Andrew Delbanco, *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be* (Princeton University Press, 2012)

ONE

WHAT IS COLLEGE FOR?

One of the peculiarities of the teaching life is that every year the teacher gets older while the students stay the same age. Each fall when classes resume, I am reminded of the ancient Greek story of a kindly old couple who invite two strangers into their modest home for a meal. No matter how much the hosts drink, by some mysterious trick their goblets remain full even though no one pours more wine. Eventually, the guests reveal themselves as gods who have performed a little miracle to express their thanks. So it goes in college: every fall the teacher has aged by a year, but the class is replenished with students who stay forever young.[1]

For this and many other reasons, the relation between teacher and student is a delicate one, perhaps not as fraught as that between parent and child, or between spouses or siblings, but sometimes as decisive. Henry James captured it beautifully in a story called "The Pupil," which is not about a college teacher but about a private tutor who has come to love the child whom he is trying to save from his parents:

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> When he tried to figure to himself the morning twilight of childhood, so as to deal with it safely, he perceived that it was never fixed, never arrested, that ignorance, at the instant one touched it, was already flushing faintly into knowledge, that there was nothing that at a given moment you could say a clever child didn't know. It seemed to him that he both knew too much to imagine [the child's] simplicity and too little to disembroil his tangle.

Embedded in this passage is the romantic idea that the student possesses latent knowledge of ultimate things, and that the teacher's task is to probe for the lever that releases knowledge into consciousness.

In trying to make it happen, even—perhaps especially—a good teacher can sometimes seem brutal. The famously demanding Joseph Schwab, for example, who taught for years in the "Biological Sequence" course at the University of Chicago, was known for "putting one student in the hot seat for a while . . . working that person as thoroughly and creatively as possible before moving on to another." One Chicago alumnus, Lee Shulman, former president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, recalls that sitting in Schwab's class "fostered clammy hands, damp foreheads" and, to put it mildly, "an ever-attentive demeanor."[2] This figure of the "tough love" teacher—think of Annie Sullivan in *The Miracle Worker* or Professor Kingsfield in *The Paper Chase*—has become a cliché of our culture, and like all clichés, it contains some truth, though doubtless simplified and unduly generalized. It also seems less and less pertinent to the present. At most colleges today, a student experiencing such anxiety would likely drop the class for fear of a poor grade (compulsory courses of the sort that Schwab taught have become rare),

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and the teacher would risk a poor score on the end-of-semester evaluations.[3]

Whatever the style or technique, teaching at its best can be a generative act, one of the ways by which human beings try to cheat death—by giving witness to the next generation so that what we have learned in our own lives won't die with us. Consider what today we would call the original "mission statement" of America's oldest college. The first fund-raising appeal in our history, it was a frank request by the founders of Harvard for financial help from fellow Puritans who had stayed home in England rather than make the journey to New England. Despite their mercenary purpose, the words are still moving almost four hundred years after they were written:

> After God had carried us safe to New England, and we had built our houses, provided necessaries for our livelihood, reared convenient places for God's worship, and settled the civil government, one of the next things we longed for and looked after was to advance learning and perpetuate it to posterity; dreading to leave an illiterate ministry to the churches, when our present ministers shall lie in the dust.[4]

These mixed sentiments of faith and dread have always been at the heart of the college idea. They are evident at every college commencement in the eyes of parents who watch, through a screen of memories of their own receding youth, as their children advance into life. College is our American pastoral. We imagine it as a verdant world where the harshest sounds are the reciprocal thump of tennis balls or the clatter of cleats as young bodies trot up and down the fieldhouse steps. Yet bright with hope as it may be, every college is shadowed by the specter of mortality—a place where, in that uniquely American season of "fall and football

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weather and the new term," the air is redolent with the "Octoberish smell of cured leaves."[5]

But what, exactly, is supposed to happen in this bittersweet place—beyond sunbathing and body-toning and the competitive exertions, athletic and otherwise, for which these are just the preliminaries? First of all, it should be said that the pastoral image of college has little to do with what most college students experience today. A few years ago, Michael S. McPherson, president of the Spencer Foundation and former president of Macalester College, and Morton O. Schapiro, former president of Williams College (now of Northwestern University), pointed out that "the nation's liberal arts college students would almost certainly fit easily inside a Big Ten football stadium: fewer than one hundred thousand students out of more than fourteen million."[6]

Since then, the number of undergraduates has grown by nearly a third, to around eighteen million, while the number in liberal arts colleges—by which McPherson and Schapiro meant a four-year residential college that is not part of a big university, and where most students study subjects that are not narrowly vocational such as nursing or computer programming—remains about the same. Many college students today, of whom a growing number are older than traditional college age, attend commuter or online institutions focused mainly on vocational training. Often, they work and go to school at the same time, and take more than four years to complete their degree, if they complete it at all. Five years from now, undergraduate students in the United States are projected to exceed twenty million, and President Obama wants to accelerate the growth. But only a small fraction will attend college in anything like the traditional sense of the word.[7]

Whatever the context, the question remains: what's the point? My colleague Mark Lilla put the matter well not long

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ago when he spoke to the freshmen of Columbia College near the end of their first college year. He was talking, of course, to students in a college commonly described as "elite." Divided roughly equally between young men and women, these students were more racially diverse than would have been the case even a few years ago. About one in ten was born abroad or has some other claim, such as a parent with a foreign passport, to be an "international" student; and, though it's hard to tell the financial means of the students from their universal uniform of tee shirts and jeans, roughly one in seven (a somewhat higher rate than at other Ivy League colleges) is eligible for a Pell grant, a form of federal financial aid that goes to children of low-income families.

As they filed into the lecture room, they gave each other the public hugs that signify new friendships, or, in some cases, the mutually averted eyes that tell of recent breakups. They seemed simultaneously fatigued and at ease. Once they had settled into their seats, out came the iPhones and laptops, some of which stayed aglow for the whole hour, though mostly they listened, rapt. And when Lilla made the following surmise about how and why they had come to college, they reacted with the kind of quiet laughter that meant they knew he was telling the truth:

> You figured, correctly, that to be admitted you had to exude confidence about what Americans, and only Americans, call their "life goals"; and you had to demonstrate that you have a precise plan for achieving them. It was all bullshit; you know that, and I know that. The real reason you were excited about college was because you had questions, buckets of questions, not life plans and PowerPoint presentations. My students have convinced me that they

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> are far less interested in getting what they want than in figuring out just what it is that's worth wanting.[8]

No college teacher should presume to answer this question on behalf of the students, though, too often, he or she will try. (Requiring discipleship has always been a hazard of the teaching profession.) Instead, the job of the teacher and, collectively, of the college, is to help students in the arduous work of answering it for themselves.

To be sure, students at a college like mine have many advantages. Elite institutions confer on their students enormous benefits in the competition for positions of leadership in business, government, and higher education itself. As soon as they are admitted, even those without the prior advantage of money have already gotten a boost toward getting what they want—though not necessarily toward figuring out what's worth wanting. In fact, for some, the difficulty of that question rises in proportion to the number of choices they have. Many college students are away from their parents for the first time, although in our age of Facebook and Skype and Google Chat and the like, they are never really away. Their choices may seem limitless, but powerful forces constrain them, including what their parents want them to want. Students under financial pressure face special problems, but students from privileged families have problems too.[9]

College is supposed to be a time when such differences recede if not vanish. The notion of shared self-discovery for all students is, of course, a staple of exhortations to freshmen just coming in and valedictions to seniors about to go out—an idea invoked so often that it, too, has become a cliché. In other cultures, however, it would be an oddity. The American college has always differed fundamentally from the European university, where students are expected to know what they want (and what they are capable of) before they

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arrive. That is true even at the ancient English colleges of Oxford and Cambridge, to which students apply around age seventeen to "read" this or that subject, and once arrived, rarely venture outside their chosen field of formal study. By contrast, in America—in part because of our prosperity, which still exceeds that of most of the rest of the world—we try to extend the time for second chances and to defer the day when determinative choices must be made. In 1850, when Herman Melville, whose formal schooling ended at age seventeen, wrote that "a whaleship was my Yale College and my Harvard," he used the word "college" as the name of the place where (to use our modern formulation) he "found himself."

A few years ago, I came across a manuscript diary—also, as it happens, from 1850—kept by a student at a small Methodist college, Emory and Henry, in southwest Virginia. One spring evening, after attending a sermon by the college president that left him troubled and apprehensive, he made the following entry in his journal: "Oh that the Lord would show me how to think and how to choose." That sentence, poised somewhere between a wish and a plea, sounds archaic today. For many if not most students, God is no longer the object of the plea; or if he is, they probably do not attend a college where everyone worships the same god in the same way. Many American colleges began as denominational institutions; but today religion is so much a matter of private conscience, and the number of punishable infractions so small (even rules against the academic sin of plagiarism are only loosely enforced), that few college presidents would presume to intervene in the private lives of students for purposes of doctrinal or moral correction. The era of spiritual authority belonging to college is long gone. And yet I have never encountered a better formulation—"show me how to think and how to choose"—of what a college should strive to be: an aid to reflection, a place

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and process whereby young people take stock of their talents and passions and begin to sort out their lives in a way that is true to themselves and responsible to others.

2

Many objections can be lodged against what I have just said. For one thing, all colleges, whatever their past or present religious orientation, now exist in a context of secular pluralism that properly puts inculcation at odds with education.[10] Then there is the fact that students arrive in college already largely formed in their habits and attitudes, or, in the case of the increasing number of "nontraditional" (that is, older) students, preoccupied with the struggles of adulthood—finding or keeping a job, making or saving a marriage, doing right by one's children. Many college women, who now outnumber men, are already mothers, often single. And regardless of age or gender or social class, students experience college—in the limited sense of attending lectures, writing papers, taking exams—as a smaller part of daily life than did my generation, which came of age in the 1960s and 70s. They live now in an ocean of digital noise, logged on, online, booted up, as the phrase goes, 24/7, linked to one another through an arsenal of gadgets that are never "powered down."

Having just survived the travails of getting in, students in selective colleges find themselves under instant and constant pressure to prepare for competing with graduates of comparable colleges once they get out. Those in open-admissions colleges, many of whom must cope with deficits in their previous schooling, may not be able to compete at what we call the "same level," but they are likely to feel even more pressure to justify the cost of earning a credential in the hope that it will give them a fighting chance in postcollege life. In other words, college is less and less

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a respite from what my campus newspaper used to call "the real world." This is true of colleges of all types and ranks.

It may also be objected that there is nothing new about any of this—an objection with a good deal of merit. When the first administrators at Stanford (founded in 1891) wanted to know why the new freshman class had chosen to enroll, they heard mainly about the California climate, the prestige of the new university, and the (at that time) low living expenses.[11] Twenty years later, the president of Western Reserve University, a clergyman with the wonderfully donnish name Charles Thwing, found that students were less interested in "hard reading and high thinking" than in acquiring the " 'touch' of college life" in order to impress prospective employers. Around the same time, at Penn State, an English professor complained of being pestered with a recurrent question about the value of what he was teaching: "Lissun, Prof, how is this dope going to help a guy get a job and pull down a good salary?"[12] And fifty years after that, the eminent critic Lionel Trilling (who taught all his life at Columbia, except for visiting stints at Harvard and Oxford) had come to feel that his students regarded college "merely as a process of accreditation, with an economic-social end in view."[13]

So it's an old and familiar story. If we look through the eyes of fiction writers who set their stories and novels on a college campus, most of what we see in the past looks a lot like the present. In Mark Twain's novel *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894), a young man goes up from small-town Missouri to Yale, and comes back with nothing to show except two new habits: drinking and gambling. In Edgar Allan Poe's story "William Wilson" (1839), we get a picture of the University of Virginia as a place where besotted boys indulge in round-the-clock gambling and whoring. Pretty much the same scene is described 165 years later in Tom Wolfe's novel

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I Am Charlotte Simmons (2004), in which students have their mouths fastened perpetually to the spigot of a beer keg except when taking a break to have sex—though some seem capable of doing both simultaneously. And in a still more recent novel, *The Ask* (2010), by Sam Lipsyte, the narrator recalls college in the 1970s as a time when he and his housemates "drank local beer, smoked homegrown and shake":

> Senior year I moved into the House of Drinking and Smoking, took the cheap room . . . screwed a blue bulb in the ceiling and slept there, mostly alone . . . drank in the living room with . . . a crew that included . . . a guy . . . who may or may not have been a student, though by dint of his meth addiction could have counted as an apprentice chemist.[14]

Such fictions tend to be borne out by recollections of fact. In a recent oral history, the distinguished physician Spencer Foreman, who became the transformative leader of New York's Montefiore Hospital, described the small liberal arts college he attended in the 1950s as a place where "the difference between the pre-meds and the non-pre-meds" was that "the pre-meds began drinking Thursday night. Everybody else drank every night."[15] One should always be wary of accounts of college life that posit some golden age when students went to bed early and rose early, using the night to refresh themselves with sleep (solo, of course) for the lofty labors of the day to come. It has never been so.

In fact, for much of its history, college was a quasi–penal institution where boys were "sentenced" by their parents to "temporary custody."[16] Only because they could not afford to replicate the quadrangle system at Oxford and Cambridge, with its stone walls and guarded gates, did the founders of Harvard build

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a high fence around the yard—not so much to keep the cows and goats out as to keep the students in.[17] Today we expect the opposite: that going to college means to be released into a playground of unregulated freedom.

The most obvious instance of the expanded freedom is, of course, sex, which has come a long way from the days when it was a furtive extracurricular activity, as described in the novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald or J. P. Marquand, in which Princeton or Harvard boys, waiting to be matched with some designated debutante, find relief with prostitutes or serving-girls; or, as Philip Roth described it two generations later, when "co-eds" were "thrust up against the trunks of trees in the dark" by boys desperate in those last minutes before their dates had to return, alone, to their dorms. In most colleges, this is ancient history. A couple of years ago, the Office of Residential Life and Learning at one well-regarded northeastern college felt compelled to institute a rule banning "any sex act in a dorm room while one's roommate is present."[18] Presumably, exemption is granted to the roommate who wants to be part of the action.

Over the past half century or so, this expansion of freedom has been the most obvious change in college life—not just sexual freedom, but what might be called freedom of demeanor and deportment, freedom of choice as fields and courses have vastly multiplied, and, perhaps most important, freedom of judgment as the role of the college as arbiter of values has all but disappeared. Relatively few colleges require any particular course for graduation, and the course catalogue is likely to be somewhere between an encyclopedia and the proverbial Chinese menu—from which students choose a little of this and a little of that, unless they are majoring in one of the "hard" sciences, in which case their range of choice is much narrower.

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This situation makes for certain ironies. Old institutions invoke their own antiquity in their promotional materials ("reassuring printed matter," as Thorstein Veblen described it long ago, by which "marketable illusions" are sold to the public), while within the institution, the past is denounced as a dark age of meddling trustees, autocratic presidents, and a faculty of "old boys" with benighted views of just about everything.[19] Traces of the reviled old college survived till not all that long ago. I can remember when a full-time employee of the college library patrolled the reading room tapping the shoes of students sprawled back in their chairs with their feet on the table until they sat up (or, more likely, woke up) and planted them back on the floor.

All that sort of thing has been thrown out with a hearty good riddance—and yet, as one college chaplain wrote not long ago, today's students seem to "want to retain their hard-won autonomy, while at the same time insisting that institutions assume a moral responsibility for protecting them from the consequences of that autonomy." College authorities have given up their role of acting *in loco parentis*, but when trouble breaks out over, say, some incendiary "hate speech," they still tend to get blamed for not parentally stepping in. If and when they do so, they are likely to be indulgent. Except in the "hard" sciences, academic failure, especially in elite colleges, is rare; and cheating, except in the military academies, tends to be treated as a minor lapse.

3

So college culture has undergone many deep changes—some slow to establish themselves, such as the advent of elective courses and the end of compulsory chapel in the late nineteenth century, others sudden, such as the abandonment of parietal rules in the late 1960s. There have been deep changes, too, in what some call the

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"learning style" of college students. The cultural critic Carlin Romano, who has taught in several colleges, reports that for many undergraduates today, being asked to read "a whole book, from A to Z, feels like a marathon unfairly imposed on a jogger"—a problem that some faculty are trying to solve by gathering students outside of class to read long works such as *Paradise Lost* or *Ulysses* aloud. The sociologist Tim Clydesdale, who teaches at the College of New Jersey, speaks of a "new epistemology," by which he means that students no longer "arrive in awe of the institution and its faculty, content to receive their education via lecture and happy to let the faculty decide what was worth knowing." Now they show up knowing "full well that authorities can be found for every position and any knowledge claim, and consequently . . . [they are] dubious (privately, that is) about anything we claim to be true or important." The Harvard English professor Louis Menand thinks that college teachers have yet to adapt the old "linear model for transmitting knowledge—the lecture monologue in which a single line of thought leads to an intellectual climax after fifty minutes—to a generation of students who are accustomed to dealing with multiple information streams in short bursts."[20] The fact is there is always a lag between what's happening in the mental world of students and that of the faculty, and by the time the latter catches up with the former, new students have arrived with new attitudes, so the cycle begins again. In the 1960s, students tended to be to the left of faculty on social and political issues. In the 2010s, it is likely to be the other way around.

Former Princeton president William Bowen keeps on his desk an alabaster calendar inscribed with a comment by the naturalist John Burroughs: "New times always! Old time we cannot keep."[21] It's good advice. And yet, in some essentials, it is also true that colleges change very little. New college presidents find out

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fast that they have landed in the slowest-changing institutions in American life—slower, even, than the post office. The Ohio University economist Richard Vedder gets reliable laughs when he tells corporate audiences that "with the possible exception of prostitution, teaching is the only profession that has had absolutely no productivity advance in the 2400 years since Socrates." Shortly before the economic debacle of 2008, former president of Johns Hopkins William Brody remarked that "if you went to a [college] class circa 1900, and you went today, it would look exactly the same, while if you went to an automobile plant in 1900 and today, you wouldn't recognize the place."[22]

It may well be true that the strongest force in academia is inertia. But, contrary to his intention, Vedder's joke could be construed to mean that neither prostitution nor teaching can be improved through economies of scale; and Brody's invidious comparison was badly timed, since a few months later the auto companies (except for Ford) came within a whisker of going belly up, while our colleges more or less weathered the storm. His comment also wasn't exactly accurate, since in the college classroom of 1900 you would probably have seen no women unless you were visiting one of the new women's colleges; nor would you have seen any persons of color, unless you were visiting, say, Tuskegee or Howard or Morehouse. What is true is that the method of teaching in 1900 was pretty much the same as it is now: no PowerPoint, different dress code—but otherwise recognizable.

And so, I think, are the students. They have always been searching for purpose. They have always been unsure of their gifts and goals, and susceptible to the demands—overt and covert—of their parents and of the abstraction we call "the market." There is much talk today, as well there should be, about students resort-

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ing to cheating or binge drinking in response to these pressures, while others fall into chronic anxiety and depression. It is probably true that these problems have grown in recent years, along with our awareness of them.[23] But lest we think that something altogether new is happening, consider this passage from an 1871 novel by Harriet Beecher Stowe, written in the voice of a man thinking back to his senior year:

> During my last year, the question, "What are you good for?" had often borne down like a nightmare upon me. When I entered college all was distant, golden, indefinite, and I was sure that I was good for almost anything that could be named. Nothing that had ever been attained by man looked to me impossible. Riches, honor, fame, anything that any other man unassisted had wrought out for himself with his own right arm, I could work out also.
>
> But as I measured myself with real tasks, and as I rubbed and grated against other minds and whirled round and round in the various experiences of college life, I grew smaller and smaller in my own esteem, and oftener and oftener in my lonely hours it seemed as if some evil genius delighted to lord it over me and sitting at my bed-side or fire-side to say "What are you good for, to what purpose all the pains and money that have been thrown away on you? You'll never be anything; you'll only mortify your poor mother that has set her heart on you, and make your Uncle Job ashamed of you." Can any anguish equal the depths of those blues in which a man's whole self hangs in suspense before his own eyes, and he doubts whether he himself, with his entire outfit and apparatus, body, soul, and spirit, isn't to be, after all,

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> a complete failure? Better, he thinks never to have been born, than to be born to no purpose. . . .[24]

With a few small changes in diction, these sentences could have been written today. Now, as then, most students have no clear conception of why or to what end they are in college. Some students have always been aimless, bored, or confused; others self-possessed, with their eyes on the prize. Most are somewhere in between, looking for something to care about.

What does all this mean for those (students, faculty, administrators, alumni, donors, legislators, trustees) who have something to say about what happens in America's colleges? Surely it means that every college has an obligation to make itself a place not just for networking and credentialing but for learning in the broad and deep meaning of that word. It means that all students deserve something more from college than semi-supervised fun or the services of an employment agency. Good colleges can still be transformative in the sense of the title of a best-selling book, *Colleges that Change Lives*, which has become a welcome alternative to the usual guides (*Barron's*, *Princeton Review*, *U.S. News & World Report*), which simply list colleges in a hierarchy of prestige that conforms almost exactly to the relative size of their endowments.

For all these reasons, it is particularly painful when those colleges at the top of the usual lists, the ones with the most resources and (as they like to claim) the most talent, fail to confront their obligations—when, as the former dean of Harvard College, Harry Lewis, puts it, they "affect horror" that "students attend college in the hope of becoming financially successful, but . . . offer students neither a coherent view of the point of a college education nor any guidance on how they might discover for themselves some larger purpose in life." Lewis's critique of "the

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service-station conception" of college is more than a gripe at his home institution.[25] It is a call for every college to do what every true teacher, at least since Socrates, has asked every student to do: engage in some serious self-examination.

4

What, then, are today's prevailing answers to the question, what is college for? There are basically three. The most common answer is an economic one, though it is really two linked answers: first, that providing more people with a college education is good for the economic health of the nation; and, second, that going to college is good for the economic competitiveness of the individuals who constitute the nation.

Politicians tend to emphasize the first point, as when Richard Riley, secretary of education under President Clinton, said in a much-quoted comment that we must educate our workers for an increasingly unpredictable future: "We are currently preparing students for jobs that don't yet exist using technologies that haven't been invented in order to solve problems that we don't even know are problems yet." President Obama makes the same point more briefly: "countries that out-teach us today will out-compete us tomorrow."[26]

As for the second economic rationale—the competitiveness of individuals—it's clear that a college degree long ago supplanted the high school diploma as the minimum qualification for entry into the skilled labor market, and there is abundant evidence that people with a college degree earn more money over the course of their lives than people without one. One authority claims that those who hold a BA degree earn roughly 60 percent more, on average, over their lifetime than those who do not. Some estimates put the worth of a BA degree at about a million

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dollars in incremental lifetime earnings. More conservative analysts, taking account of the cost of obtaining the degree, arrive at a more modest number, but there is little dispute that one reason to go to college is to increase one's earning power.[27]

For such economic reasons alone, it is alarming that the United States has been slipping relative to other developed nations as measured by the percentage of its younger population with at least some postsecondary education. There are differences of opinion about how much we have slipped, but there is general agreement that American leadership in higher education is in jeopardy and can no longer be taken for granted. For the first time in our history, we face the prospect that the coming generation of adult Americans will be less educated than their elders.[28]

Within this gloomy general picture are some especially disturbing particulars. For one thing, flat or declining college attainment rates (relative to other nations) apply disproportionately to minorities, who are a growing portion of the American population. And financial means has a shockingly large bearing on educational opportunity, which, according to one authority, looks like this in today's America: if you are the child of a family making more than $90,000 per year, your odds of getting a BA by age twenty-four are roughly one in two; if your family's income is between $60,000 and $90,000, your odds are roughly one in four; if your parents make less than $35,000, your odds are one in seventeen.[29]

Moreover, among those who do get to college, high-achieving students from affluent families are four times more likely to attend a selective college than students from poor families with comparable grades and test scores.[30] And since prestigious colleges (prestige correlates almost exactly with selectivity) serve as funnels into leadership positions in business, law, and government, this means that our "best" colleges are doing more to sus-

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tain than to retard the growth of inequality in our society. Yet colleges are still looked to as engines of social mobility in American life, and it would be shameful if they became, even more than they already are, a system for replicating inherited wealth.

Not surprisingly, as in any discussion of economic matters, one finds dissenters from the predominant view. Some on the right say that pouring more public investment into higher education, in the form of enhanced subsidies for individuals or institutions, is a bad idea. They say that the easy availability of government funds is one reason for inflation in the price of tuition. They argue against the goal of universal college education as a fond fantasy and, instead, for a sorting system such as one finds in European countries, where children are directed according to test results early in life toward the kind of schooling deemed suitable for them: vocational training for the low-scorers, who will be the semiskilled laborers and functionaries; advanced education for the high-scorers, who will be the diplomats and doctors, and so on.[31]

Others, on the left, question whether the aspiration to go to college really makes sense for "low-income students who can least afford to spend money and years" on such a risky venture, given their low graduation rates and high debt. Such skeptics point out, too, that most new jobs likely to be created over the next decade will probably not require a college degree. From this point of view, the "education gospel" seems a cruel distraction from "what really provides security to families and children: good jobs at fair wages, robust unions, affordable access to health care and transportation."[32]

One can be on either side of these questions, or somewhere in the middle, and still believe in the goal of achieving universal college education. Consider an analogy from another sphere of public debate: health care. One sometimes hears that eliminat-

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ing smoking would save untold billions because of the immense cost of caring for patients who develop lung cancer, emphysema, heart disease, or diabetes—among the many diseases caused or exacerbated by smoking. It turns out, however, that reducing the incidence of disease by curtailing smoking (one of the major public-health successes of recent decades) may actually end up costing us more, since people who don't smoke live longer, and eventually require expensive therapies for chronic diseases and the inevitable infirmities of old age. Yet who does not think it a good thing when a person stops smoking and thereby improves his or her chances of living a longer and healthier life? In other words, measuring the benefit as a social cost or social gain does not quite get the point—or at least not the whole point. The best reason to end smoking is that people who don't smoke have a better chance to lead better lives.[33] The best reason to care about college—who goes, and what happens to them when they get there—is not what it does for society in economic terms but what it can do for individuals, in both calculable and incalculable ways.

5

The second argument for the importance of college is a political one, though one rarely hears it from politicians. This is the argument on behalf of democracy. "The basis of our government," as Thomas Jefferson put the matter near the end of the eighteenth century, is "the opinion of the people." And so if the new republic was to flourish and endure, it required, above all, an educated citizenry—a conviction in which Jefferson was joined by John Adams, who disagreed with him on just about everything else, but who concurred that "the whole people must take upon themselves the education of the whole people, and must be willing to bear the expense of it."[34]

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This is more true than ever. All of us are bombarded every day with pleadings and persuasions, of which many are distortions and deceptions—advertisements, political appeals, punditry of all sorts—designed to capture our loyalty, money, or, more narrowly, our vote. Some say health-care reform will bankrupt the country, others that it is an overdue act of justice; some believe that abortion is the work of Satan, others think that to deny a woman the right to terminate an unwanted pregnancy is a form of abuse; some assure us that charter schools are the salvation of a broken school system, others are equally sure that they violate the public trust; some regard nuclear energy as our best chance to break free from fossil fuels, others describe it, especially in the wake of the tsunami in Japan, as Armageddon waiting to happen. Any such list could be extended indefinitely with conflicting claims between which citizens must choose or somehow mediate, so it should be obvious that the best chance we have to maintain a functioning democracy is a citizenry that can tell the difference between demagoguery and responsible arguments.

About a hundred years ago, a professor of moral philosophy at Oxford, John Alexander Smith, got to the nub of the matter. "Gentleman," he said to the incoming class (the students were all men in those days), "Nothing that you will learn in the course of your studies will be of the slightest possible use to you in after life—save only this—that if you work hard and intelligently you should be able to detect when a man is talking rot, and that, in my view, is the main, if not the sole, purpose of education."[35] Americans tend to prefer a two-syllable synonym, bullshit, for the one-syllable Anglicism, rot—and so we might say that the most important thing one can acquire in college is a well-functioning bullshit meter.[36] It's a technology that will never become obsolete.

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Putting it this way may sound flippant, but a serious point is at stake: education for democracy not only requires extending educational opportunity but also implies something about what kind of education democratic citizens need. A very good case for college in this sense has been made recently by former Yale Law School dean Anthony Kronman, who now teaches in a Great Books program for Yale undergraduates. In a book with the double-entendre title, *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life*, Kronman argues for a course of study (at Yale it is voluntary; at my college, Columbia, it is compulsory) that introduces students to the constitutive ideas of Western culture. At Yale, relatively few students, about 10 percent of the entering class, are admitted to this program, which is called "Directed Studies." At Columbia, the "Core Curriculum" is required of all students, which has the advantage, since they are randomly assigned to sections (currently capped at twenty-two), of countering their tendency to associate mainly with classmates from the same socioeconomic or ethnic background, or in their own major or club or fraternity house. The Core also counters the provincialism of the faculty. Senior and junior professors, along with graduate student instructors, gather weekly to discuss the assigned texts—a rare opportunity for faculty from different fields, and at different stages of their careers, to consider substantive questions. And, not least among its benefits, it links all students in the college to one another through a body of common knowledge: once they have gone through the Core, no student is a complete stranger to any other.

Whether such a curriculum is an option or an obligation, its value is vividly evident in Kronman's enumeration of the ideas it raises for discussion and debate:

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> The ideals of individual freedom and toleration; of democratic government; of respect for the rights of minorities and for human rights generally; a reliance on markets as a mechanism for the organization of economic life and a recognition of the need for markets to be regulated by a supervenient political authority; a reliance, in the political realm, on the methods of bureaucratic administration, with its formal division of functions and legal separation of office from officeholder; an acceptance of the truths of modern science and the ubiquitous employment of its technological products: all these provide, in many parts of the world, the existing foundations of political, social, and economic life, and where they do not, they are viewed as aspirational goals toward which everyone has the strongest moral and material reasons to strive.[37]

Anyone who earns a BA from a reputable college ought to understand something about the genealogy of these ideas and practices, about the historical processes from which they have emerged, the tragic cost when societies fail to defend them, and about alternative ideas both within the Western tradition and outside it. That's a tall order for anyone to satisfy on his or her own—and one of the marks of an educated person is the recognition that it can never be adequately done and is therefore all the more worth doing.

6

Both of these cases for college—the argument for national and individual competitiveness, and the argument for inclusive democratic citizenship—are serious and compelling. But there is a third case, more rarely heard, perhaps because it is harder to articulate without sounding platitudinous and vague. I first heard

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it stated in a plain and passionate way after I had spoken to an alumni group from the college in which I teach. I had been commending Columbia's core curriculum—which, in addition to two yearlong courses in literary and philosophical classics, also requires the study of art and music for one semester each. Recently, a new course called "Frontiers of Science," designed to ensure that students leave college with some basic understanding of contemporary scientific developments, has been added. The emphasis in my talk was on the Jeffersonian argument—education for citizenship. When I had finished, an elderly alumnus stood up and said more or less the following: "That's all very nice, professor, but you've missed the main point." With some trepidation, I asked him what that point might be. "Columbia," he said, "taught me how to enjoy life."

What he meant was that college had opened his senses as well as his mind to experiences that would otherwise be foreclosed for him. Not only his capacity to read demanding works of literature and to grasp fundamental political ideas, but also his alertness to color and form, melody and harmony, had been heightened and deepened—and now, in the late years of his life, he was grateful. Such an education is a hedge against utilitarian values. It has no room for dogma—only for debate about the meaning, or meanings, of truth. It slakes the human craving for contact with works of art that somehow register one's own longings and yet exceed what one has been able to articulate by and for oneself. As the gentleman reminded me, it is among the invaluable experiences of the fulfilled life, and surely our colleges have an obligation to coax and prod students toward it.

If all that seems too pious or earnest, I think of a comparably personal comment I once heard my colleague Judith Shapiro, former provost of Bryn Mawr and then president of Barnard, make

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to a group of young people about what they should expect from college: "You want the inside of your head to be an interesting place to spend the rest of your life." What both Judith and the Columbia alum were talking about is sometimes called "liberal education"—a hazardous term today since it has nothing necessarily to do with liberal politics in the modern sense of the word. (Former Beloit College president Victor Ferrall suggests scrapping that troublesome adjective and replacing it with something bland like "broad, open, inclusive," or simply "general.")[38] The phrase *liberal education* derives from the classical tradition of *artes liberales*, which was reserved in Greece and Rome—where women were considered inferior and slavery was an accepted feature of civilized society—for "those free men or gentlemen possessed of the requisite leisure for study."[39] Conserved by medieval scholastics, renewed in the scholarly resurgence we call the Renaissance, and again in the Enlightenment, the tradition of liberal learning survived and thrived in Europe, but remained largely the possession of ruling elites.

Seen in this long view, the distinctive American contribution has been the attempt to democratize it, to deploy it on behalf of the cardinal American principle that all persons, regardless of origin, have the right to pursue happiness—and that "getting to know," in Matthew Arnold's much-quoted phrase, "the best which has been thought and said in the world" is helpful to that pursuit. This view of what it means to be educated is often caricatured as snobbish and narrow, beholden to the old and wary of the new; but in fact it is neither, as Arnold makes clear by the (seldom quoted) phrase with which he completes his point: "and through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits."[40] In other words, knowledge of the past helps us to think critically about the present.

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Arguably the most eloquent defense of liberal education remains that of Arnold's contemporary John Henry Newman in *The Idea of a University* (1852), where, in a definition that encompasses science as well as what is customarily called the "humanities," he describes liberal knowledge as "knowledge which stands on its own pretensions, which is independent of sequel, expects no complement, refuses to be *informed* (as it is called) by any end, or absorbed into any art, in order duly to present itself to our contemplation."[41] In today's America, at every kind of institution—from underfunded community colleges to the wealthiest Ivies—this kind of education is at risk. Students are pressured and programmed, trained to live from task to task, relentlessly rehearsed and tested until winners are culled from the rest. They scarcely have time for what Newman calls contemplation, and too many colleges do too little to save them from the debilitating frenzy that makes liberal education marginal or merely ornamental—if it is offered at all.[42]

In this respect, notwithstanding the bigotries and prejudices of earlier generations, we might not be so quick to say that today's colleges mark an advance over those of the past. Consider a once-popular college novel written a hundred years ago, *Stover at Yale* (1912), in which the young Yalie declares, "I'm going to do the best thing a fellow can do at our age, I'm going to loaf."[43] Stover speaks from the immemorial past, and what he says is likely to sound to us today like a sneering boast from the idle rich. But there is a more dignified sense in which "loaf" is the colloquial equivalent of what Newman meant by contemplation, and has always been part of the promise of American life. "I loaf and invite my soul," says Walt Whitman in that great democratic poem *Song of Myself*, "I lean and loaf at my ease observing a spear of summer grass."

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Surely, every American college ought to defend this waning possibility, whatever we call it. And an American college is only true to itself when it opens its doors to all—rich, middling, and poor—who have the capacity to embrace the precious chance to think and reflect before life engulfs them. If we are serious about democracy, that means everyone.

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