

An orange braided tassel hangs vertically along the left edge of the page. It features a gold-colored metal cap with a textured, knitted top and a long, dense fringe of orange threads.

ANDREW DELBANCO

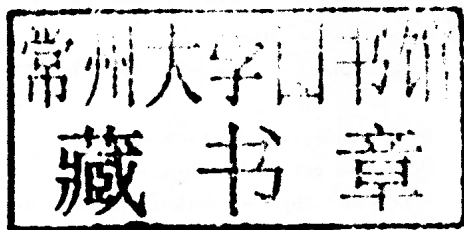
# COLLEGE

WHAT IT WAS, IS,  
AND SHOULD BE

ANDREW DELBANCO

# COLLEGE

What It Was, Is, and Should Be



PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

Princeton and Oxford

Copyright © 2012 by Princeton University Press

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

All Rights Reserved

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

COLLEGE

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

To my students

## PREFACE

When colleagues heard that I was writing a book about college, they would sometimes ask me why. It seemed to me a surprising question, like asking a doctor why she is interested in hospitals and patients, or an architect why he cares about buildings and the people who live or work in them. It is true that most books on this subject are written by scholars who study it as a professional specialty, or by retired presidents who have led one kind of academic institution or another. So why would a professor of American literature distract himself with it? Occasionally, the question even carried a hint of suspicion or disapproval, as if I were losing interest in my “field.”

I have two answers, which seem worth stating here at the outset of the book that I ended up writing. The first can be stated very briefly. Undergraduate education—how its purposes and practices have been expressed and enacted—is a fascinating part of America’s history. I hope this book will convey some sense of that fascination.

The second answer is a little more extended, and requires a story. Soon after I arrived at Columbia University twenty-six years ago, a meeting of the college faculty was called to discuss the latest budget crisis. (There is always a crisis—but this one was especially severe.) At that meeting, the president of the university announced that the deficit in the budget of the arts and sciences division, of which the undergraduate college is a main part, was growing so rapidly that he had no choice but to urge an end to Columbia's policy of "need-blind admissions" in order to rein in expenditures on financial aid. As a new arrival, I was unfamiliar with most of my new colleagues, but I recognized a number of distinguished faculty in the room. One by one, they rose in protest. They said that the president's proposal would not stand. They said that the policy of need-blind admissions expressed a basic value: that our college must be open to any qualified applicant regardless of financial means. A motion was made, and passed by acclamation, that the faculty would give back a percentage of its scheduled salary raise to be paid into the pool of funds reserved for financial aid. The president retreated, and the need-blind admissions policy was retained.

Of course, I voted yes. Like Ishmael in *Moby-Dick*, "I was one of that crew; my shouts had gone up with the rest; my oath had been welded with theirs." And, like Ishmael vowing to join the hunt for the white whale, I had no idea of what I was saying. On my way across campus after the meeting, I confessed to myself that need-blind admissions, though it sounded like justice and fairness and goodness itself, was for me just a slogan. I had no grasp of what it meant. Where did the idea come from? Who decides who needs what? What does the policy cost? How is it paid for?



I don't think my ignorance was unusual. Faculty often know next to nothing about how the institutions in which they work became what they are, how they are organized, where the lines of authority begin and end, or just about anything else outside their home department or division. In some ways, this disconnectedness is a good thing. It allows the freedom to concentrate on whatever subject stirs the passion and made academic work exciting in the first place. But in other ways it is a problem, because it hinders faculty from participating in the life of their college or university as informed citizens.

In the years following that meeting, I undertook to educate myself about American higher education so I could better understand certain central questions—not just about admissions and financial aid, but about curriculum, teaching techniques, the financial structure of academic institutions, and, more generally, the premises and purposes of college education. In so doing, I followed the principle that governs my own teaching—that in order to comprehend problems of the present, it is helpful to know something about the past. After a while, I organized a colloquium for graduate students—future faculty—to discuss the history, current state, and prospects for colleges and universities in the United States. With my colleague Roger Lehecka, former Columbia College dean of students, I also began to teach a course for undergraduates about equity and access in American higher education. Eventually, when I felt I had become reasonably informed about these issues, I began to write about them. This book is the result.

I hope it will be a useful book not only for present and future college faculty, but for present and future college students as well. And at a time when Americans are bombarded with sound-

Preface

bites and half-truths about our colleges and universities—about their high cost, low student achievement, (putatively) pampered faculty, and so on—I also have had a broader audience in mind. It's my hope that anyone concerned with what it means, and what it takes, to educate citizens in our republic will find some interest here too.

New York City  
September 2011

# COLLEGE

# CONTENTS

	Preface	<i>xi</i>
	Introduction	<i>1</i>
ONE	What Is College For?	<i>9</i>
TWO	Origins	<i>36</i>
THREE	From College to University	<i>67</i>
FOUR	Who Went? Who Goes? Who Pays?	<i>102</i>
FIVE	Brave New World	<i>125</i>
SIX	What Is to Be Done?	<i>150</i>
	Acknowledgments	<i>179</i>
	Notes	<i>183</i>
	Index	<i>215</i>

# 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

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.”<sup>3</sup> 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.”<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup>

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