of seniors at Stern School of Business in New York titled *Professional Responsibility and Leadership*. In this course the students are forced to consider conflicts where they must balance what is good for the firm, for yourself, for your bosses, for your employees, for your community.

Should this course, or something like it, be instituted at other schools? He clearly thinks yes and I agree; however, I wonder if one course is enough. Taking a tip from the first chapter, some of these issues should be embedded in other courses as well.

Could this course, or something like it, be instituted at other schools? He does not address this so I will. If professional schools were not quite so hung up on research (which is the problem universities have) then yes, this kind of course could be developed and work elsewhere. That may be a big *If*.

Graduate Education: The Nerve Center of Higher Education by Catharine Stimpson.

If I want to find out which school any of the authors of the chapters are at, and what positions they hold, I could go to the back of the book. For some of them there is a mild mention of this in their chapter (e.g., Douglas Taylor mentions teaching Evolutionary Biology). This chapter is more personal. Catharine

Stimpson was a Dean at the NYU Graduate School, and also at Rutgers Graduate School, and she uses this personal experience in her chapter.

She first points out that graduate school is not well understood. The general population knows about community colleges, 4-year colleges, professional schools, but not much about graduate school. This is dangerous since we need graduate schools.

She then points out some statistics about graduate school that are interesting. I will share one of them: In 1989 women got 29% of all doctorates in science and engineering, but in 2009 they got 42%.

Her main point is to look at some of the tradeoffs that Graduate Education has to deal with. One is depth versus breadth. She doesn't restate the famous quote on depth so I will:

*Getting a PhD is learning more and more about less and less
until you know everything about nothing.*

This is an issue on all levels. How much should a PhD in physics know about the history and sociology of physics and its affect on society? How much should a PhD in string theory know about thermodynamics? How much should a PhD about protons know about electrons? One can get very narrow, and academic incentives encourage that.

Another issue is cooperation. A university is supposed to be competitive and strive to be better than other schools; yet a university is also supposed to cooperate with other schools. This issue is brought up in the context of cooperating with other countries since America may be losing its edge.

She ends on an optimistic note which I quote:

To be sure, more and more wonderful inventions, discoveries, and ideas will emanate from research universities outside of the Unites States. But, to speak NewYorkese, the Unites States is not yet chopped liver. Moreover, at their strongest, our advanced communities of inquiry are morally charged. They can embody what I call *Humane Excellence*. Our morality, when in action, is a global magnet even in the most competitive of conditions.

4 Opinion

This book raises many questions of interest. It should start many discussions and a few bar fights. But the authors, without really intending it, seem also to say that the situation is hopeless. It's not clear where to go from there.

There is one aspect of modern society that is conspicuously absent from this book: technology. With the web students can look up much more than they used to be able to. MOOCS may make the cost of going to college drop drastically. Social media connects up students to a phenomenal degree. All of this must have some effect on the issues being discussed; however, none of this is mentioned. Given that Harry Lewis is a computer scientist who co-authored (with Hal Abelson, Ken Ledeen) an excellent book about the effects of computers on society, (*Blown to Bits*), this omission is surprising.

Nevertheless, this book is an excellent way to start a debate. Here is hoping it inspires not just debate, but action.