ANDREW DELBANCO

COLLEGE

What It Was, Is, and Should Be

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS
Princeton and Oxford

Published by Princeton University Press, 41 William Street,
Princeton, New Jersey 08540
In the United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, 6 Oxford Street,
Woodstock, Oxfordshire OX20 1TW

press.princeton.edu

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Delbanco, Andrew, 1952–
College : what it was, is, and should be / Andrew Delbanco.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-691-13073-6 (alk. paper)
1. Education, Higher—Aims and objectives—United States. I. Title.
LA227.4.D455 2012
378.73–dc23

2011039399

British Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available

This book has been composed in Garamond Premier Pro and Trajan Pro

Printed on acid-free paper. ∞

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The true college will ever have one goal—not
to earn meat, but to know the end and aim
of that life which meat nourishes.

—W.E.B. DuBois

INTRODUCTION

Imagine a list of American innovations that would convey some sense of our nation's distinctiveness in the world. Depending on the list-maker's mood, it might include the atom bomb, jazz, the constitutional rights of criminal defendants, abstract expressionism, baseball, the thirty-year fixed rate mortgage, and fast food. Everyone would have a different version; but unless it included the American college, it would be glaringly incomplete.

At least in a vague way, we all know this. Americans, particularly those in or aspiring to the middle class, talk about college all the time—from the toddler's first standardized test, through the nail-biting day when the good or bad news arrives from the admissions office, to the "yellow, bald, toothless meetings in memory of red cheeks, black hair, and departed health," as Ralph Waldo Emerson described his twentieth college reunion nearly two centuries ago (men aged more quickly in those days). The best week of the year for your local news vendor is probably the week *U.S. News & World Report* comes out with its annual college rankings

issue. Rival publications from *Playboy* to *Princeton Review* peddle their own lists of best party colleges, best "green" colleges, best for minorities, best for cost versus value, and, of course, their versions of the best of the best. If you Google the word "college"—even if you screen out such irrelevancies as "electoral college" or "college of cardinals"—you run the risk of overloading your computer. When I tried it not long ago, I got 52,800,000 hits.

Most of the chatter does little, however, to answer the question of what a good college is or ought to be. In fact, the criteria we use to assess the quality of a college—number of publications by its faculty, size of endowment, selectivity in admissions, rate of alumni giving, even graduation rates—tell very little about what it does for its students. In a *New Yorker* article not long ago, Malcolm Gladwell pointed out that faculty compensation, which is one standard measure of college quality, may actually have an inverse relation to faculty engagement in teaching—since the best-paid professors are likely to be at research universities, where undergraduate teaching tends to be a sideline activity.[1]

Yet we use the terms "college" and "university" interchangeably. "She went to Michigan," we say, or "he goes to Oberlin"—not bothering with the noun that follows the name, as if a college and a university were the same thing. They are not. They are, to be sure, interconnected (most college teachers nowadays hold an advanced university degree), and a college may exist as a division or "school" within a university. But a college and a university have—or should have—different purposes. The former is about transmitting knowledge of and from the past to undergraduate students so they may draw upon it as a living resource in the future. The latter is mainly an array of research activities conducted by faculty and graduate students with the aim of creating new knowledge in order to supersede the past.

Both of these are worthy aims, and sometimes they converge, as when a college student works with a scholar or scientist doing "cutting-edge" or "groundbreaking" research—terms of praise that would have been incomprehensible before the advent of the modern university. More often, however, these purposes come into competition if not conflict, especially as one moves up the ladder of prestige. As the man who created one of the world's great universities, the University of California, acknowledged with unusual honesty, "a superior faculty results in an inferior concern for undergraduate teaching." It has been nearly fifty years since Clark Kerr identified this "cruel paradox" as "one of our more pressing problems." Today it is more pressing than ever.[2]

But what, exactly, is at stake in college, and why should it matter how much or little goes on there? At its core, a college should be a place where young people find help for navigating the territory between adolescence and adulthood. It should provide guidance, but not coercion, for students trying to cross that treacherous terrain on their way toward self-knowledge. It should help them develop certain qualities of mind and heart requisite for reflective citizenship. Here is my own attempt at reducing these qualities to a list, in no particular order of priority, since they are inseparable from one another:

1. A skeptical discontent with the present, informed by a sense of the past.
2. The ability to make connections among seemingly disparate phenomena.
3. Appreciation of the natural world, enhanced by knowledge of science and the arts.
4. A willingness to imagine experience from perspectives other than one's own.
5. A sense of ethical responsibility.

These habits of thought and feeling are hard to attain and harder to sustain. They cannot be derived from exclusive study of the humanities, the natural sciences, or the social sciences, and they cannot be fully developed solely by academic study, no matter how well "distributed" or "rounded." It is absurd to imagine them as commodities to be purchased by and delivered to student consumers. Ultimately they make themselves known not in grades or examinations but in the way we live our lives.

Still, encouraging and fostering them should be among the aims of a college education, and in the pages that follow I will have critical things to say about how well we are doing at meeting this responsibility. I have been reluctant, however, to join the hue and cry that the condition of our colleges is dire. Everywhere, and all the time—or so, at least, it seems—we hear about "administrative bloat, overpriced tuition, overpaid teachers, decadent facilities, and subpar educational experiences."[3] This cry of crisis is very old. As early as 1776, Abigail Adams was writing to her husband that college students "complain that their professor . . . is taken off by public business to their great detriment," and that education has "never been in a worse state." More than a century later, the president of Stanford University declared that "the most pressing problem in American higher education is the care of underclassmen, the freshmen and sophomores."[4] It would not be difficult to compile a list of similar laments stretching from the colonial period into the present.

So anyone who writes about the state of our colleges today has a boy-who-cried-wolf problem. But that does not mean that the wolf is not at the door. The American college is going through a period of wrenching change, buffeted by forces—globalization; economic instability; the ongoing revolution in information technology; the increasingly evident inadequacy of K–12 educa-

tion; the elongation of adolescence; the breakdown of faculty tenure as an academic norm; and, perhaps most important, the collapse of consensus about what students should know—that make its task more difficult and contentious than ever before. For now, let me pause on just one of these forces—what is sometimes called the "casualization" or "adjunctification" of the faculty—by way of the CEO of a high-tech company who offers an ominous analogy.

Once upon a time, he says, thousands of pianists provided live music in America's movie theaters; then, one day, the technology of the soundtrack arrived, and suddenly all those musicians went out of business except for "two piano players [who] moved to L.A." to produce recorded movie music. By analogy, course "content" (readings, lectures, problem sets, quizzes, and the like) can now be uploaded onto interactive websites, and instructors hired, essentially as pieceworkers, to evaluate students' work online. People who, in the pre-digital past, would have been teachers in college classrooms will have to "go and do more productive things"—just as those obsolete piano players had to do.[5]

It is no accident that science-oriented institutions such as MIT and Carnegie Mellon are leading the way in developing new technologies for "online" learning; and while, as former Princeton president William Bowen puts it, these technologies have already proven their value for fields "where there is a 'single right answer' to many questions" (Bowen's example is statistics), the jury is out on whether they can be successfully adapted as a means to advance genuinely humanistic education. As the British education scholar Alison Wolf writes, "we have not found any low-cost, high-technology alternatives to expert human teachers"—at least not yet.[6]

This specter, though it is spreading across the landscape of higher education, will be only a shadow edging into view on the

periphery of the story to be told in this book. That is because my focus is on the so-called elite colleges, which have so far been relatively immune to the gutting of the faculty that is already far advanced at more vulnerable institutions. Yet the role of faculty is changing everywhere, and no college is impervious to the larger forces that, depending on one's point of view, promise to transform, or threaten to undermine, it. As these forces bear down upon us, neither lamentation nor celebration will do. Instead, they seem to me to compel us to confront some basic questions about the purposes and possibilities of a college education at a time when there is more and more demand for it and less and less agreement about what it should be. In the face of these uncertainties, this book is an attempt to state some fundamental principles that have been inherited from the past, are under radical challenge in the present, and, in my view, remain indispensable for the future.

Before the story begins, I should say a bit more about my choice of emphasis. As one scholar puts it, over the history of American higher education, "the pattern set by Harvard, Yale, and Princeton . . . became that of colleges all over the country."[7] Along with a handful of others, these institutions have established curricular norms, admissions procedures, financial aid principles, and even the rites and ceremonies of college life. However unhealthy the public obsession with them may be, or how disproportionate the attention they command (a gross disproportion considering their relatively small enrollments), it remains the case that it is these institutions through which the long arc of educational history can best be discerned. And if they have peculiar salience for understanding the past, they wield considerable influence in the present debate over which educational principles should be sustained, adapted, or abandoned in the future.

But if my institutional focus is relatively narrow, I have also tried to keep in view the enormous diversity, as one writer puts it, of the "widely varying instances of what we call college."[8] One of the great strengths of America's educational "system" is that it has never really been a system at all. There are roughly four thousand colleges in the United States: rural, urban, and suburban; nonprofit, for-profit; secular, religious; some small and independent, others within large research institutions; some highly selective, others that admit almost anyone who applies and has the means to pay. Over the last twenty years or so, I have visited more than a hundred colleges of many kinds, which has helped, I hope, to mitigate the risk of imagining them as close variations of the ones I know best.

Even a quick scan of this landscape reveals how radically the meaning of college is changing, and how rapidly the disparities among institutions are growing.[9] For a relatively few students, college remains the sort of place that Anthony Kronman, former dean of Yale Law School, recalls from his days at Williams, where his favorite class took place at the home of a philosophy professor whose two golden retrievers slept on either side of the fireplace "like bookends beside the hearth" while the sunset lit the Berkshire hills "in scarlet and gold." For many more students, college means the anxious pursuit of marketable skills in overcrowded, underresourced institutions, where little attention is paid to that elusive entity sometimes called the "whole person." For still others, it means traveling by night to a fluorescent office building or to a "virtual classroom" that exists only in cyberspace. It is a pipe dream to imagine that every student can have the sort of experience that our richest colleges, at their best, provide. But it is a nightmare society that affords the chance to learn and grow only to the wealthy, brilliant, or lucky few. Many remarkable teachers

in America's community colleges, unsung private colleges, and underfunded public colleges live this truth every day, working to keep the ideal of democratic education alive.

And so it is my unabashed aim in this book to articulate what a college—any college—should seek to do for its students. A short statement of that obligation can be found in John Updike's last novel, *Terrorist*, about the son of an absentee Egyptian immigrant father and an Irish American mother growing up in Rust Belt New Jersey. The boy is persuaded by a local imam that he should learn the pieties and purities of his father's faith rather than expose himself to moral corruption in an American college. For different reasons, the boy's mother also sees no need for her son to extend his student days beyond high school. When the college counselor disagrees and tries to change her mind, she asks, "What would he study at college?" The counselor replies, "What anybody studies—science, art, history. The story of mankind, of civilization. How we got here, what now?"

In the pages that follow, these two questions will be asked about college itself: "How we got here, what now?"

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:

> 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 Kingsley 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),

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

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

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

> 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

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

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

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

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

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.

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

"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

fast that they have landed in the slowest-changing institutions in American life—slower, even, than the post office. The Ohio State 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-

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,

> 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

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 outcompete 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

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-

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-

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]

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.

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:

> 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

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

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.

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."

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.

TWO
ORIGINS

The assumption that young adults should pass through a period of higher education before entering a life of commerce or service is, of course, much older than the United States and older, too, than the English colonies that became the United States. Aristotle identified the years between puberty and age twenty-one as the formative time for mind and character, and it was customary for young Greek men to attend a series of lectures that resembled our notion of a college "course." In Augustan Rome, gatherings of students under instruction by settled teachers took on some of the attributes we associate with modern colleges (libraries, fraternities, organized sports), and, by the Middle Ages, efforts to regulate the right to teach by issuing licenses were under way in such nascent educational centers as Paris and Padua—presaging the modern idea of a faculty with exclusive authority to grant degrees.[1] In short, college in the broad sense of the term has a history that exceeds two millennia.

But college as we know it is fundamentally an English idea. It was brought to New England early in the seventeenth century by English Protestants who left home in dissent from the established church. To these "Puritans" (as their enemies called them, on account of their putative severity of mind and spirit), education was vitally important, and while they drew upon ancient and medieval precedents, they had particularly in mind their own experience in the colleges of Cambridge and Oxford.

Founded in the thirteenth century, the earliest English colleges were essentially retreats for scholars of divinity whose duties included celebrating mass for the soul of the benefactor who had endowed the college and thereby spared them from menial work. In today's terms, we might say that the first colleges were groups of graduate students on fellowship.[2] But by the fifteenth century, it had become common for the resident scholars to supply or supplement their living by giving instruction and accommodation to younger students whom we would call undergraduates. These boarders (or, as they were known at Cambridge, pensioners) were sometimes kinsmen of the college benefactor, or candidates admitted on the recommendation of some trusted schoolmaster who spoke for their character and competence in Latin. There were no entrance examinations.

Vouched for or not, undergraduates were guarded and watched since students then, no less than now, were not reliably compliant with the wishes of parents or patrons. One visitor to seventeenth-century Cambridge was shocked to witness "swearing, drinking, rioting, and hatred of all piety and virtue" among the students, who could not be trusted to obey the college rules, including the prohibition against "fierce birds" in their rooms. A few years earlier, a student mob jammed the Great Hall of Trinity

College, smoking, hissing, and throwing pellets at the actors who displeased them in a play written by one of the Trinity fellows.[3]

By the later fifteenth century, the cloistered structure of the Oxbridge college had emerged in its modern form: rooms accessible from an inner courtyard connected by walkways to chapel, library, and hall. The hall—a great room with rushes strewn on the floor to be gathered up and burned from time to time as a means of controlling dirt—was the center of college life. It was in hall that dining, lectures, and sometimes musical and theatrical performances took place; at one end stood the "high table," where tutors dined in the company of the Master, who, as the only college official permitted to marry, lived with his family in an attached house.[4] Part of the point—an important part—was for undergraduates to witness social and intellectual exchange among their superiors, in the hope that they would aspire someday to be worthy of sitting among them.

To this end, the initiates, or, to use the penal metaphor, the inmates, were kept in, and the public kept out. Traffic flowed through a single point of entrance and exit, the porter's gate.[5] The student's day began with predawn worship, followed by lectures, study, and meditation in what was in some respects a monastic regime of discipline and deprivation. This was the stringent world that produced John Milton and Oliver Cromwell (who toughened himself at football in the courtyard of Sidney Sussex College, Oxford) and, a little later, Isaac Newton.

But if it was a strict and confined world, it was also coddled and collegial—the latter adjective, like the noun "college," derives from the Latin *collegium*, meaning society or community—in which young men, denied the pleasures of tavern and town, were offered recreation in the college gardens, bowling green, tennis court, bathing pool, or archery range.[6] Among the roughly 20,000

persons who emigrated to New England in the 1630s, nearly 150 were graduates of one of these institutions—better than 1 in every 75 men, a ratio comparable to the college-educated percentage of Americans up until the twentieth century. The college with by far the highest representation (35 graduates or affiliates) was Emmanuel College, founded at Cambridge in the late sixteenth century on what Queen Elizabeth presciently called "a Puritan foundation." Emmanuel turned out to be the Old English "oak" to the New England sapling planted by Puritan emigrants in 1636 at Newtowne, soon renamed Cambridge in honor of the English university town. To this fledgling New England college a Puritan merchant and Emmanuel graduate named John Harvard bequeathed half his estate and all his library.[7]

In the fund-raising request they sent to prospective donors back in England, the founders of the new college thanked God for seeing fit "to stir up the heart of Mr. Harvard," and by way of asking others to follow his example, explained the purpose for which they intended to use his books and funds: to "advance learning and perpetuate it to posterity." The kind of learning they had in mind was, among others, theological learning. In what they would have called a providential mercy, the only book from John Harvard's library to survive an eighteenth-century fire was a tract entitled *Christian Warfare*.[8]

But it is a mistake to imagine the first American colleges as seminaries devoted solely to doctrine and dogma. Fewer than half of Harvard's seventeenth-century graduates ultimately entered the ministry, and the study of logic and ethics—classical as well as Christian—took up a considerable part of the students' attention, as did arithmetic and geometry.[9] Another early appeal for funds, this one specifically for the Harvard library, enumerated the need for volumes on "law, phisicke, Philosophy, and Math-

ematics," and along with Augustine's *City of God* and Calvin's *Institutes*, library holdings included Erasmus's *Colloquies* and even the bawdy comedies of the Roman playwright Plautus.[10] In short, the American college was conceived from the start as more than narrowly ecclesiastical, with the larger aim, as the historian Samuel Eliot Morison put it, to "develop the whole man—his body and soul as well as his intellect" toward the formation of a person inclined to "unity, gentility, and public service."

Religion, to be sure, came first. To study the Bible was to learn to parse God's word—no small task, since, in what Christians called the Old Testament, God spoke through shadows ("types" or "*umbra*") of truths as yet unrevealed, and, in the New Testament, through parables and prophecies requiring informed interpretation. Yet the Bible did not contain all God's truth. God also expressed his punitive or protective will through historical events (pilgrimages, holy wars) and judgments of nature (flood, earthquake, drought). And he conferred on all human beings the capacity for responsive pleasure at natural intimations of his supernatural excellence such as the celestial dance of sun, moon, and stars, the symmetrical beauty of plants and trees, or the ripples that flow outward in perfect circles when a stone is thrown into tranquil water. God furnished the natural world with what Jonathan Edwards (Yale, class of 1720; appointed president of Princeton in 1758) called "beauties that delight us and we can't tell why"—as when "we find ourselves pleased in beholding the color of the violets, but we know not what secret regularity or harmony it is that creates that pleasure in our minds."[11]

The early American college required its students to study not only scriptural texts and commentaries, but also history and natural philosophy—a tripartite division of knowledge corresponding roughly to today's triumvirate of humanities, social

sciences, and natural sciences. A college aspired to be a place (in Newman's later formulation) where "all branches of knowledge" are "connected together, because the subject-matter of knowledge is intimately united in itself, as being the acts and the work of the Creator." Its subject was nothing less, in Edwards's words, than "the university of things," a phrase that preserves the root meaning of the word "university": the gathering of all knowledge into a unified whole. Until the last third of the nineteenth century, this effort to grasp what Frederick Barnard (the man for whom the women's college at my university was named) called "the beautiful truths which are to be read in the works of God" remained the official purpose of America's colleges.[12]

Today, the word "interdisciplinary" is bandied about at every academic conference and praised in every dean's report, but in fact most of our academic institutions are much less interdisciplinary than were their counterparts in the past. In the early American college, since all studies were unified as one integrated study of the divine mind, boundaries between "fields" or "disciplines" did not exist. "There is not one truth in religion, another in mathematics, and a third in physics and in art," as one Harvard graduate (class of 1825) put the matter. "There is one truth, even as one God."[13]

2

Yet this dream of what some today would call "consilience" did not exhaust the meaning of the college idea. For the Puritans, according to Morison,

> university learning apart from college life was not worth having; and the humblest resident tutor was accounted a more suitable teacher than the most eminent community

> lecturer. Book learning alone might be got by lectures and reading; but it was only by studying and disputing, eating and drinking, playing and praying as members of the same collegiate community, in close and constant association with each other and with their tutors, that the priceless gift of character could be imparted to young men.

Already in his own day (Morison was writing nearly seventy-five years ago), the man who wrote these words was deliberately anachronistic. Even after motorcars had become commonplace, he liked to travel on horseback from his home on Beacon Hill to Harvard Yard, where he tethered his mount to a hitching post before lecturing in riding boots. And even when the "old-time college," as historians sometimes call it, gave way to the modern university, the appeal to character persisted in official pronouncements of what the university was all about. Writing in 1886, the founding president of Johns Hopkins, an institution mainly devoted to advanced research where undergraduates were initially absent, insisted that a university must never be "merely a place for the advancement of knowledge or for the acquisition of learning; it will always be a place for the development of character."[14]

Today, this assertion that a college should concern itself with something called character will strike us as a throwback to another time and world. Character, moreover, is a word with a confusing history. It has been used as a synonym for probity, but also for sheer stamina—as when Nobel laureate Arthur Lewis spoke, at his installation as chancellor of the University of Guyana, of character as the determination "to practice the same thing over and over again, while others are enjoying themselves; to push oneself from the easy part to the hard part; to listen to criticism and use it; to reject one's own work and try again."[15]

Sometimes the word has been put to unsavory uses. By the early twentieth century, it had become a thinly disguised term of discrimination between the model Protestant gentleman and the putatively grasping parvenu—in particular, the importunate Jew—knocking on the college door. During Morison's undergraduate years, Harvard's president, Abbott Lawrence Lowell, proposed "a personal estimate of character on the part of the Admission authorities" in order to control the "dangerous increase in the proportion of Jews" (the top floor of one dormitory had become unaffectionately known as "Kike's Peak").[16] And even in the absence of overt bigotry, judgments of "character" tend to boil down to how comfortable the judge feels in the presence of the judged. In a letter to Lowell, Harvard alumnus Judge Learned Hand demurred from the president's plan for screening out undesirables: "If anyone could devise an honest test for character," Hand wrote, "perhaps it would serve well. I doubt its feasibility except to detect formal and obvious delinquencies. Short of it, it seems to me that students can only be chosen by tests of scholarship, unsatisfactory as those no doubt are. . . ."[17] If the "newer races," as they were sometimes referred to, were outperforming the old boys in grades and scores, then so be it: let them in.

Yet despite its history of misuse and abuse, there is something worth conserving in the claim, as Newman put it, that education "implies an action upon our mental nature, and the formation of a character."[18] College, more than brain-training for this or that functional task, *should* be concerned with character—the attenuated modern word for what the founders of our first colleges would have called soul or heart. Although we may no longer agree on the attributes of virtue as codified in biblical commandments or, for that matter, in Enlightenment precepts (Jefferson thought the aim of education was to produce citizens capable of "temper-

ate liberty"), students still come to college not yet fully formed as social beings, and may still be deterred from sheer self-interest toward a life of enlarged sympathy and civic responsibility.

This idea that the aim of education includes fostering ethical as well as analytical intelligence long predates the churches from which the early American colleges arose, and is, of course, much older than Christianity itself. In the *Beit Midrash* of ancient Judaism, typically located physically as well as spiritually near the synagogue, students prayed for insight and clarity of mind before embarking on the day's Torah study. To join Plato's academy in Athens of the fourth-century BCE was to acknowledge "a change of heart and the adoption of a new way of life via a process akin to our own understanding of religious conversion."[19] In first-century Rome, in Seneca's famous letter on the purpose of learning, we find a measured yet passionate account of the power of liberal education to clear the mind of cant by inviting it to rise above the palaver of everyday life as well as above pedantry:

> We have no leisure to hear lectures on the question whether [Ulysses] was sea-tost between Italy and Sicily, or outside our known world. . . . We ourselves encounter storms of the spirit, which toss us daily, and our depravity drives us into all the ills which troubled Ulysses. . . . Show me rather, by the example of Ulysses, how I am to love my country, my wife, my father, and how, even after suffering shipwreck, I am to sail toward these ends, honourable as they are. Why try to discover whether Penelope was a pattern of purity, or whether she had the laugh on her contemporaries? Or whether she suspected that the man in her presence was Ulysses, before she knew it was he? Teach me rather what purity is, and how

> great a good we have in it, and whether it is situated in the body or in the soul.[20]

Whether expressed in Hebrew, Greek, Roman, Christian, or the secular terms of modernity, none of these educational aspirations gainsays the obvious fact that all lives are shaped by a mysterious confluence of innate disposition and external influence, over which no institution can possibly exert complete control. Yet the fact that students can be touched and inspired as well as trained and informed has always been the true teacher's aim and joy. In America, where this view of education has been held by traditionalists and progressives alike, Emerson gave it memorable expression when he wrote in his journal that "the whole secret of the teacher's force lies in the conviction that men are convertible. And they are. They want awakening." Teachers have always been—and, let us hope, always will be—in the business of trying to "get the soul out of bed, out of her deep habitual sleep."[21]

3

When we turn from teachers to students, another striking continuity over the long history of college comes into view: their age has stayed relatively constant. More than four hundred years ago, the English scholastic Roger Ascham proposed that the ideal time to begin college is at seventeen. Some two and half centuries later, the average age of Harvard freshmen was sixteen and a half. Fifty years after that, at Yale, the average had crept up to eighteen, widely considered to be "the normal age, under reasonably favorable conditions" for college matriculation.[22]

There has been continuity, too, in the way educators describe the stages that young people pass through en route to intellectual and ethical maturity. In this respect, Puritans made little distinc-

tion between college and church. Both institutions existed to serve human beings at war with themselves, tainted by original sin yet harboring the seed of grace—divided, that is, between the will to pride and self-love and the impulse to humility and selflessness. Puritans spoke longingly of the change that can save these creatures from themselves by opening their minds and hearts to hitherto incomprehensible contradictions such as "God's justice mixed with his mercy" as well as their own powerlessness and perseverance—in short, to the paradoxical nature of existence in all its boundedness and boundlessness. To be educated in this sense—in the root sense, that is, of the Latin *ex ducere*, to lead forth, or, according to an alternative Latin source, *educare*, to rear or bring up children—is to be enlarged by "new affections, and new language," freed from the limits of jealous self-regard in which one has hitherto been confined. "Education," as Emerson summed up the matter, amounts to "drawing out the soul."[23]

Almost a century and a half later, the educational psychologist William Perry, in describing the ideal trajectory from freshman to senior year, offered what was essentially a translation of these first principles. A true education, he believed (as paraphrased by another distinguished educational psychologist, L. Lee Knefelkamp), is one whereby the college student learns to "accommodate uncertainty, paradox, and the demands of greater complexity." The process, Perry wrote, "begins with simplistic forms in which a person construes his world in unqualified polar terms of absolute right-wrong, good-bad; it ends with those complex forms through which he undertakes to affirm his own commitments in a world of contingent knowledge and relative values."[24] The terms of description may have changed, but even as it allows for the relativism of modern life, this account of the psychological and ethical growth of college students is remarkably congruent

with much earlier views of what college is for. More than achieving the competence to solve problems and perform complex tasks, education means attaining and sustaining curiosity and humility. It means growing out of an embattled sense of self into a more generous view of life as continuous self-reflection in light of new experience, including the witnessed experience of others.

With these ends in view, Puritans spoke almost indistinguishably about teaching and preaching. Consider John Cotton, arguably the leading minister of New England's first generation. In his history of early New England, the *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702), Cotton Mather (Cotton's grandson), portrays him as a man whose religious faith and scholarly attainment are essentially one and the same. A "*universal scholar*, and a *living system* of the liberal arts, and a *walking library*," he was the very ideal to which every studious young person should aspire. His reputation as a preacher was that of a man not merely erudite and eloquent but also able to inspire young people so they might "be fitted for public service."[25] By his voice and arguments, but most of all by his manifest commitment to the impossible yet imperative task of aligning his own life with models of virtue that he found (mainly) in scripture, he was mentor to his students in the same way that he was pastor to his flock. In his theological writings, which were largely concerned with what we would call moral psychology, he explored the mystery and contingency of learning, which, he believed, sometimes proceeds in steps, sometimes by leaps, sometimes by sheer surprise in the absence of exertion, sometimes by slow and arduous accretion through diligent work.

Such a teacher is convinced that everyone has the capacity to learn and grow, but that the moment of electric connection between teacher and student cannot be predicted or planned. For some students it may never come ("some go all the way through

college," as Perry put it, "and somehow manage to remain schoolboys to the end"); for others it may come when least expected.[26] In order to create the best conditions for it to take hold, such a teacher avoids exhibitionistic erudition, speaks in plain rather than florid language, and, humble before the subject, understands himself as merely the human instrument by which God *may* choose to convey to the student the "spirit of discernment." Such a teacher also knows there is no telling when, or whether, the transmission will take place.

In our mostly post-theistic academic world, these assumptions may seem remote and possibly bizarre—but perhaps they are less so than they appear. Every true teacher, after all, understands that, along with teacher and students, a mysterious third force is present in every classroom. Sometimes this force works in favor of learning; sometimes it works against it. This is because ideas must cross an invisible interval between the mind of the teacher and that of the student, and there is no telling when a provoking thought will succeed in crossing that space, or what exactly will happen to it during its transit from speaker to hearer. One never knows how the teacher's voice will be received by the student, in whose mind it mixes with already-resident ideas that have accumulated from prior experience and, perhaps, from other teachers. Sometimes the spoken word is nothing but noise that evaporates into air or has no effect in the mind of the student beyond annoyance or confusion. Sometimes it can have surprising and powerful effects—yet it is impossible to say why or when this will happen for some students and not for others.

The Puritan word for this invisible and inaudible force was grace. One does not need to share their belief—or to be a believer in any conventional sense—to understand what they meant. To explain their concept of grace to my own students

(the rare student at my college who comes from an evangelical background needs no explanation), I sometimes draw an analogy from outside the classroom. Imagine that two college roommates go out together to see a production of Shakespeare's great play, *King Lear*, about an old man cruelly duped by his own children, who is losing his grip on power and dignity and even his own senses, and ends up wandering alone under the open sky without shelter or mercy or hope. The roommates go to see a local production of the play, and when it is done, one of them comes out of the theater saying, "You know, I've seen it done better; let's get a beer," or, "I don't know what all the fuss is about; this guy had it coming, he's a real whiner."

Meanwhile, the other young man has had a devastating experience. He doesn't know why or how, but he finds himself thinking about his own father—about the obligations of children to parents and, for that matter, parents to children; about the savage sadness that comes upon many people in their broken old age; in fact, he finds himself thinking about every aspect of his life in a new way. Does he want to have children of his own? If so, how will he bring them up? Maybe he thinks about becoming a physician; or maybe he's decided to call home to see how his father is doing, with whom he's had a difficult relationship; or, more likely, he doesn't know what to do but feels a sudden conviction that his plans and priorities need to be revisited and revised. One thing he knows for sure is that he doesn't want to end up like Lear wandering alone on the heath. In short, the world has been transformed for him while it remains utterly unchanged for his friend. And yet they have heard the same voices and words, seen the same bodies and props moving about on the same stage, or, to put it in mechanistic terms, experienced the same aural and visual stimuli.

It is impossible to say why something so important has happened to one of these young men and not to the other. Their SAT scores may be identical. In fact, the one whom the play leaves unmoved may have higher scores and better grades and better prospects to make the dean's list. The difference between them is immeasurable by any testing instrument, and has nothing to do with which one has studied harder for tomorrow's exam on Elizabethan drama. While most of us who work in education today have no language to account for this mystery, that does not mean the mystery does not exist.

Such inexplicable human differences were of intense interest to the founders of America's first colleges, and sometimes their efforts to elucidate the differences run closer than we might expect to what we are likely to think today. They believed, for instance, that learning can be blocked by pride (in either teacher or student), and that it can also be blocked by shame. Today, social psychologists speak of "stereotype threat" to explain low academic achievement by minority students who may have been distrusted or demeaned by adults as well as peers ever since they can remember. Some such students, knowing they are expected to do poorly or to fail, find themselves fulfilling that expectation in spite of talent and effort. It's a phenomenon that researchers have shown to be widespread, and is closely akin to what one seventeenth-century minister had in mind when he told his congregation that "sometimes a dejected discouraged Christian thinks he hath so much to say against his comfort, as will put to silence the best and ablest Ministers."[27]

Let me risk one more anachronistic analogy. Consider the Puritans' paradoxical insight that knowledge can sometimes establish itself in the mind only when we give up trying to attain it. This is part of why Newman spoke of the inestimable worth of

contemplation, and Whitman of loafing. The capacity for spiritual surprise, for apprehending without plan or foresight what Emerson called "the miraculous in the common" has been an enduring theme in psychological writing at least since Augustine, whose conversion, reported in the *Confessions*, comes upon him without volition, as a gift unsought and unearned.

In such cases, as Edwards wrote a millennium and a half later, "no improvement or composition of natural qualifications"—no effort, as we might say, to concentrate or focus—yields the desired result. Max Weber, a close student of the Protestant tradition to which Edwards belonged, put it this way: "ideas come when we do not expect them, and not when we are brooding and searching at our desks." We encounter the same point in Emerson's lecture on memory, in which he says that sometimes "we are assisted by a dream to recall what we could not find awake," and in Henry Adams's account of how his sullen indifference to the music of Beethoven suddenly gave way to an overwhelming sense of its hitherto unheard beauty:

> A prison-wall that barred his senses on one great side of life, suddenly fell, of its own accord, without so much as his knowing when it happened [and] a new sense burst out like a flower in his life, so superior to the old senses, so bewildering, so astonished at its own existence, that he could not credit it, and watched it as something apart, accidental, and not to be trusted.[28]

No effort or exertion precedes or leads to this breakthrough. It happens unbidden and in unlikely circumstances (amid the "fumes of coarse tobacco and poor beer" in a Berlin *rathskeller*), but it leaves the listener thoroughly and permanently transformed.

We may know more today than did Augustine, Edwards, Emerson, Weber, or Adams about the basic neurological processes that constitute memory or that account for the pleasure we take in creativity observed or expressed. Yet it is striking how little the latest theories of teaching and learning diverge from long-established views on these matters. Take, for example, William James on how one is sometimes blocked in the effort to retrieve an elusive memory:

> You know how it is when you try to recollect a forgotten name. Usually you help the recall by working for it, by mentally running over the places, persons, and things with which the word was connected. But sometimes this effort fails: you feel then as if the harder you tried the less hope there would be, as though the name were *jammed*, and pressure in its direction only kept it all the more from rising. And then the opposite expedient often succeeds. Give up the effort entirely; think of something altogether different, and in half an hour the lost name comes sauntering into your mind, as Emerson says, as carelessly as if it had never been invited. Some hidden process was started in you by the effort, which went on after the effort ceased, and made the result come as if it came spontaneously.[29]

Anyone who has ever stared at a math problem or struggled to write a recalcitrant sentence, and, after giving up, felt the elements fall into place with suddenly obvious ease, knows what James meant. Today, neuroscientists speak of the same phenomenon that he called jamming, but they are likely to use new acronyms such as TOTs ("Tip-of-the-Tongue events"), and come to the unsurprising conclusion that "massing"—or, to use the colloquial term, "cramming"—is a poor study method since exerting unre-

mitting effort can defeat the purpose of the exertion.[30] On the basis of controlled experiment, they recommend that after asking a rhetorical question, a good teacher can get "generation benefits by leaving a pause before giving the answer"—in other words that "a mind must work to grow," and that students learn more by active thinking than by "passive absorption."[31] It's good to have data to corroborate these claims, but the most surprising thing about the findings is that they are presented as discoveries. The latter two phrases, "work to grow" and "passive absorption" are from 1869 (Charles W. Eliot) and 1915 (John Dewey). In 1870, Yale's clergyman president, Noah Porter, remarked that "the most effective teaching" is teaching by questioning—a pedagogical truth that has never been better demonstrated than in the Platonic dialogues composed some twenty-five hundred years ago.

4

In short, genuinely new educational ideas are rare. But sometimes old ones, such as the Socratic idea that learning is a collaborative rather than a solitary process, can take new form. That is what happened when the Christian idea of monastic community evolved into the idea of college as a place where students live as well as learn together. In this respect, too, the college idea, after it was carried to New England, echoed and extended the Puritans' conception of the church—by which they did not mean a physical structure of wood or stone (this they called the meetinghouse) but a voluntary gathering of seekers who come together for mutual support. Here is John Cotton on what constitutes a true church:

> I cannot tell how better to compare it than to a musical instrument, wherein though there be many pipes, yet one

> blast of the bellowes puts breath into them all, so that all of them at once break forth into a kind of melody, and give a pleasant sound to the ears of those that stand by; all of them do make but one Instrument, and one sound, and yet variety of musick.[32]

In the relatively homogeneous society of colonial New England, this aspiration toward unity in multiplicity—an early version, one might say, of "*e pluribus unum*"—was doubtless more fanciful than actual. But as an ideal it was as basic to college as to the church.

Cotton Mather invoked it when he noted in his history that students in the university towns of continental Europe "board... here and there at private houses," but that the English view, carried to New England, was that they should be "brought up in a more *collegiate* way of living." College was about young people from scattered origins converging to live together—taking their meals together, attending lectures and sermons together, sharing the daily rhythms of study and social life. At the heart of this "collegiate way" was a concept of what might be called lateral learning—the proposition that students have something important to learn from one another.[33]

This idea, routinely endorsed today in the websites and brochures of many American colleges, has become so familiar that we take it for granted. It is what Nathaniel Hawthorne (Bowdoin, class of 1825) had in mind when he remarked that "it contributes greatly to a man's moral and intellectual health, to be brought into habits of companionship with individuals unlike himself, who care little for his pursuits, and whose sphere and abilities he must go out of himself to appreciate." It is what Newman had in mind when he spoke of college as a place where stu-

dents are "brought, by familiar intercourse" into a relation where "they learn to respect, to consult, to aid each other." It's what Dewey meant when he described education as "a mode of social life" in which "the best and deepest moral training is precisely that which one gets through having to enter into proper relations with others in a unity of work and thought." It's why William Perry insisted that maturity in a college student means realizing there is something to learn from one's peers.[34]

The principle behind all these assertions may seem self-evident to us, but it is by no means universally so. With a few exceptions—such as Roosevelt Academy in the Netherlands (a branch of the University of Utrecht) or Lingnan University in Hong Kong—the residential college is virtually unknown outside the Anglo-American world. That is part of the point of Randall Jarrell's college novel *Pictures from an Institution* (1952) (a thinly veiled portrait of Bennington College), where émigré professors, grateful as they are to have found sanctuary from the Nazified universities of Europe, simply can't absorb the strange American notion that "students might be right about something" and the professor wrong.[35]

It is hard to overstate the importance of this idea of lateral learning. It is the source of the question that every admissions officer in every selective college is supposed to ask of every applicant: "what does this candidate bring to the class?" It underlies the opinion by Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell in the "affirmative action" case of *Bakke vs. University of California* (1978), in which the court ruled that consideration of a candidate's race is constitutional for the purpose of ensuring "the interplay of ideas and the exchange of views" among students from different backgrounds. These are modern reformulations of the ancient (by American standards) view that a college, no

less than a church, exists fundamentally as an "interaction of consciences," and that admission should be based primarily on the candidate's "aptness to edifie another."[36]

5

The place where the idea comes alive, or at least where it can and should, is the classroom. Here is an account of what the idea in practice meant for one student, born and schooled in China, who came to the United States not long ago in order to attend Bowdoin (founded 1794), where he encountered the modern version of the Puritan principle that no communicant should "take any ancient doctrine for truth till they have examined it" for themselves:

> Coming from a culture in which a "standard answer" is provided for every question, I did not argue with others even when I disagreed. However, Bowdoin forced me to re-consider "the answer" and reach beyond my comfort zone. In my first-year seminar, "East Asian Politics," I was required to debate with others and develop a habit of class engagement. This sometimes meant raising counterarguments or even disagreeing with what had been put forward. For instance, one day we debated what roles Confucianism played in the development of Chinese democracy. Of the 16 students in the classroom, 15 agreed that Confucianism impeded China's development; but I disagreed. I challenged my classmates. Bowdoin made me consistently question the "prescribed answer." That was the biggest challenge for me.[37]

A necessary, though not sufficient, condition for this kind of learning is small class size—which is why, in all but the very rich-

est institutions, educational and fiscal interests are always in tension. The educational premise is simple: a class should be small enough to permit every student to participate in the give-and-take of discussion. The economics are simple too: the lower the ratio between students and faculty (especially tenured faculty), the higher the cost.

Yet in many colleges the principle is defended with impressive ferocity, especially by alumni who want future students to have something like the experience they had, and who make generous contributions to that end. I have seen it at work in an array of institutions, at public colleges such as the Beaufort branch of the University of South Carolina, or Norwalk Community College in coastal Connecticut, as well as at colleges in what is sometimes called the American "heartland"—some of them keenly aware of their Protestant (if not strictly Puritan) heritage, such as Valparaiso University in Indiana, Wheaton College in Illinois, Baylor University in Texas, Geneva College in western Pennsylvania, to name just a few. Of course, the institutional and individual descendants of the people who invented the idea of lateral learning exercise no monopoly over it. It is not a Puritan idea, or a Protestant idea; it is a timeless idea—as evident in Talmudic debate or Socratic dialogue as in the Anglo-American college. But in the context of such a college it presents certain distinctive problems and possibilities.

A renowned teacher at my own institution, Lionel Trilling, remarked near the end of his life that when, "through luck or cunning," small-group discussion works well, it "can have special pedagogic value." Coming from Trilling, whose quietly reflective style gave him great intensity in the classroom (students called him, with no irony intended, "Thrilling Trilling"), this was high praise. What he meant was that a small class can help students

learn how to qualify their initial responses to hard questions. It can help them learn the difference between informed insights and mere opinionating. It can provide the pleasurable chastisement of discovering that others see the world differently, and that their experience is not replicable by, or even reconcilable with, one's own. At its best, a small class is an exercise in deliberative democracy, in which the teacher is neither oracle nor lawgiver but a kind of provocateur.

Let me offer an example from my own experience. It was a literature class in which the students also happened to be teachers themselves—high school teachers from a public school in central North Carolina. One of the poems we read together was a well-known poem by Emily Dickinson, of which these are the first two stanzas:

> My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—
> In Corners—till a Day
> The Owner passed—identified—
> And carried Me away—
>
> And now We roam in Sovereign Woods—
> And now We hunt the Doe—
> And every time I speak for Him—
> The Mountains straight reply—

This poem may be read as a woman's account of how it feels to be confined to the status of an instrument of a man's will, allowed only enough independence to serve as a facilitator of his pleasure. At first, the students seemed convinced by such a reading, and they added to the discussion many particular insights that tended to support it.

Then, toward the end of the session, as we were considering the later stanzas ("And do I smile, such cordial light / Upon the Valley glow — / It is as a Vesuvian face / Had let its pleasure through —"), one usually voluble member of the class, who had been strikingly silent, spoke up. What she said was roughly this: this poem moves me as an expression of erotic power. It reads like a transcript of my own marriage ("And when at Night — Our good Day done — / I guard My Master's Head — / 'Tis better than the Eider-Duck's / Deep Pillow — to have shared —"). It celebrates the completion of one human life by its cleaving to another. It is a love poem about how surrendering the will can enlarge the self. What we concluded at the end of our discussion was not that one side or the other had won the day on behalf of its preferred reading, but that the poem existed in the difference between them.

I can think of many such occasions when a student's intervention broke up a complacent consensus in my class. And yet small classes hardly guarantee large learning. "There will be students," as Trilling went on to say, "who cannot be induced to say anything at all, and there will be those who cannot be kept from trying to say everything." And, he added, "even a measured articulateness does not ensure the cogency of what is said."

This remark puts me in mind of a story our son told my wife and me some years ago on a visit home from college. He was taking an art history course, and the discussion leader, a graduate student teaching for the first time, projected onto the screen a slide reproduction of Alfred Stieglitz's famous photograph "The Steerage," showing emigrants packed onto the deck of a ship in New York harbor. One of the students, very bright and self-assured, launched into a discussion of the "liminality" of the voyagers, as conveyed by the blurry quality of the image; the journey, she said, had half-erased them, leeching out of them their

Old World identity before they had formed a new identity in the New World. Other students developed the point, contributing competitive allusions to various theories of "hegemony" and "alterity" until one student suggested that the teacher try adjusting the slide projector. Sure enough, the image came sharply into focus—but the discussion went on undeterred. The moral of the story (of special salience to the humanities these days) is that it's always a good idea to bring one's bullshit meter to class, and to expect that now and then the needle will jump off the dial.

And yet a well-managed discussion can be of exceptional effect. It can envelop the mind in multiple perspectives that lead toward what William James (a great teacher to whom W.E.B. DuBois looked as "my guide to clear thinking") called "that ideal vanishing-point towards which we imagine that all our temporary truths will some day converge."[38] That phrase captures a distinctively American conception of truth as always in flux, in-the-making rather than ready-made. This pragmatist conception of truth runs counter to the idea of revelation received and absorbed by persons who have nothing to add to it except their consent. In that sense, it is an idea at odds with the "Augustinian strain of piety" that animated the Puritan mind and out of which several of our first colleges took form. But Puritanism also had within it a proto-democratic conception of truth emerging through discussion and debate among human beings who are inherently equal.

6

There was another form of teaching toward which the founders of the first American colleges felt particular devotion. This was the lecture—originally a medieval term (derived from the Latin *legere*, to read) for reading aloud and explicating scrip-

tural, patristic, or classical texts by scholars whose students, in the pre-Gutenberg era, rarely possessed books of their own. In the Puritan tradition, the word "lecture" acquired a more specific meaning. By the later sixteenth century, in parishes where the resident clergyman was unable or unwilling to satisfy the public demand for preaching, unsatisfied laity sometimes hired supplementary lecturers, typically men fresh out of college, whose charge was to preach several times each week—on weekdays as well as on the Sabbath.

Committed as they were to what I have called lateral learning, Puritans nevertheless suspected that too much talk from the laity with too little guidance from the clergy could lead to insolence and heresy—and so they stressed the need to hear from learned lecturers as well as from themselves. In fact, their zeal for sermons became a point of sore dispute in old England, where the state church emphasized the sonic and scenic aspects of public worship—the sound of the organ, the sight of the scarlet-clad priest seen in light refracted through stained glass. For those who took seriously St. Paul's injunction that "faith cometh by hearing" (Romans 10:17), this kind of spectacle was both too little and too much. One reason they emigrated to New England in the first place was their belief that the infusion of grace was likeliest to occur not while a penitent sinner was witnessing the sacraments or even while taking communion, but when he or she was listening to a gospel preacher whose voice could melt the heart.

The ideal listener was inwardly restless, measuring the preacher's claims against his own experience ("Go home and consider whether the things that have been taught were true or no," John Cotton told his listeners), searching her mind for scriptural analogues to what he or she was feeling.[39] Although a lecture takes place in public, listening to it was—and, ideally, still is—a fun-

damentally private experience. "The preacher's words had taken a deep impression on my conscience," one young Englishman reported in his diary around 1590, yet the same words made so little impression on his friends that they "fell upon me in jesting manner," full of mockery and contempt.[40] Puritans were so committed to this half-private, half-public form of religious experience, and so convinced that the lecture-sermon was among God's ways of sorting the saved from the damned, that in early New England, to which one faction removed in order to found sermon-drenched churches, the average churchgoer could expect to attend roughly seven thousand sermons in a lifetime, which amounted (since a sermon might last two hours or more) to nearly "fifteen thousand hours of concentrated listening."[41]

This was the context—a world saturated by the spoken word—in which the American college first arose, and from which the modern college lecture derives. Scientists have believed in it as strongly as those whom today we would call humanists. Two centuries after the founding of Harvard, we find William Barton Rogers, a professor of chemistry at William and Mary and the University of Virginia, who went on to become the first president of MIT, unfavorably comparing "exclusive textbook study and recitation" to the "greater impressiveness of knowledge *orally* conveyed."[42] The tradition that Rogers invoked was not, as we might think, that of the thundering preacher who sends forth settled TRUTH from his pulpit or podium. There were, no doubt, such preacher-teachers, and always will be. But the real power of the tradition lies in its exploratory reflectiveness, as when the teacher speaks from sketchy notes rather than from a controlling script, in order to allow spontaneous self-revision. He or she speaks from inside the subject, with an openness to new discoveries even while moving through an argument

made many times before. No good lecture (or sermon) should be closed to second thoughts; it must have a dialogic quality—a spirit of self-questioning that draws the listeners into honest inquiry into themselves.

But what should we make today of this time-honored trust in the power of the spoken word? In our wired world, it is hard to imagine sitting for hours in a drafty meetinghouse silent except for the sound of the preaching voice, pinned to one's pew by the eyes of a clergyman who seems somehow privy to one's secret sins. Some educators today think that the college lecture has become as obsolete as the hellfire sermon. Rather than listening continuously, many students are e-mailing, texting, and checking their "smart" phones during class. As for those who do unplug themselves for a while, what, exactly, are they supposed to get from a long monologue when they are accustomed to surfing and multitasking and "dealing with multiple information streams in short bursts"? It's a question that goes to the larger question of whether America's colleges can still lay claim to a useable past.

At least the beginning of an answer is suggested by Emerson's comment that "it is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul." The hallmark of the great lecturer has always been the power to provoke, and there is no reason to think this power diminished. In fact, in our age of degraded public speech, such a lecturer fills a need—if not, to use today's ubiquitous marketing language, a niche. One lecturer may be hotly demonstrative, another so shyly inattentive to the students in the room that they feel they have eavesdropped on a private conversation between the speaker and herself. I still hear from Columbia alumni of a certain age how they flocked to listen to Meyer Schapiro, the great art historian whose glowing eyes and transported smile as he spoke of Cézanne or Kandin-

sky led more than one student to say, "Whatever he's smoking, I'll have some."

Or consider this account of William James by another grateful student, George Santayana:

> Perhaps in the first years of his teaching he felt a little in the professor's chair as a military man might feel when obliged to read the prayers at a funeral. He probably conceived what he said more deeply than a more scholastic mind might have conceived it; yet he would have been more comfortable if someone else had said it for him. He liked to open the window, and look out for a moment. I think he was glad when the bell rang, and he could be himself again until the next day. But in the midst of this routine of the class-room the spirit would sometimes come upon him, and, leaning his head on his hand, he would let fall golden words, picturesque, fresh from the heart, full of the knowledge of good and evil.[43]

In this passage we get not only a portrait of a great teacher but a glimpse of what college at its best can be.

7

To anyone even glancingly acquainted with the history of American education, it is hardly news that our colleges have their origins in religion, or that they derive their aims, structure, and pedagogical methods mainly from Protestantism, and, more particularly, from the stringent form of Protestantism whose partisans were called—at first derisively by their enemies, later proudly by themselves—Puritans. Many colleges, both old and relatively new, retain vestiges of their religious origins in, for example, the neo-Gothic architecture of the library or in a chapel

spire that rises above the center (or what was once the center) of campus and from which everything else radiates outward.

Yet 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. If you were to remind just about any major university president today that his or her own institution arose from this or that religious denomination, you'd likely get the response of the proverbial Victorian lady who, upon hearing of Darwin's claim that men descend from apes, replied that she hoped it wasn't so—but if it were, that it not become widely known.

This is a pity and a waste, since there is much to be learned from the past, including the clerical past, about the essential aims and challenges of college education. We tend not to remember, or perhaps half-deliberately to forget, that college was once conceived not as a road to wealth or as a screening service for a social club, but as a training ground for pastors, teachers, and, more broadly, public servants. Founded as philanthropic institutions, the English originals of America's colleges were "expected," as Morison put it, "to dispense alms to outsiders, as well as charity to their own children."[44] Benjamin Franklin, founder of the University of Pennsylvania, who was both a conservator and renovator of the Puritan tradition, put it this way: "The idea of what is *true merit*, should . . . be often presented to youth, explain'd and impress'd on their minds, as consisting in an *Inclination* join'd with an *Ability* to serve Mankind, one's Country, Friends, and Family . . . which Ability should be the great *Aim* and *End* of all learning."[45]

Franklin's friend Benjamin Rush founded Dickinson College a hundred miles west of Philadelphia, in Carlisle, Pennsylvania,

with the stipulation that it be built near the courthouse—so that its students, as Dickinson's current president puts it, could make the short walk to "observe government in action" and become "engaged with their society in order to prepare them to lead in it."[46] In our own time, when some colleges seem to have less than a firm grasp on their public obligations, such precedents—from both the era of religion and of Enlightenment—should not be cause for embarrassment but for emulation.

As for obligations to our "own children"—to students, that is— it may help to recall the derivation of the word by which we name the person who stands at the lectern or sits at the head of the seminar table. That word, of course, is "professor"—a term that once referred to a person who professes a faith, as in the Puritan churches, where the profession was made before the congregation as a kind of public initiation. Surely this meaning is one to which we should still wish to lay claim, since the true teacher must always be a professor in the root sense of the word—a person undaunted by the incremental fatigue of repetitive work, who remains ardent, even fanatic, in the service of his calling.

SIX

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

I have tried in this book to tell a story of ideas and institutions while keeping people—students, teachers, academic leaders—at the forefront of the tale. I did not want to stick to any one of the genres to which such a story usually conforms—jeremiad (invoking the past to shame the present), elegy (gone are the greats of yesteryear), call to arms (do this or that and we will be saved)—so the result, no doubt, is a messy mixture of them all.

In fact, if there is one form to which most recent writing about college belongs, it is none of the above, but, rather, the funeral dirge. Here's an example that appeared in the *Washington Post* soon after the economic meltdown whose consequences we are still trying to fathom:

> Students starting school this year [2009–10] may be part of the last generation for which "going to college" means packing up, getting a dorm room and listening to tenured professors. Undergraduate education is on the verge of a

> radical reordering. Colleges, like newspapers, will be torn apart by new ways of sharing information enabled by the internet. The business model that sustained private U.S. colleges cannot survive.[1]

One benefit of looking into the past is to be reminded that apocalyptic prophecies are more often wrong than right. But in some respects this one has already come true.

By this I mean that the theme I've stressed—college as a community of learning—is, for many students, already an anachronism. If we count as liberal arts colleges the roughly six hundred institutions that make up the Council of Independent Colleges (an organization that does not include colleges within research universities), their total enrollment represents around one in fourteen of the nation's undergraduate students.[2] A couple of summers ago, in one of those reflective editorials that seeks to capture the mood of the season, the *New York Times* reported that "all across the country, poignantly overstuffed vehicles will be heading down the highway to campuses that will soon be turning autumnal."[3] What the *Times* failed to mention is that for every one of those college-bound cars, there are scores of families whose children will be staying home to attend a commuter school without anything resembling traditional college life.[4]

Moreover, millions of college-age Americans never get to college in the first place. For young people in our country whose families are in the bottom income quartile, the chance of going to college is about one in five. By the age of twenty-six, fewer than two-thirds of white high school graduates have enrolled in college, while for minorities the figure is significantly lower—slightly more than half for blacks and, for Hispanics, slightly less.

Among all students who do manage to enroll, roughly half finish at a different college from where they began, fewer than 60 percent finish within six years, and more than a third never finish at all.[5]

Yet college myths and memories have long been an important part of America's sense of what young adulthood is all about. Consider *The Big Chill*, or even that dubious classic *Animal House*. Think of the fictional Ron Patimkin swooning to his treasured LP of Ohio State school songs, "Goodbye, Columbus," in Philip Roth's novella of the same name, or this little recitative from the Broadway show *Avenue Q*:

KATE MONSTER: I wish I could go back to college.
Life was so simple back then.
NICKY: What would I give to go back and live in a dorm with a meal plan again!
PRINCETON: I wish I could go back to college.
In college you know who you are.
You sit in the quad, and think, "Oh my God!
I am totally gonna go far!" . . .
I wanna go back to my room and find a message in dry-erase pen on the door!
Ohhh . . .
I wish I could just drop a class . . .
NICKY: Or get into a play . . .
KATE MONSTER: Or change my major . . .
PRINCETON: Or fuck my T.A. . . .
NICKY: But if I were to go back to college,
Think what a loser I'd be—
I'd walk through the quad,
And think "Oh my God . . . "
ALL: "These kids are so much younger than me."

Perhaps, as this skit reminds us, our brains are programmed to edit out the failures and disappointments—the botched exams, missed free throws, unrequited loves—that can make college a difficult time for young people struggling to grow up.

If most students no longer have anything like the "traditional" college experience, neither do the people who teach them. In 1975, nearly 60 percent of college professors were full-time faculty with tenure or on the "tenure track." Today that fraction has declined to around 35 percent, which means that most students are being taught by part-time or contingent employees who have limited stake in the institution where they work.[6] Some highly regarded colleges play a game of what Berkeley professor David Kirp calls "bait and switch" by luring students with big-name faculty and then assigning them to classes taught by overworked part-timers.[7] These teachers—often excellent people forced to cobble together a subsistence wage by working in one college for part of the week, then in another (or others) for the rest of the week—have no assurance that they will be teaching next year at all. The author of a grimly entitled book, *The Last Professors*, plausibly describes this "dismantling of the American professoriate" as "part and parcel of the casualization of labor" that is under way throughout American life, along with the rise of outsourcing and the decline of unions.[8]

This vision of the imminent future remains a long way from realization at the old and prestigious colleges that have been at the center of this book. In fact, their appeal seems likely to grow precisely because they have the wealth and "market share" to retain a stable faculty teaching what they like, as they like. But at many other colleges, it is uncomfortably close to a description of how things already are. The professor shaping a course around his interests and sensibility (now known as the "independent-operator professor")[9] is becoming a relic, while the instructor-

for-hire, whose job is to monitor standardized content over some "delivery system," is becoming the new norm. If she doesn't like the template of the course for which she has been hired, the institution will have no trouble hiring somebody else. By the rules of the marketplace—efficiency, cost effectiveness, and, for a growing number of institutions, profitability—it all makes sense. By the measures of educational value as I have defined it in this book, it makes no sense at all.

Even the wealthiest private colleges now find themselves straining for the resources they need (or think they need), while public institutions are reeling from the loss of tax revenues on which they still depend. Independent colleges are raising tuition to prohibitive levels and cutting back, sometimes without public acknowledgment, on financial aid. Community colleges—portals of opportunity for students from low-income and immigrant families (some 60 percent of Hispanic college students attend a community college)—are overwhelmed not only by students of traditional college age but also by adults hoping to learn skills that will help them find employment in a dire job market. Meanwhile, some private institutions that lack the allure of high prestige are finding it hard to meet their enrollment targets as prospective students choose a more affordable four-year public or two-year community college instead. As for the fastest-growing sector in higher education—the for-profit institutions—they provide, at best, narrow training in vocational subjects such as accounting or information technology. At worst, they take money in exchange for worthless credentials.[10]

In this new context, and in the face of disturbing evidence of poor student achievement—according to one recent study, roughly a quarter of college graduates cannot comprehend a moderately sophisticated magazine article, or estimate if there's enough

gas in the car to reach the next gas station—a national movement has been forming to devise credible ways to assess what students are actually learning and to improve their prospects of learning more. Our current method of assessing college teachers—mainly surveying students about how much they like or dislike them—is atomistic, impressionistic, and generally close to worthless. "I have seen students fill a lecture room for the mere sake of entertainment," one professor wrote nearly two hundred years ago, "because the Professor interspersed his lecture (by no means the best of the university) with entertaining anecdotes."[11] At a time when faculty retention and promotion depend at least partly on student evaluations, the risk of this sort of thing is higher than ever.

As for evaluating the students themselves, grade inflation (also encouraged by student surveys, since few students appreciate a low grade) has at least kept pace with, if not exceeded, the epidemic of cheating. Except in the hard sciences, grades mean less and less, especially in elite colleges, where the numbers of students graduating with honors and with GPAs *over* 4.0 (the A+ is no longer uncommon) have become outlandish. What exactly a college degree signifies is now so variable across institutions, and, for that matter, within the same institution, that having the degree doesn't mean much either—leaving it at risk of becoming what one writer long ago called a "merely formal and unmeaning certificate."[12]

Meanwhile, American academic leaders, long accustomed to assuming that their institutions are without peer abroad, are looking nervously over their collective shoulder at the rising universities abroad, especially in China, as well as at "the Bologna process"—the movement in Europe to make degree requirements sufficiently compatible across national borders so that, for example, a baccalaureate in chemistry earned in a French university will be a portable credential qualifying the holder for further study

or skilled employment, in, say, Belgium. And some countries—notably China and Germany—have a long tradition of standardized national examinations by which students are evaluated quite apart from whatever academic credential they hold.

2

There is no American counterpart to these traditions. In the late nineteenth century, when James McCosh argued for a relatively uniform undergraduate curriculum against Charles W. Eliot's proposal of free electives and relaxed attendance requirements, he made his case partly by comparing what America lacked with what Europe possessed:

> I know that in Germany they produce scholars without requiring a rigid attendance, and I rather think that in a few American colleges, they are aping this German method, thinking to produce equally diligent students. They forget that the Germans have one powerful safeguard which we have not in America. For all offices in Church and State there is an examination by high scholars following the college course. A young man cannot get an office as clergyman, as teacher, as postmaster, till he is passed by that terrible examining bureau, and if he is turned down by them his prospects in life are blasted. Let the State of Massachusetts pass a law like the Prussian, and Harvard may then relax attendance, and the State will do what the colleges have neglected to do.[13]

McCosh's point was that if colleges don't keep their houses in order, the state will—or should—do it for them.

Since then, at the secondary school level, Americans have become used to a testing regime that is administered privately (the

SAT, the ACT) or publicly (for example, the New York State Regents exam). Under President George W. Bush, the "No Child Left Behind" law attempted to strengthen that regime and hold schools and teachers accountable for the test scores of their students. But there is mounting evidence that the law has had little positive effect, and some say it has a negative effect by encouraging states to "dumb down" the tests, and by driving "soft" subjects such as art and music to the margins, or out of the curriculum altogether.[14] For most educators, the specter of government intrusion only threatens to introduce blunter instruments than those we already use for measuring what students learn.

It seems unlikely that such a regime will extend to our colleges anytime soon, but as a prod to action by colleges themselves, the prospect may actually be salutary. One distinctive aspect of American higher education has always been its decentralization: except for submitting to periodic accreditation reviews, colleges and universities enjoy virtually untrammeled freedom to conduct education as they see fit. On the other hand, very few colleges can be said to be strictly private in the sense of being accountable only to themselves. Ever since the Massachusetts General Court granted income from a public conveyance (the Charlestown ferry) to Harvard College and paid its president directly from the public treasury, higher education in America has been a hybrid of private and public; and over the centuries the distinction between the two has grown increasingly blurry.[15]

In early America, public subsidy of private institutions amounted to a sort of matching challenge, since individuals were expected to follow the lead of the magistrates and make donations of their own. This public-private partnership persists today in the form of tax exemption for private colleges and tax deductibility for their donors, as well as in the form of direct govern-

ment grants that carry compliance conditions pertaining to hiring procedures, laboratory safety, and the like. As for public universities, they have gone deep into the business of raising private endowments, while private for-profit institutions are zealously exploiting the availability of public funds for low-income students, thereby joining the partnership as well.[16]

From time to time, the federal government has delivered shocks to this mixed system in the form of appropriations, regulations, or changes in the tax code. In the mid-nineteenth century, the Morrill Act created the land-grant institutions. In the mid-twentieth century, the GI Bill opened college to previously excluded groups. After World War II, a major science initiative, led by presidential advisor Vannevar Bush, created the now-familiar system of basic research through competitive funding awarded to universities by such government agencies as the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health. In 1980, the Bayh-Dole Act opened up moneymaking prospects for both faculty and (mainly) research universities, and in 1986, Congress acted to end mandatory retirement, passing a law that made faculties older and probably made entry-level teaching positions scarcer—though colleges and universities were granted an exemption till 1994.

A few years ago, under President George W. Bush, another intervention from Washington seemed in the making. Convened by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, a federal commission took note of rising costs, low graduation rates, and the weakness of many college graduates in basic verbal and numerical skills. In response, some colleges, especially the more vulnerable ones, evinced a new urgency to make serious attempts at self-assessment before government stepped in, while the Ivies and other well-endowed institutions responded mainly by increasing subsidies to their relatively wealthy students. With less wealthy colleges and

students in mind, some commentators now argue that in order to spare students and families from crippling debt, the standard duration of study for a bachelor's degree should be reduced from four years to three.[17] In fact, however, with the contraction of the job market, the opposite has been happening: the MA degree (master's programs in everything from statistics to museum studies have been burgeoning) is becoming a de facto fifth college year—but only, of course, for those who can afford to pay another year's tuition for another credential. It's another instance of the more needy getting less while the less needy get more.

Meanwhile, a privately developed test called the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), designed to measure student progress from the first to the fourth year, has been adopted by a growing number of colleges, and many now participate in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which seeks to measure how actively involved students are in their own education. A consortium of colleges, foundations, and lobbying groups has formed an organization called the New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability, which has proposed a certificate, modeled on the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design program (LEED), to be awarded to colleges that raise academic standards. And boards of trustees, which have mostly confined themselves to fiduciary oversight since the academic-freedom struggles of the early twentieth century, are beginning to take a more active role in monitoring the educational performance of the institutions they govern.[18] So far, it's too early to tell what good or harm will come of all this.

What's clear is that keeping the college idea alive for more than the privileged few is a huge challenge. With costs relentlessly rising, pressure is increasing on the idea of college as a capacious community with socioeconomic and ethnic diversity as well as

intellectual range. Colleges in the same city or region are increasingly tempted to consolidate academic departments—so that, say, certain languages will be taught on one campus and others on another. Some subjects and disciplines may be eliminated altogether, or provided through online instruction shared by multiple institutions. Such cost-cutting strategies are, of course, likely to take hold in less wealthy and prestigious institutions first, since one component of prestige is the breadth of the course offerings.

In the meantime there are things, in theory at least, that government could do to help students from less affluent families get into, and stay in, college. As Christopher Jencks has said with admirable succinctness, "Making college a lot more affordable is a challenge governments know how to meet, while making students learn a lot more is a challenge we do not currently know how to meet. Under those circumstances, starting with affordability is probably the best bet."[19] This would require making additional expenditures for existing programs that serve low-income students, such as Pell grants and Perkins loans, and crediting some portion of college tuition as a tax deduction. The economist Ronald Ehrenberg has suggested that private and public colleges should be rewarded with federal and state funds for each Pell grant recipient who is graduated from their institution. Donald Heller has made the more sweeping suggestion that all grants for college students—institutional as well as governmental—should be awarded on the basis of a needs analysis similar to that which currently governs Pell grant expenditures.[20] The obvious problem with such proposals, sensible as they are, is that, unless they are funded by shifting support from middle-class to needier students, they would require large new investments—two options that seem politically impossible in the current context of anxiety about government deficits.

Still, public discussion about higher education continues to focus on issues of cost and access, including the always-glamorous question of who gets to go to the most prestigious colleges. One problem with this focus is that getting in is by no means good enough. A great many low-income students who manage to start college never finish. A common response to this situation is to say that the real problem is our K–12 schools, and that, in fact, too many students go on to college rather than too few—but I have known only one parent who includes a child of his own in this assessment, which always seems to apply to other people's children.[21] Primary and secondary education doubtless need reform, and need it badly. But it would be folly for our colleges to wait. As one college president put it a century and a half ago, "whatever elementary instruction the schools fail to give, the college must supply."[22]

Not only should colleges do better at providing remedial help to students who need it, but they should recognize that their obligations begin with prospective students. More partnerships are needed between four-year colleges and community colleges, as well as collaborations linking colleges with local high schools and community organizations that work with high school students who are hoping, against the odds, to attend college.[23] Low-income families also need help in understanding the rationale for paying for education with future dollars—something that can be frightening to those who associate all forms of debt with exploitative lenders and the specter of default.[24] As for improving graduation rates, one striking finding from a recent study of public institutions is that children from low-income families are more likely to graduate if provided with "settings . . . that encourage close contact among students and between students and faculty members."[25] In short, what I have

described in this book as the college idea still has the power to motivate young adults more than any other form of education we know.

3

So the problems are big, but despite recent demands that academia reform itself down to its foundations, big solutions—whether initiated from within or from without—are unlikely. Such demands are numerous and, often, shrill. One example is a recent book entitled *Crisis on Campus: A Bold Plan for Reforming Our Colleges and Universities*, based on an apocalyptic op-ed piece entitled "End the University as We Know It," that calls for the abolition of (among other things) tenure, academic departments, and the scholarly dissertation as a worse-than-worthless exercise in pedantry.[26] The premise here is that colleges and universities have become hopelessly sclerotic and removed from the real world. It's an old complaint. Emerson remarked a long time ago that "we are shut up in . . . college recitation rooms . . . & come out at last with a bellyful of words & do not know a thing. . . . We do not know an edible root in the woods. We cannot tell our course by the stars nor the hour of the day by the sun."[27]

Perhaps we really are more lost than ever. It is certainly true, as one former college president puts it, that most academic institutions are "organized anarchies," in which faculty "wander in and out of the decision-making process depending on circumstance and inclination."[28] Yet it is also true that much can be achieved—more than by crying crisis—when faculty and administrators work in a collaborative spirit on behalf of their students. There are plenty of examples of replicable "best practices" that have not been sufficiently replicated. One striking instance is the University of Maryland at Baltimore, where, under the

leadership of President Freeman Hrabowski, graduation rates have markedly improved through a combination of mentoring, encouragement of structured group study, and apprenticeships to research faculty—with particularly impressive progress among minority students majoring in "STEM" (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields. At Carnegie Mellon University, the "open learning initiative" is drawing widespread attention for its free online courses in which students get frequent feedback on how they are doing, and presentations and exercises are continually revised in response to evidence of how much students are learning.[29]

Even people who are skeptical, as I am, about the digital revolution as a great advance for learning must recognize the potential of the Internet to reduce the gap between the haves and have-nots. Already today, access to archives or out-of-print books is no longer restricted to students with a "stack pass" at some great university library, and the long trip to consult a periodical or a rare newspaper can now be made in an instant through JSTOR, LexisNexis, and the like. Some educators see a bright future for college as a hybrid form of in-person and distance learning whereby students anywhere can "attend" lectures by a world-renowned lecturer via the web, then follow up in a discussion group with peers led by a local faculty member. And some believe that "mental attendance" is bound to be higher when such a student signs on at a time of his or her choosing rather than dozing in the back of a darkened lecture hall—or, for that matter, staying in bed.[30]

An exuberant vision of the future has recently been offered by Duke professor Cathy Davidson, who believes that, for young people accustomed to rapid-fire switching from texting to surfing to blogging, etc., multitasking is not a cause or symptom of distraction but an "ideal mode" of learning. In this vision, the class-

room becomes a fluid and porous place—indeed hardly a place at all—in which authority for grading, and even for defining the subject of study, is shared by teacher and students, on the "crowd-sourcing" model of such collaborative entities as *Wikipedia*.[31] In some respects, this version of the college of the future is a vindication of the college of the past—a place in which students learn from their peers. What Davidson calls "collaboration by difference" is, in fact, the old idea of lateral learning under a new name: the idea that multiple perspectives contributed by students with different gifts and interests are not only desirable but essential. Her dynamic, improvisational college-to-come stands in bright contrast to the dark refrain one hears from many commentators who see higher education in decline. But in the end, utopian prophecies seem no more convincing than prophecies of doom.

While we await the high-tech college of the future, whatever it will turn out to be, it would be good to pay attention to cases where recalcitrant problems are yielding to low-tech solutions in the present. I suspect that multiyear contracts with (transparent, one hopes) review procedures will gradually overtake both lifetime tenure and casual hiring as the academic norm; but in the meantime, stability without sclerosis is the best condition for any college faculty. Denison University for one, has found that by carefully calibrating sabbatical schedules, it can shift from hiring temporary adjuncts to adding tenure-track professors even in small departments, so that students may count on faculty advisors who don't come and go from year to year. Beginning in 2010, Valparaiso University has been holding half-day workshops twice each academic year under the rubric "How the University Works," at which faculty meet with administrators in every sector of university governance from admissions to finance. The idea is to dispel the mystery and reduce the misunderstanding that can under-

mine trust between faculty and administrators, and to encourage informed debate of policy and practice. Good ideas are also emanating from study groups that span a range of institutions. The California Commission on General Education for the Twenty-first Century has proposed that at every research university, "one person, commanding a staff and a budget, should be in the cabinet of the president or chancellor with his or her primary responsibility to undergraduate education, with special attention to features of undergraduate education that transcend the interests of the departments."[32] It's a good proposal, since undergraduates rarely have a strong advocate in the president's inner circle.

Small changes, too, in classroom practice have been shown to yield large results—not only for students in the particular class, but, now that websites and blogs and social networks make it easy to get the word out, for students in other classes and colleges as well. Harvard physics professor Eric Mazur, having discovered that his students were doing more memorizing than thinking, shifted from the hour-long lecture to shorter periods of exposition alternated with ten-minute periods during which student breakout groups work collaboratively on an assigned problem. Students then report their results through an electronic feedback system, which tells the professor how well they have grasped the point he has just explained. If a significant number haven't understood it, he returns to it for further discussion before moving on. It's a way of restoring a dialogic dimension, even in a large class, to the monologic lecture.[33]

4

None of these innovations is, as the phrase goes, rocket science. They are commonsense responses to the plain fact that undergraduates easily get lost—which often starts with getting bored—

especially in institutions devoted to research and specialized instruction. All these experiments have in common something simple: they come from faculty who care. If good things are to happen to students, faculty must care, not only because this is the basic precondition of good teaching, but because, with a few minor exceptions such as teaching awards or, occasionally, supplementary pay for teaching certain required courses, the proffered rewards of academic life—promotions, raises, leaves—have nothing to do with demonstrated concern for students. In many academic institutions, teaching is its own reward.

Therefore, one obvious thing to do is to try to produce more teachers who care about teaching. This elementary but essential point has been made in one way or another by many recent critics of academia—Anthony Kronman, Louis Menand, Andrew Hacker, and Claudia Dreifus, to cite just a few. For all of them, the bogeyman is research—in the sense of narrowly focused inquiry into matters of marginal interest to young people in need of a general education.[34] I am obviously sympathetic to this view, which takes seriously the fact that the talents of the research scholar or scientist are not necessarily those of the teacher. If the same person gives evidence of both, it's a fortuitous convergence. Nearly a century ago, Max Weber noted that "one can be a preeminent scholar and at the same time an abominably poor teacher," and if we go back further still, we find Emerson making the mischievous suggestion that "a college professor should be elected by setting all the candidates loose on a miscellaneous gang of young men taken at large from the street. He who could get the ear of these youths after a certain number of hours . . . should be the professor."[35]

What all these critics have in common is the awareness that a gift for teaching cannot be certified by any advanced degree, and that zeal for teaching can be drained away by the profes-

sional training that allows one to become a college teacher in the first place. It doesn't have to be that way. No one should want America's universities to surrender their commitment to training researchers of the highest imagination and ambition, whether or not these people are well suited to teaching. The problem is not that universities are centers of research, but rather it's the way they use college teaching to subsidize the training of researchers. Our universities admit graduate students on the basis of scholarly promise, then assign them, in exchange for stipendiary support, and often with minimal preparation, to teach undergraduate discussion classes in, say, English or history, or sections of introductory science or math courses. "My graduate work," recalls Carol Geary Schneider, who holds a PhD in history and is now president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, "had not included even an hour's worth of time on the real-world students I might find in my classroom, much less on the mysterious subject of 'learning.'"[36] Few graduate programs make much effort to distinguish between those who are qualified to do research in the library or lab and those who show promise for the classroom—and fewer make any systematic effort (this would be even better) to mitigate the distinction by helping good scholars and scientists become good teachers. Most applicants to a PhD program are never formally interviewed by teaching faculty, and once they arrive in graduate school, they are encouraged to think of teaching as an onerous obligation rather than an opportunity.

That this situation is taken for granted has been inadvertently confirmed by an exhaustively researched study whose results were recently published under the title *Educating Scholars: Doctoral Education in the Humanities* (2010). It's a densely statistical book showing rates of attrition, years-to-degree, patterns of postdoctoral employment, and so on; but it includes only a

single brief mention of what the authors call "relevant preparation for later teaching careers." The mention comes in the context of a discussion of whether or not graduate teaching assistantships retard progress toward the degree. Similarly, the National Research Council bases its closely watched ranking of doctoral programs on criteria that have nothing to do with what doctoral programs do—or don't do—to prepare their graduates for college teaching.[37] These failures to consider teaching as an integral part of graduate education strike me as astonishing, but in most academic circles they don't seem to raise an eyebrow.

What we have here is a situation analogous to what it would mean if medical schools were to grant the MD degree to students who had never completed any clinical rotations. This might conceivably make sense for those determined to become "bench scientists" or to go into certain technical fields such as radiology, although even in such cases, a little human contact with patients wouldn't hurt—and sometimes a young person with expectations to the contrary discovers that working with patients is surprisingly satisfying. But the notion of sending a young physician to a patient's bedside without serious apprenticeship and mentoring is—as it should be—out of the question.

Moreover, unlike in graduate schools of arts and sciences, no candidate is admitted to an American medical school without a personal interview in which his or her fitness for the profession is (no doubt, imperfectly) assessed. In strictly financial terms, those who go into specialties or certain research fields are more amply rewarded than those who become primary care or family physicians—roughly analogous to becoming college teachers. But, without damage to the training of the former, medical schools have increasingly recognized the dignity and importance of the latter. By introducing opportunities for students to work

in underserved communities, they have made progress toward closing the "schism between medicine as science and medicine as service." Many physicians now speak of "patient-centered" medicine as a main goal of the profession.[38] If we in academia are to break what Robert Maynard Hutchins long ago called "the vicious circle . . . in which the products of a bad system grow up to be the operators and perpetuators of it," it is high time that PhD programs take seriously their obligation to provide "student-centered" doctoral education—in the sense of preparing scholars to be teachers too.[39]

It shouldn't be all that hard. The distinction—or conflict—between research and teaching tends to be overstated, as one British writer nicely pointed out some years ago in response to a survey that asked faculty how they allotted their time between the two. That question, he said, is like asking a sheep "how much of its time is devoted to growing wool and how much to turning itself into mutton."[40] There is not—or at least ought not to be—a clear dividing line, and if it's a cliché to say, "my teaching enhances my scholarship" or "my scholarship makes me a better teacher," that's because both statements are often true. Passion for learning lies at the heart of scholarly and scientific investigation, and great practitioners have what one scientist called "radium of the soul" by which their students are inspired to push further, to revise or reject or extend the mentor's work. In a wonderful essay entitled "Research Strategy: Teach," the Cornell chemist Roald Hoffmann describes his creative process of discovery as inseparable from the act of explanation—explaining not only to himself but to multiple audiences, including undergraduates as well as professional peers. "The more I taught beginning classes, the more important it became to me to explain," he writes, and the more he realized that "the gleam of truth, or of a connection"

is most likely to strike the mind "not in isolation, but in discourse with another person."[41] At their best, in other words, research is a form of teaching, and teaching is a form of research.

Yet future professors are seldom asked in graduate school to articulate the "why" of what they do, to learn to convey its significance to a lay audience, even to express for themselves the fascination they feel for it. In my own field of literary studies, for example, it would make eminent sense to include on every doctoral oral examination an opportunity for the candidate to make a case for why a given author might interest a college student. What makes him or her alive in the present moment? Why should this novel or poem or play written a hundred years ago still matter? In other words, how would you teach this subject? These questions may seem theoretically unsophisticated, but in fact they are hard questions—and, sooner or later, if one wants to be an effective teacher, they have to be confronted. If future teachers are not pressed to ask them from the start of their graduate training, the likelihood of their evading them—for now or forever—grows.[42]

The fact is that college teaching is a delicate and difficult art. It requires both confidence and tact. It means putting students under pressure, but it can degenerate into badgering or bullying. It requires making clear explanations of complex ideas. But sometimes it requires waiting out the silence after posing a difficult question—or, as Donald Finkel, a renowned teacher at Evergreen State College, once put it, "teaching with your mouth shut."[43] In training future scholars, we give far too little thought to these challenges, which, as teachers, all of them will face.

5

I have tried in this book to tell a story with a beginning, a middle (in relation to where we are today), but no end. It cannot be al-

lowed to have an end. The American college faces a great many serious challenges—from the fiscal to the ethical and even, it might be said, the existential—but it is too precious an institution to be permitted to give up on its own ideals.

It began, as I have tried to show, in a spirit poised between hubris and humility. My view of the continuing pertinence of its religious origins may seem at odds with the intolerance of the clerics who founded it. They had no use for rival forms of Christianity, not to mention "heathens" such as Muslims and Jews, or the polytheistic "savages" amidst whom they found themselves living—except as candidates for conversion. They had their own kinds of blindness, self-deception, and cruelty. Yet when they were true to their convictions (are we sure that we are more so?), they tried to honor their cardinal belief that God in his omnipotence, not man in his presumption, determines the fate of every human being, and therefore that no outward mark—wealth or poverty, high or low social position, credentials or lack thereof—tells anything about the inward condition of the soul.

Even in our secular world, anyone concerned with America's colleges must still come to terms with the implications of these principles—including the linked truths that education is a mysterious process and that we should be slow to assume that any student is beyond its saving power. Perhaps the most daunting challenge facing those of us who believe in the universal value of liberal education is the challenge of conveying its value to anyone—policymakers, public officials, and even many academics—who has not personally experienced it. In this respect, too, we would do well to recall the Puritan view that the transformative power of a true education is "such a mystery as none can read but they that know it."[44]

If an old, and in many respects outmoded, religion seems an improbable touchstone for thinking about education today, perhaps a more plausible one is democracy. Surely it is an offense against democracy to presume that education should be reserved for the wellborn and the well-off. As Emerson put it in his great Phi Beta Kappa oration in 1837, "colleges can only highly serve us when . . . they gather from far every ray of various genius to their hospitable halls, and by the concentrated fires, set the hearts of their youth on flame. . . . Forget this, and our American colleges will recede in their public importance, whilst they grow richer every year."[45] He did not mean the word "genius" in our sense of extraordinary talent, but in the democratic sense that each individual possesses an irreplicable spirit. He meant that colleges should reach far, wide, and deep for their students and allow them, by their convergence, to ignite in one another a sense of the possibilities of democratic community.

No doubt, students with good preparation obtained in good high schools bring huge advantages with them to college. And since affluent applicants are overwhelmingly likely to have the stronger credentials, it will always be difficult for selective colleges to reconcile their twin principles of equity and excellence when they admit their new class every year. Yet it is often students of lesser means for whom college means the most—not just in the measurable sense of improving their economic competitiveness, but in the intellectual and imaginative enlargement it makes possible.

My own life in academia has been a privileged and insular one, and, to some readers, my emphasis in this book on a few selective colleges will seem to vitiate the general pertinence of the story I have tried to tell. But having observed and participated in classes at a wide range of colleges with students at all levels

of preparation and sophistication, it's been my experience that whether they are studying accounting or philosophy, hotel management or history, the vast majority of college students are capable of engaging the kinds of big questions—questions of truth, responsibility, justice, beauty, among others—that were once assumed to be at the center of college education.

A number of leading educators have lately put this premise to the test. I'd like to mention here just two examples, one from each coast. At Stanford, a professor of philosophy, Debra Satz, with a colleague in political science, Rob Reich, started a program called "Hope House," in which faculty, assisted by undergraduate volunteers, discuss classic philosophical and literary texts with female addicts and ex-convicts living in a residential treatment center. At Bard College, in upstate New York, faculty teach literature, mathematics, history, and philosophy to inmates at the Eastern New York Correctional Facility. In each case, a word that figures frequently in descriptions of the experience is the word "joy."

In the Bard program, at each year's commencement (the term may sound ironic, since many of the graduates have only a remote chance for parole), students speak, according to Bard president Leon Botstein, of "the liberation of the mind . . . and their joy in the close, intense reading of texts, the working out of problem sets in mathematics, and the struggle they encountered in learning to reconsider deeply held prejudices and facile notions based on ignorance." At Stanford, the students "experienced joy and self-confidence by participating in a democratic community of inquiry" into deep questions raised by writers ranging from Immanuel Kant to Adrienne Rich on such issues as civil disobedience or the defensibility of lying on behalf of others or oneself. To bring such questions alive for their regular Stanford under-

graduates, Satz and Reich report that they strain for historical examples such as lying to the Gestapo for the sake of a fugitive Jew—while the women in the "Hope House" program feel no disconnection between life and text, speaking readily and eloquently "from the cauldron of their own experiences."[46]

It is easy to dismiss such programs as the work of do-gooders making conscience-salving gestures; but anyone who witnesses or participates in this kind of teaching is likely to be chastened and moved. It is a reminder, as Botstein puts it, of "the connection between ethics and learning," which can be harder to establish among students "for whom the privilege of moving seamlessly from high school into college is taken for granted." In general, I think, we are too quick to assume that students with lesser preparation are unfit for education in this enlarging sense.

Quickest to assume so are today's entrepreneurs of for-profit education, such as the former director of the University of Phoenix (now by far America's largest college, with five times as many students as the largest public university, Ohio State), who tells us that "I'm happy that there are places in the world where people sit down and think. We need that. But that's very expensive. And not everybody can do that. So for the vast majority of folks who don't get that privilege, then I think it's a business."[47] The putative realism of this point of view is a surrender of America's democratic promise. At my own university we have an undergraduate division that admits students who may have started years ago at another college, then gone to work, or to war, before resuming their studies. They are frequently admitted into the same courses with highly credentialed students of traditional college age, where, it turns out, those with the most searching minds are sometimes military veterans who have arrived in the classroom

via some unheralded community college and a tour in the army on a battlefield in Afghanistan or Iraq.

Perhaps the brightest spot in the contemporary landscape of American higher education is the resurgence of interest in engaging students in civic life beyond campus. "Community service" organizations have long been a feature of most colleges, but explicit connection of coursework with service work is relatively new, and growing. In courses on such subjects as immigration, the environment, public health, and education, among others, students integrate their reading and writing assignments with volunteer work helping immigrant families cope with public bureaucracies, doing research for an environmental advocacy group, tutoring at-risk children, or assisting the elderly—sometimes through partnerships that formally link a college with a community organization. Much of the impetus for such work comes from the students themselves, who, despite everything I have said about the problems and pathologies of contemporary college culture, are often brimming with ideals and energy and hope, and have a craving for meaningful work.

There is also a growing movement promoting education for citizenship by engaging students on issues of constitutional interpretation provoked by debate over current issues such as gay marriage, gun control, or civil liberties in wartime. One organization called Project Pericles sponsors an annual national conference, "Debating for Democracy," in which students from some thirty participating colleges come together for public debate and receive critiques from leading public figures on the quality of their research and their arguments.[48]

Such initiatives are continuous with the best traditions of the American college as an institution devoted not only to personal

advancement but to the public good. Some of our leading colleges are showing leadership in taking this tradition seriously—as in Amherst's commitment to providing students in nearby community colleges with mentoring support and, for strong students, an opportunity to transfer to Amherst itself; or Yale's engagement with the city of New Haven by forming partnerships with local schools and generally accepting its responsibility to mitigate the "town-gown" tension that elite institutions have often inflamed. On a recent visit to The University of Tulsa, I learned that the university provides up to eight hours per month of paid leave for staff who wish to devote that time to community service. Such actions bespeak a recognition that in any genuine community—an aspiration fundamental to the original conception of college—self-interest and public interest are not at odds, but are two names for the same thing.

The institution I have explored in this book is a very old one. Yet one of the pleasures of the teaching life is to witness its renewal with every incoming class. Much of what has been true of students will always be true. A hundred and forty years ago, the president of Yale wrote of "the leisure and curiosity of this morning of life," and of "the zest with which its novel experiences . . . are enjoyed." In our own day a former president of Amherst writes of a young man experiencing in college the "stirring and shaping, perhaps for the first time in his life, [of] actual convictions—not just gut feelings—among his friends and, more important, further down, in his own soul."[49]

College should be much more than a place that winnows the "best" from the rest. It should be a transit point for those whom Lionel Trilling called "midway people," whose "movement from social group to social group . . . makes for the uncertainty of

their moral codes, their confusion, their indecision"—that is, for young Americans, who, more than their counterparts in other nations, have all and always been "midway people" in Trilling's sense.[50] A college should not be a haven from worldly contention, but a place where young people fight out among and within themselves contending ideas of the meaningful life, and where they discover that self-interest need not be at odds with concern for one another. We owe it to posterity to preserve and protect this institution. Democracy depends on it.

NOTES

Introduction

1. Malcolm Gladwell, "The Order of Things: What College Rankings Really Tell Us," *New Yorker*, February 14 and 21, 2011, p. 72.
2. Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University*, 5th ed. (1963; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 49.
3. Jaimes Amber, "Neouniversitas," *Harvard Crimson*, October 12, 2010.
4. Abigail Adams to John Adams, August 14, 1776, in *The Book of Abigail and John: Selected Letters of the Adams Family, 1762–1784*, ed. L. H. Butterfield, Marc Friedlaender, and Mary-Jo Kline (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 152; David Starr Jordan, quoted in Julie A. Reuben, *The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 253.
5. Scott McNealy, chairman of Sun Microsystems, quoted in Anan Giridharadas, "Virtual Classrooms Could Create a Marketplace of Knowledge," *New York Times*, November 6, 2009.
6. Bowen, commencement address at the graduate school of Indiana University, May 6, 2011. Alison Wolf, *Does Education Matter? Myths about Education and Economic Growth* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), p. 247.

7. Earnest Earnest, quoted in Jerome Karabel, *The Chosen* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 2005), p. 19.
8. Anya Kamenetz, *DIYU: Edupunks, Edupreneurs, and the Coming Transformation of Higher Education* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green, 2010), p. 34.
9. For a detailed analysis of the growing gap between well-funded and poorly funded colleges, see the report *Trends in College Spending: 1999–2009* (September 2011), by the Delta Cost Project and the Lumina Foundation, http://www.deltacostproject.org/resources/pdf/Trends2011_Final_090711.pdf.

Chapter One. What Is College For?

1. This experience pertains mainly to colleges where most students are of "traditional" age. The number of "nontraditional" students, i.e., those who have come to college at a later stage of life, has been rapidly growing.
2. Shulman, quoted in Donald N. Levine, *Powers of the Mind: The Reinvention of Liberal Learning in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 130.
3. Recent studies of student evaluations have found that students tend to give good reviews "to instructors who are easy graders or who are good looking," and lesser reviews to women and instructors born outside the United States. The largest such study, at Ohio State University, finds "no correlation between professor evaluations and the learning that is actually taking place." See *InsideHigherEd.com*, January 29, 2007.
4. *New England's First Fruits* (1643), in Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Founding of Harvard College* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935), p. 432.
5. Wallace Stegner, *Crossing to Safety* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), p. 31.
6. Michael S. McPherson and Morton Owen Schapiro, "The Future Economic Challenges for the Liberal Arts Colleges," in *Distinctively American: The Residential Liberal Arts Colleges*, ed. Steven Koblik and Stephen R. Graubard (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2000), p. 50.

7. For a statistical portrait of undergraduate education, see the annual "Almanac of Higher Education," published most recently by the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 26, 2011.
8. Mark Lilla's lecture, "The Soldier, The Sage, The Saint, and the Citizen" (delivered on April 23, 2010), is posted on the Columbia University website: http://www.college.columbia.edu/core/lectures/spring2010-0.
9. See Suniya S. Luthar and Shawn J. Latendresse, "Children of the Affluent: Challenges to Well-Being," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 14, no. 1 (February 2005): 49–53.
10. As early as 1869, Charles W. Eliot, Harvard's first president without a clerical background, dismissed "the notion that education consists in the authoritative inculcation of what the teacher deems true," and declared "the very word 'education'" to be "a standing protest against dogmatic teaching" (Eliot, inaugural address as president of Harvard [1869], in *American Higher Education: A Documentary History*, 2 vols., ed. Richard Hofstadter and Wilson Smith [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961], 2:606). There are, alas, still dogmatic teachers, although their numbers are exaggerated and their dogma is more likely today to be political than theological.
11. Laurence R. Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 271.
12. Charles Franklin Thwing, *The American College: What It Is and What It May Become* (New York: Platt and Peck, 1914), p. 97. I am grateful to Steven Wheatley of the American Council of Learned Societies for drawing my attention to this book. The English professor was Fred Lewis Pattee, quoted in Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 107.
13. Trilling, "The Uncertain Future of the Humanistic Educational Ideal" (1974), in *The Last Decade: Essays and Reviews, 1965–75* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1979), pp. 160–76.
14. Sam Lipsyte, *The Ask* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2010), p. 51.
15. *Spencer Foreman, MD in First Person: An Oral History* (Chicago: American Hospital Association Center for Hospital Administration

and Health Care Administration History and Health Research and Educational Trust, 2008), p. 6.

16. Burton J. Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), p. 227; Veysey, *Emergence of the University*, p. 269.
17. Morison, *Founding of Harvard*, p. 229.
18. Roth, *Indignation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009), p. 49. "Tufts U. Bans Student Sex When Roommates Are Present," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 28, 2009. For an account of social life on the same campus, see "Lady Power," by Nancy Bauer, chair of the Philosophy Department at Tufts: "Visit an American college campus on a Monday morning and you'll find any number of amazingly ambitious and talented young women wielding their brain power, determined not to let anything—including a relationship with some needy, dependent man—get in their way. Come back on a party night, and you'll find many of these same girls (they stopped calling themselves 'women' years ago) wielding their sexual power, dressed as provocatively as they dare, matching the guys drink for drink—and then hook-up for hook-up. . . . When they're on their knees in front of a worked-up guy they just met at a party, they genuinely do feel powerful—sadistic, even. After all, though they don't stand up and walk away, they in principle could. But the morning after, students routinely tell me, they are vulnerable to what I've come to call the 'hook-up hangover.' They'll see the guy in the quad and cringe. Or they'll find themselves wishing in vain for more—if not for a prince (or a vampire, maybe) to sweep them off their feet, at least for the guy actually to have programmed their number into his cell phone the night before. When the text doesn't come, it's off to the next party." Opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com, June 20, 2010.
19. Thorstein Veblen, *The Higher Learning in America* (1918: repr. New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), pp. 101, 99.
20. Romano, "Will the Book Survive Generation Text?" *Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 29, 2010; Kevin Kiley, "Long Reads," *InsideHigherEd.com*, May 12, 2011; Clydesdale, "Wake up and Smell the New Epistemology," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January, 23,

2009; Menand, *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), p. 19.

21. Bowen, preface to *Jefferson and Education*, ed. Jennings L. Wagoner Jr. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), pp. 11–12.

22. Richard Vedder, *Going Broke by Degree: Why College Costs Too Much* (Washington DC: American Enterprise Institute, 2004), p. 52; Brody, quoted in Dale Keiger, "Measuring the Unmeasurable," *Johns Hopkins Magazine*, November, 2008, p. 29.

23. The incidence of cheating is hard to measure, but one authority on the subject, Donald McCabe of Rutgers University, finds that the number of students reporting "cut and paste" plagiarism using Internet sources quadrupled between 1999 and 2001. McCabe also describes a sharp rise over the last four decades in the number of students reporting "unpermitted collaboration" (academicintegrity.org/cai_research.asp). Drawing on McCabe's research, David Callahan, *The Cheating Culture: Why More Americans Are Doing Wrong to Get Ahead* (New York: Harcourt, 2004), p. 217, estimates that serious cheating in college increased by 30 to 35 percent during the 1990s. As for drinking, many studies confirm the high incidence of binge drinking and substance abuse among college students. See, for example, "Wasting the Best and the Brightest: Substance Abuse at America's Colleges and Universities," report from the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, March, 2007, available at http://www.casacolumbia.org/templates/Publications_Reports.aspx#111, which estimates that roughly half of all full-time college students binge drink or abuse drugs at least once a month.

24. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *My Wife and I* (New York, 1871), pp. 76–77.

25. Harry Lewis, *Excellence without a Soul: How a Great University Forgot Education* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006), p. 17. The phrase "service-station conception" comes from Robert Maynard Hutchins, *The Higher Learning in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1936), p. 6.

26. Riley, quoted in Mildred Garcia, "A New Model of Liberal Learning for the 21st Century," *DailyBreeze.com*, November 23, 2009. Garcia, a

staunch defender of liberal education, is president of California State University at Dominguez Hills, a community college serving a large minority population. President Obama, quoted in *Politico*, February 24, 2009.

27. Alison Wolf, *Does Education Matter? Myths about Education and Economic Growth* (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 18: "The more educated you are, the more likely you are to be in work, to stay in work, and to enjoy stable, long-term employment on a permanent contract." There is also evidence that an associate's degree from a two-year college, or completing even a year or two at a four-year college, has measurable economic value. Relative to their starting point, students who gain the most in economic terms seem to be those from poor families, or from families where no one has previously attended college, or from minority groups with lower college-going rates. See David Glenn, "Disadvantaged Students May Benefit Most from Attending College," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 1, 2010. Recent data are available in "The College Payoff: Education, Occupation, Lifetime Earnings," http://cew.georgetown.edu/collegepayoff/, released on August 5, 2011, by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, in partnership with the Lumina Foundation.
28. See Clifford Adelman, *The Spaces Between Numbers: Getting International Data on Higher Education Straight* (Washington DC: Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2009), and Jane V. Wellman, *Apples and Oranges in the Flat World: A Layperson's Guide to International Comparisons of Postsecondary Education* (Washington DC: American Council on Education, 2007).
29. Brian K. Fitzgerald, "Missed Opportunities: Has College Opportunity Fallen Victim to Policy Drift?" *Change* 36, no. 4 (July–August 2004): 14. The estimates of chances to attend college are cited, with permission, from a talk given on March 5, 2010, by Eugene Tobin, former president of Hamilton College, currently program officer on higher education at the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Tobin was drawing on Ross Douthat, "Does Meritocracy Work?" *Atlantic Monthly*, November 2005, p. 120; and William G. Bowen, Martin A. Kurzweil, and Eugene M. Tobin, *Equity and Excellence in Ameri-*

can Higher Education (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), pp. 77–94.

30. Danette Gerald and Kati Haycock, "Engines of Inequality: Diminishing Equity in the Nation's Premier Public Universities" (Washington DC: Education Trust, 2006).
31. See, for example, Charles Murray, "Are Too Many People Going to College?" *The American* (Journal of the American Enterprise Institute) 2, no. 5 (September–October 2008): 40–49.
32. Ann Larson, "Higher Education's Big Lie," *InsideHigherEd.com*, June 3, 2010; and Jacques Steinberg, "Plan B: Skip College," *New York Times*, May 14, 2010.
33. Jan J. Barendregt et al., "The Health Care Costs of Smoking," *New England Journal of Medicine* 337 (October 9, 1997): 1052–57.
34. In Lester J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), p. 480.
35. Smith made this statement at Oxford in 1914.
36. In a talk delivered at the National Convention for Teachers of English, published in Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (New York: Delacorte, 1969), Postman credited the phrase "crap detector" to Ernest Hemingway as a term describing the one thing necessary for good writing.
37. Anthony Kronman, *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 172–73.
38. Victor E. Ferrall Jr., *Liberal Arts on the Brink* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 8.
39. Bruce Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education* (1986), quoted in Francis Oakley, *Community of Learning: The American College and the Liberal Arts Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 51.
40. Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), ed. Samuel Lipman (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 5.
41. John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (1852), ed. Frank M. Turner (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 81.

42. My impression is at odds with that of Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), who estimate that today's college students, on average, spend only twelve hours per week studying (p. 69). Arum and Roksa suggest that students at highly selective colleges spend somewhat more—around fifteen hours. Other studies, such as that of Philip Babcock and Mindy Marks, summarized in *Leisure College USA: The Decline in Student Study Time* (Washington DC: American Enterprise Institute, 2010), conclude that study time has declined by roughly 50 percent over the half century since 1961. For a more nuanced view, see Alexander C. McCormick, "It's About Time: What to Make of Reported Declines in How Much College Students Study," *Liberal Education* 97, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 30–39 (published by the Association of American Colleges and Universities). McCormick calls attention to such factors as "efficiency gains due to new technologies" (by which he means word processing versus the longhand writing or mechanical typewriting of fifty years ago), as well as to the different meanings of "week" that students have in mind (some mean five days, others seven) in responding to survey questions about their study habits.
43. Owen Johnson, *Stover at Yale* (1912; Boston: Little, Brown, 1926), p. 234.

Chapter Two. Origins

1. Aristotle, *Politics*, Book 7; H. I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity* (New York: New American Library, 1964), p. 402; Oakley, *Community of Learning*, p. 18.
2. Morison, *Founding of Harvard*, p. 37.
3. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *The Life of Francis Higginson* (New York, 1891), pp. 11–12.
4. Morison, *Founding of Harvard*, pp. 80–81.
5. Frederick Rudolph, *The American College and University: A History* (1962) (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), p. 90, suggests that early American colleges failed to replicate this plan because they could not afford the cost of such elaborate construction.

6. Morison, *Founding of Harvard*, p. 82.
7. Alan Heimert, "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men," *Cambridge Review* 106 (November 1985): 177–82.
8. Jennifer Tomase, "Tale of John Harvard's Surviving Book," *Harvard University Gazette*, November 1, 2007.
9. Lawrence Cremin, *American Education: The Colonial Experience* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), pp. 214, 221.
10. Morison, *Founding of Harvard*, p. 249.
11. Jonathan Edwards, *Scientific and Philosophical Writings*, ed. Wallace E. Anderson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980), p. 306.
12. Newman, *The Idea of a University*, ed. Turner, p. 76; Edwards, *Scientific and Philosophical Writings*, p. 344. Frederick Barnard, quoted in Reuben, *Making of the Modern University*, p. 22.
13. Horatio Greenough, *Form and Function: Remarks on Art, Design, and Architecture*, ed. Harold A. Small (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1947), p. 74. The essays constituting this volume were originally published in 1853.
14. Morison, *Founding of Harvard*, p. 252. Daniel Coit Gilman, quoted in Veysey, *Emergence of the University*, p. 161.
15. Lewis, quoted by Bowen in his commencement address at Indiana University, May 6, 2011.
16. Jerome Karabel, *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), p. 51.
17. Quoted in James O. Freedman, *Liberal Education and the Public Interest* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2003), p. 107.
18. Newman, *Idea of a University*, ed. Turner, p. 83.
19. Oakley, *Community of Learning*, pp. 50–51.
20. Seneca, *Moral Epistles*, no. 88 ("On Liberal and Vocational Studies"), 3 vols., trans. Richard M. Gummere (Loeb Classical Library) (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1917–1925), 2:353–55.
21. Emerson, journal entry, April 20, 1834, in *Emerson in His Journals*, ed. Joel Porte (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 123.
22. Ascham, quoted in Morison, *Founding of Harvard*, p. 61; Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism*, p. 243. This number may be somewhat

misleading, since the range of ages contributing to the average was relatively wide. See James Morgan Hart, in Hofstadter and Smith, *Higher Education: A Documentary History*, 2:579. "Normal age" is Charles W. Eliot's phrase, in Hofstadter and Smith, eds., *Higher Education*, 2:705.

23. Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life*, p. 98; Emerson, journal entry, September 13, 1831, in Porte, ed., *Emerson in His Journals*, p. 80.
24. William G. Perry Jr., *Forms of Ethical and Intellectual Development in the College Years,* ed. L. Lee Knefelkamp (1970; San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), pp. xii, 3.
25. Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, 2 vols. (1702; Hartford, CT, 1853), 1:273, 260.
26. Perry, *Forms of Development*, p. 37.
27. John Davenport, *The Saint's Anchor-Hold* (London, 1682), p. 132. The concept of stereotype threat was introduced in 1995 by Claude M. Steele and Joshua Aronson in their article "Stereotype Threat and the Intellectual Test Performance of African Americans," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 69 (5): 797–811.
28. Weber, "Science as a Vocation" (1918) in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 136; Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (1918; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), pp. 80–81.
29. William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902; New York: Collier Books, 1973), p. 172.
30. Nate Kornell and Janet Metcalfe, "'Blockers' Do Not Block Recall during Tip-of-the-Tongue States," *Metacognition and Learning* 1 (2006): 248–61.
31. Janet Metcalfe, "Improving Student Learning: Empirical Findings," PowerPoint presentation, Columbia University Center for Teaching and Learning, January 29, 2009. "A mind must work to grow" is from C. W. Eliot, in Hofstadter and Smith, eds., *Higher Education*, 2:610. "Passive absorption" is quoted from John Dewey, in Donald Levine, *Powers of the Mind*, p. 81.
32. John Cotton, *A Treatise of the Covenant of Grace* (London, 1671), p. 154.

33. Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702), in Hofstadter and Smith, eds., *Higher Education*, 1:15.
34. Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850; New York: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 25; Newman, *Idea of a University*, ed. Turner, p. 77; Dewey, in *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, 2 vols., ed. John J. McDermott (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1973), 2:447; Perry, *Forms of Development*, ed. Knefelkamp, pp. xxxiii, 120. Writing in this tradition, Donald Levine, former dean of the college at the University of Chicago, defines a true college as "a kindred assemblage constituted by diversity of opinion" (*Powers of the Mind*, p. 67).
35. Jarrell, *Pictures from an Institution* (1952; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 82.
36. John S. Coolidge, *The Pauline Renaissance in England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 49–50; John Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life* (London, 1651), p. 156.
37. Interview with Yongfang Chen and Li Wan, "A True Liberal Arts Education," *InsideHigherEd.com*, October 16, 2009.
38. DuBois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (1940; New York: Schocken, 1968), pp. 38, 33.
39. Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life*, p. 200.
40. Robert Greene, quoted in Paul Seaver, *The Puritan Lectureships: The Politics of Religious Dissent, 1560–1662* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1970), p. 40.
41. Harry Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 4.
42. Rogers, in *The Colleges and the Public, 1787–1862*, ed. Theodore Rawson Crane (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1963), p. 47. For a searching treatment of Rogers's thought and career, see Philip Alexander, *A Widening Sphere: Evolving Cultures at MIT* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).
43. Santayana, *Character and Opinion in the United States* (1920; New York: W. W. Norton, 1967), p. 96.
44. Morison, *Founding of Harvard*, p. 85.

45. Franklin, "Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania" (1749) in *Benjamin Franklin: Representative Selections*, ed. Frank Luther Mott (New York: Hill and Wang, 1962), p. 206.
46. William G. Durden, "Reclaiming the Distinctiveness of American Higher Education," *Liberal Education* 93, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 40.

Chapter Three. From College to University

1. See James T. Axtell, "Dr. Wheelock's Little Red School," chap. 4 in *The European and the Indian: Essays in the Ethnohistory of Colonial America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).
2. Thomas Jefferson Wertenbaker, *Princeton: 1746–1896* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1946), p. 18.
3. Jefferson to Adams, in Cappon, ed., *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, p. 599.
4. Charles A. Brixted, *Five Years in an English University*, 2 vols. (New York, 1852), 1:106. Thanks to James O'Donnell for alerting me to this book. For the growth of colleges in the 1820s, see David B. Potts, *Liberal Education for a Land of Colleges: Yale's Reports of 1828* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 9.
5. Richard Hofstadter, *Academic Freedom in the Age of the College* (1955; repr. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1996), pp. 223–24.
6. Kamenetz, *DIYU*, p. 10.
7. Charles Sumner, quoted in David Donald, *Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 1961), p. 14; Adams, *Education*, pp. 54–55.
8. Bledstein, *Culture of Professionalism*, p. 229. Diary of Hugh Gwynn, 1850–51; coll. 298, folder 30 (manuscript collections, Wilson Library of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), p. 67.
9. Reuben, *Making of the Modern University* (1996), is a distinguished exception.
10. See Potts, *Liberal Education for a Land of Colleges*, pp. 16–19.
11. James McPherson, *The Abolitionist Legacy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 7.
12. Bowen et al., *Equity and Excellence*, p. 21.
13. Charles Dickens, *American Notes for General Circulation* (1842; London: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 77.

34. Andrew Dickson White, president of Cornell (1873), quoted in Bok, *Universities in the Marketplace*, p. 55; Bowen et al., *Equity and Excellence*, p. 171; Lewis, *Excellence without a Soul*, p. 252.
35. Christopher Jencks and David Riesman, *The Academic Revolution* (1968; New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2002), p. 243.
36. Bok, *Universities in the Marketplace*, p. 30.

Chapter Six. What Is to Be Done?

1. Zephyr Teachout, *Washington Post*, September 13, 2009. See also Sarah Lacy, "Peter Thiel: We're in a Bubble and It's Not the Internet. It's Higher Education," *TechCrunch*, April 10, 2011, www.techcrunch.com. (Thiel is cofounder of PayPal.)
2. Michael S. McPherson and Morton O. Schapiro, "The Future Economic Challenges for the Liberal Arts Colleges," in Koblik and Graubard, eds., *Distinctively American*, pp. 49–50.
3. *New York Times*, August 25, 2010.
4. Clark Kerr, "The American Mixture of Higher Education in Perspective: Four Dimensions," *Higher Education* 19 (1990): 1; American Council on Education, *Fact Book on Higher Education, 1986–1987* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), p. 57; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *120 Years of American Education: A Statistical Portrait* (Washington DC: U.S. Department of Education, 1993), table 24, pp. 76–77.
5. Arthur Levine, "Colleges and the Rebirth of the American Dream," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 11, 2010; Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson, *Crossing the Finish Line*, p. 30; Jane Wellman, *New York Times*, February 4, 2010; Sara Goldrick-Rab, "Following Their Every Move: An Investigation of Social-Class Differences in College Pathways," *Sociology of Education* 79, no. 1 (January 2006): 61–79.
6. Eugene Tobin, comments to the board of the Teagle Foundation (March 5, 2010), quoted by permission.
7. David Kirp, *Shakespeare, Einstein, and the Bottom Line: The Marketing of Higher Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 69.
8. Donoghue, *Last Professors*, p. xiv.

9. Diane Auer Jones, "Assessment Changes Online Teaching from an Art to a Science," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 6, 2011.
10. Over the last decade, the dollar amount of loans going to students enrolled in for-profit colleges has expanded by nearly 700 percent, from $4 billion in 2000 to $27 billion in 2010 (National Public Radio, *All Things Considered*, August 17, 2010). Some observers, noting the combination of increasing government scrutiny and growing public skepticism about the value of credentials earned from for-profit institutions, believe that this is a business headed for collapse. See Steve Eisman et al., "Subprime Goes to College," Market Folly, May 27, 2010, http://www.marketfolly.com/2010/05/steve-eisman-frontpoint-partners-ira.html.
11. W. Robert Connor and Cheryl Ching, "Can Learning Be Improved When Budgets Are in the Red?" *Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 25, 2010. For a cautionary tale of how the effort to measure educational "outcomes" has affected universities in Britain, see Stefan Collini, "From Robbins to McKinsey," *London Review of Books*, August 25, 2011. Francis Lieber, in Hofstadter and Smith, *American Higher Education*, 1:299. See chap. 1, n. 3.
12. Ticknor, *Remarks on Changes in Harvard University*, p. 35.
13. McCosh, in Hofstadter and Smith, *American Higher Education*, 2:723.
14. Perhaps the most persuasive critical voice in the debate is that of Diane Ravitch, who once supported NCLB but now calls it a "timetable for the destruction of public education." See Ravitch, "Obama's War on Schools," *Newsweek*, March 20, 2011.
15. Cotton Mather, in Hofstadter and Smith, *American Higher Education*, 1:16. Margery Foster, "*Out of Smalle Beginnings: An Economic History of Harvard College in the Puritan Period* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 105.
16. Dave Gershman, "Legislative Study Group Explores Idea of Privatizing the University of Michigan," *Ann Arbor News*, December 18, 2008.
17. For an attempt to measure student learning at seventeen colleges and universities, see the Wabash National Study, 2006–2009, at http://

www.liberalarts.wabash.edu/study-research/. On October 26, 2009, *Newsweek* ran a cover story by Senator Lamar Alexander of Tennessee (a former university president and secretary of education), entitled "Why College Should Take Only Three Years." The same idea had been put forward more than one hundred years earlier by, among others, William James, "The Proposed Shortening of the College Course," *Harvard Monthly* 11 (1891).

18. "Board Responsibility for the Oversight of Educational Quality," a report issued March 17, 2011, by the Association of Governing Boards, www.agb.org. See also José A. Cabranes, "Myth and Reality of University Trusteeship in the Post-Enron Era," *Fordham Law Review* 76, no. 2 (November 2007): 955–79.
19. Christopher Jencks, "The Graduation Gap," *American Prospect*, November 18, 2009.
20. Ronald G. Ehrenberg, "How Governments Can Improve Access to College," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 6, 2007; Donald Heller, "A Bold Proposal: Increasing College Access without Spending More Money," *Crosstalk*, Fall 2004.
21. See, for instance, Charles Murray, "Intelligence and College," *National Affairs* (Fall 2009): 95–106, who states with remarkable confidence that "only a small minority of high-school graduates have the intelligence to succeed in college."
22. Eliot, in Hofstadter and Smith, *American Higher Education*, 2:604.
23. An exemplary college-community partnership is the Double Discovery Center, founded at Columbia in the 1960s by students and faculty. Through volunteers who are mainly college students, DDC provides over one thousand local middle and high schoolers with tutoring and mentoring, in order to improve their chances of becoming first in their families to attend college. See http://www.columbia.edu/cu/college/ddc/.
24. See Christopher Avery and Thomas J. Kane, "Student Perceptions of College Opportunities: The Boston COACH Program," in *College Choices: The Economics of Where to Go, When to Go, and How to Pay for It*, ed. Caroline M. Hoxby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). For a summary of recommendations to clarify and simplify

the process of applying for financial aid, see Michael S. McPherson and Sandy Baum, "Fulfilling the Commitment: Recommendations for Reforming Federal Student Aid," College Board, 2009, www.collegeboard.com/rethinkingstudentaid.

25. Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson, *Crossing the Finish Line*, pp. 204, 219.
26. *New York Times*, April 26, 2009.
27. Emerson, journal entry, September 14, 1839, in Porte, ed., *Emerson in his Journals*, p. 223.
28. Richard L. Morrill, *Strategic Leadership: Integrating Strategy and Leadership in Colleges and Universities* (Westport, CT: American Council on Education/Praeger, 2007), p. 26.
29. See Open Learning Initiative, http://oli.web.cmu.edu/openlearning/, which offers courses in statistics, biochemistry, economics, and other subjects.
30. One interesting experiment is "University of the People," a global online university that, up to now, has charged no tuition and minimal processing and examination fees. www.uopeople.org.
31. Cathy Davidson, *Now You See It: How the Brain Science of Attention Will Transform the Way We Live, Work, and Learn* (New York: Viking, 2011). Davidson's vision reminds me of something I heard twenty-five years ago from a job candidate during an interview for an English department teaching position. When asked what he would teach in a course on American poetry, he replied that he preferred the "inductive syllabus"—by which he meant that rather than assigning readings he would ask students to consult some poetry anthologies in the library, and, after they had leafed through them for a bit, he would have them nominate their favorite poems, put the nominees to a class vote, and the winners would constitute the course reading list.
32. Michael Schudson et al., "General Education in the 21st Century: A Report of the University of California Commission on Undergraduate Education," Center for Studies in Higher Education, April 2007, www.cshe.berkeley.edu.
33. For an account of Mazur's practice, see Derek Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn*

and Why They Should Be Learning More (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 132–34. For an innovative method of teaching history, whereby students, having read relevant primary and secondary texts, adopt the roles of historical figures and debate contentious issues from the trial of Socrates or Galileo, to the partition of India or Palestine, see Mark Carnes, "Inciting Speech," *Change* (March–April 2005): 6–11. Carnes calls his teaching method "Reacting to the Past."

34. Kronman calls it the "research ideal" (*Education's End*, chap. 3); Menand writes of the decline of general education in favor of "credentialization and specialization" (*Marketplace of Ideas*, p. 101); Hacker and Dreifus speak of "knowledge that professors create for other professors" and of faculty inflicting their "microspecialties" on defenseless undergraduates (*Higher Education?*, p. 85).
35. Emerson, quoted in Bledstein, *Culture of Professionalism*, p. 265.
36. Carol Geary Schneider, "Transformative Learning—Mine and Theirs," in *Literary Study, Measurement, and the Sublime: Disciplinary Assessment*, ed. Donna Heiland and Laura J. Rosenthal (New York: Teagle Foundation, 2011), p. 28.
37. Ronald G. Ehrenberg, Harriet Zuckerman, Jeffrey A. Groen, and Sharon M. Brucker, *Educating Scholars: Doctoral Education in the Humanities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 260.
38. Edward J. Eckenfels, *Doctors Serving People: Restoring Humanism to Medicine Through Student Community Service* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), p. 5.
39. Robert Maynard Hutchins, *The Higher Learning in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1936), p. 115.
40. Quoted in Mark Schwehn, *Exiles from Eden: Religion and the Academic Vocation in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 70.
41. Roald Hoffmann, "Research Strategy: Teach," *American Scientist* 84 (1996): 20–22. See also David F. Feldon et al., "Graduate Students' Teaching Experiences Improve Their Methodological Research Skills," *Science* 333, no. 6045 (August 19, 2011): 1037–39.

42. I have put forward this suggestion in greater detail in "What Should PhD Mean?" *PMLA* 115 (2000): 1205–9.
43. Donald I. Finkel, *Teaching with Your Mouth Shut* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2000).
44. John Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life*, p. 119.
45. Emerson, *The American Scholar* (1837), in *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Stephen Whicher (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1957), p. 69.
46. Leon Botstein, "Con Ed," *New Republic*, November, 6, 2009; Debra Satz and Rob Reich, "The Liberal Reach," *Dissent* (Winter 2004): 72–75.
47. These words were spoken by Mark DeFusco, former director of the University of Phoenix, on the PBS *Frontline* report, "College Inc.," broadcast May 4, 2010. I owe the reference to an unpublished paper by Christine Smallwood, "What Makes Education So Special: For-Profit Colleges and American Higher Education," Columbia University, spring 2010.
48. Project Pericles, www.projectpericles.org.
49. Noah Porter, *American Colleges and the American Public* (1870), in Cohen, ed., *Education in the United States*, 3:1475; Peter Pouncey, *Rules for Old Men Waiting* (New York: Random House, 2005), pp. 105–6.
50. Trilling, "The America of John Dos Passos," in *The Moral Obligation to be Intelligent: Selected Essays of Lionel Trilling*, ed. Leon Wieseltier (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000), pp. 6–7.