

NOTABLE BOOKS

In each issue, we identify and briefly describe a small number of books that are insightful about consequential matters and offer new ways of thinking strategically about the nonprofit world.

College: What It Was, Is and Should Be

Andrew Delbanco

Princeton University Press, 2012, 240 pp., \$24.95.

Reviewed by Ben Wildavsky

At the outset of his deeply informed defense of the value of liberal arts education, Andrew Delbanco, a noted Melville scholar, illustrates one of his central points with a quotation from *Moby Dick*. When the novel's narrator famously declares that "a whale ship was my Yale College and my Harvard," Delbanco observes, "he used the word 'college' as the name of the place where (to use our modern formulation) he 'found himself.'"

Learning "How to Think and How to Choose"

Yet if college is in part a voyage of self-discovery, it ought not to be simply a narcissistic extension of adolescence, contends Delbanco, a professor of American Studies and Humanities at Columbia University. At its heart, college is—or should be—about truth-seeking. Quoting an 1850 diary by a student at a Methodist college in Virginia, Delbanco declares that showing students

"how to think and how to choose" ought to be the goal of every college. He ticks off a list of the habits of mind that a college should nurture in its students, from a "skeptical discontent with the present, informed by a sense of the past," to knowledge of science and the arts, to the capacity "to make connections among seemingly disparate phenomena."

Unfortunately, far too many colleges simply don't give students anything approaching this kind of education. In *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be*, Delbanco traces U.S. higher education from the establishment of religious colleges in Colonial days to the advent of research universities in the nineteenth century to the birth, more recently, of mass-access community colleges. He thoughtfully details, among other things, how the goals of college have evolved, what meritocracy in admissions does and doesn't mean, and how, although access to college has expanded massively, numerous shortcomings remain in the nation's efforts to make higher education available to more Americans. Along the way, he writes, the meaning of a college education has changed radically.

Developing Marketable Skills, but Not the Whole Person

Today, only a modest number of students have the leisure to pursue the life of the mind under the tutelage of wise professors. For the majority, laments Delbanco, "college means the anxious pursuit of marketable skills in overcrowded, under resourced institutions, where little attention is paid to that elusive entity sometimes called the 'whole person.'" Even at colleges that ostensibly aim to provide a broad education to their charges, the triumph of the nineteenth century German university model, which placed scientific research rather than undergraduate education at its core, has often left humanistic inquiry out in the cold. "Literature, history, philosophy, and the arts are becoming the stepchildren of our colleges," Delbanco writes.

Delbanco is certainly correct that much of

At its heart,
college is—or
should be—about
truth-seeking.

academe has stepped away from its responsibility to tell students "what's worth thinking about." As anybody who has taken a child on a college tour lately knows, with rare exceptions—the celebrated core curriculum at Delbanco's university among them—it is hard to find a college that asks students to take a required set of classes that will bring some common intellectual coherence to their undergraduate studies. Instead, as he notes, most colleges offer "a grab bag of unrelated subjects," sometimes accompanied by a set of perfunctory discipline-based distribution requirements. Little wonder that while students "have always been searching for purpose," he writes, most "have no clear conception of why or to what end they are in college."

the mind. He doesn't provide much by way of example except a couple of programs that bring philosophy, literature, and mathemat-



"We're from Student Loans—we came to repo your B.A."

The Transformation of the College Experience

To Delbanco's credit, he inserts plenty of caveats as he tells this important story. Among them: few of today's complaints about colleges are without historical precedent (Abigail Adams wrote to her husband in 1776 that education "has never been in a worse state"), and colleges vary so much that generalizations are often inadequate. Delbanco also acknowledges repeatedly that the traditional four-year college experience is a thing of the past for most students. A large and growing number are practically-minded adults who are already working, commute to classes, have children, and take longer to graduate than their younger counterparts.

Yet while Delbanco makes a strong case that all students at the rich variety of institutions that make up U.S. higher education ought to have "the precious chance to think and reflect before life engulfs them," he never quite succeeds in showing how nontraditional students can best be exposed to the life of

ics classes to prison inmates and recovering drug addicts. Nor does he squarely address the fact that, while it is indeed patronizing to assume that nontraditional students can't benefit from liberal arts education, they may not want it. Most have very practical goals when they take on college classes along with their other demanding real-world commitments. Delbanco dismisses "narrow training in vocational subjects such as accounting or information technology." But would he have 35-year-old working mothers and fathers forced to debate Hegel around a seminar table?

It is quite true, of course, that an instrumental view of higher education can coexist with an effort to touch students' souls. "The two types do not stand opposed," wrote German sociologist Max Weber, whom Delbanco cites on this point. This is particularly true in a traditional college or university setting. There is no reason that Animal Science majors at Iowa State University should not also be required to study Shakespeare or, well, Weber. Often, alas, they aren't.

The traditional four-year college experience is a thing of the past for many students.

Against this backdrop, it's a shame that Delbanco doesn't specify exactly which books and authors he himself believes all students should study. Nor, unaccountably, does he discuss the rise of race-, sex-, and class-based identity politics on campus in recent decades, which surely has much to do

with the demise of the Western canon and its much-disparaged dead white male creators. He does, however, fault late twentieth century postmodernism for dealing a terribly damaging blow to the humanities. Postmodernists, he writes, "denied the very idea of truth by asserting, with varying degrees of 'postmodern' irony, that all putative truths are contingent and all values relative." The de-

pressing upshot, although Delbanco doesn't put it this way: it doesn't much matter what books students read if their professors don't see truth-seeking as a worthwhile mission in the first place.

Can College be "Fixed"?

As he wraps up his account, Delbanco proffers a long list of measures for fixing what ails American higher education. All seem commendable in principle: more attention to helping low-income students not only get into college but finish; better programs to train graduate students to become effective teachers; a renewed push to convey the value of a liberal arts education, and so forth. Still, it's unclear how much any of these will do to restore the search for meaning that he correctly believes should lie at the core of a traditional college education.

Moreover, when it comes to the important goal of improving access to college, Delbanco seems to hold a somewhat crimped, suspicious view of the possibilities of market-driven changes, both within and outside the conventional collegiate world. He laments the severe underfunding of community colleges, which despite many imperfections have been such a crucial tool

in bringing mass access to American higher education. Yet he apparently fails to see how new initiatives to deliver more instructional bang for the buck—often using technology-driven pedagogy—have the potential to reach precisely the marginalized, underserved students about whom he expresses understandable concern.

Similarly, the much-discussed MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), including Coursera, Udacity, and MITx, promise to make top instructors available at low or no cost to a broad range of students who may have few other appealing and convenient alternatives. These initiatives are young and relatively untested, to be sure. But they are only the beginning of far-ranging changes in higher education. Anybody who cares about the democratization of college opportunity, as Delbanco clearly does, ought to take this evolving new world more seriously.

Still, *College* offers much valuable analysis, as when Delbanco lays out three common understandings of the purposes of college today: economic advancement, both for individuals and for the nation; preparation for citizenship (including the development of "a well-functioning bullshit meter"); and contemplative liberal education. Each is a worthwhile goal, but of course the third is the closest to the author's heart. If Delbanco does not provide a fully satisfying plan for reaching that objective, this may simply be because such a change would require massive cultural and political changes, inside and outside academe. Flaws notwithstanding, his fine-grained, literate argument for why teaching students "how to think and how to choose" ought to be at the heart of a college education deserves careful thought and consideration, on and off campus.

Ben Wildavsky is a senior scholar at the Kauffman Foundation, a guest scholar at the Brookings Institution and a member of Education Sector's K20 Task Force. He is the author of The Great Brain Race: How Global Universities are Reshaping the World (Princeton University Press, 2010) and co-editor of Reinventing Higher Education: The Promise of Innovation (Harvard Education Press, 2011).