

From Liberal Education To Job Training

WHAT'S COLLEGE FOR?

The Struggle to Define American Higher Education

By Zachary Karabell

The Washington Post - Washington, D.C.

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Date: Oct 25, 1998

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It has been more than a decade since Allan Bloom launched the conservative assault on the academy in *The Closing of the American Mind*. In the intervening years, media pundits, politicians and the professorate have been deeply engaged in ideological debates about the state of American higher education. In this latest foray in the "culture wars," Zachary Karabell looks at how different groups answer the basic question "What's college for?" After examining the contradictory views of students, parents, professors, administrators and legislators, Karabell concludes that recent trends making college more universally accessible have rendered the ideological arguments of the recent past irrelevant. The massive influx of non-traditional students and the growing proportion of part-time faculty have simply overwhelmed traditional notions of the college experience.

Karabell peels away the myths surrounding the college experience and the romantic images associated with higher learning that persist in the popular mind, to reveal the hard realities on campus. There may have been a time when students saw college as a chance to escape the demands of everyday life and pursue learning for its own sake, but a majority of today's students see college as their best chance to obtain a better job. The older image might still apply to the top 100 select colleges and universities, but most students today are more worried about staying in college than getting in, and growing numbers of them are holding down jobs to pay for their education. These students approach higher education as consumers rather than as members of a community of learning.

This is especially true for the growing ranks of community college students. Though their professors usually resist the intrusion of market influences in the groves of academe, students "shape what goes on in the classroom," and, according to Karabell, their power is growing. The result has been a "dumbing down" of courses through the reduction of reading, writing and academic rigor. Process and personal opinion have replaced challenging content and serious analysis. Having paid for their classes, students expect their degree, and the deans commonly oblige complaining students. "At school after school," Karabell concludes, "commodification trumps education."

Karabell is even more critical of an isolated professorate that collectively clings to an outdated model of scholarship. Innovative research often enhances good teaching, but too many faculty, bolstered by their graduate training and professional academic organizations, pursue specialized, often arcane, research topics at the expense of the public good. Wielding academic jargon in order to advance field-specific theories, modern scholars rarely communicate beyond their department, let alone to the broader public, or even the other side of campus.

Such scholarly efforts, according to Karabell, are best left to select research universities. Instead, Karabell finds that American higher education is rife with duplicated research and a proliferation of academic journals attracting ever-smaller audiences. All the while, graduate students and adjuncts are responsible for

a larger share of the teaching load that includes a greater number of students who are increasingly unprepared to do college-level work.

This is not a recipe for success, and the formula is preserved by a tenure system that gives a blind eye to faculty incompetence and ignores the economic realities of the modern college. The dominance of the research-scholar is ensured by the professional insecurities and institutional pressures felt throughout the faculty. As a result, "the university is a deeply conservative place," according to Karabell, "not ideologically conservative" but "institutionally conservative." By holding the college hostage to a narrow and impractical standard of scholarship, the professors and their organizations undermine the strength of higher learning in America: its variety. He sees tenure both as the primary symptom of what is wrong with the colleges, and as an opportunity for genuine reform. Such change will occur only after individual institutions, departments and faculty create a tenure system for rewarding innovative teaching and community service as well as research.

Karabell aims to "spur a complacent, troubled profession to apply its intellectual energies" to solving the problems of American higher education, but most professional academics will find his insights undistinguished and his analysis somewhat superficial. The parallel he describes between medieval guilds and modern academic organizations obscures as much as it reveals, as does his comparison of professors to monks. Much of his book is grounded in perceptions from his experience and that of countless others he interviewed. These perceptions, however, are difficult to quantify or assess, and he often merely ends up replacing an older conventional wisdom for a more recent version.

What's College For? reads like a summary of recent headline stories, and maintains an easy, almost conversational tone. Though Karabell likely will miss the mark in his effort to mobilize reform within the academy, his book serves as a useful road map for a general understanding of the struggle to define American higher education today.