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Lagemann, E. C., & Lewis, H. (Eds.). (2012). *What is college for? The public purpose of higher education*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press. 159 pp.

Review by Kyle Cecil

The purposes of higher education have been and will be forever debated. This is an evolutionary reality of higher education, as well as an important means by which change in the system of higher education takes place. In this book, Lagemann and Lewis bring together a diverse group of scholars from various higher education institutions, disciplines, and areas of professional responsibility to discuss this reality. That these scholars represent fields ranging from social sciences to natural sciences as well as administration reflects sound judgment exercised by the editors to ensure the discussion on the public purpose of higher education is viewed from different lenses. This diversity among the authors of the book chapters in their associations with higher education lends itself to an appreciation of the complexity within which a consideration of this important question lies.

The central thesis of this book is that one should not, likely cannot, reduce the purpose of higher education to any single, uniform, easily measured goal. However, as the authors argue, that is not to say that there should not exist among both academe and the public a broad unifying concept of higher education and its role in promoting the public good. In making this assertion, very little of the evidence provided by the authors is empirical, but this is understandable given that the conception of social good is a very personal and value-laden ideal.

I found it useful that the book only briefly covers the standard economic data supporting the value of higher education. Volumes of literature exist that provide this information. The authors of this volume spend considerable time and do an admirable job describing their conception of higher education for the public good from the perspective of one's own responsibility and agency. The authors submit that regardless of whether one is trained as a biologist, psychologist, or engineer, the role of higher education is to nurture the idea that one's skills are used within a public sphere. Consequently, it is necessary that higher education foster thoughtful judgment and action among individuals.

The book begins with a discussion of renewing the civic mission of higher education. The key assertion in this part of the text is that thoughtful judgment and action, as noted above, is part of a process of reflection with many facets. In the first chapter, Lagemann and Lewis describe how they feel the civic purpose of higher education is tied to the future of citizenship in America and beyond. Too often people acquire values based solely on their own personal welfare: If it's good for me, it's a good thing. Recognition of the dangers in such values underlies the contention that higher education has strayed too far toward a market-driven environment in which the most important purpose of a college degree is personal economic gain. It would be naïve to argue that personal economic stability is not important. One can gain this type of economic security, but it does not remove the responsibility to execute one's skills in a manner that ultimately benefits not only oneself but society as well. Lagemann and Lewis state that during the formidable college years, higher education across the spectrum of institutions and disciplines needs to promote and help develop in students this sense of responsibility and agency.

A chapter on anti-intellectualism provides a backdrop to illuminate the idea that tensions constantly exist between members of society based on each individual's values and priorities and that one's values and priorities influence one's conception of knowledge. This influence affects perceptions of not only what constitutes knowledge but how it is generated, conceived, and applied. In keeping with the basic premise of this book, the chapter by Douglas Taylor supports the idea that if one has developed the skills of thoughtful reflection, sensible decisions will result. He does quite often, however, allude to the idea of legitimacy, specifically referring to issues of scientific debate, and takes a positivist stance that scientific findings should be unconditionally accepted regardless of personal long-held beliefs. This is extremely difficult to achieve since all personal decisions are embedded within a social framework. This conundrum highlights one of the important ideas that this book tries to illuminate, which is the tension that results because higher education is pressed to develop a population that, while skilled and literate, is also aware of and responsive to social implications of decisions.

Elaine Hansen, a professor and president emeritus of a liberal arts college, writes a chapter dealing with liberal arts, liberal arts colleges, and liberated consumers. As Hansen notes, liberal arts colleges have long been identified with practicing a model of higher education that places emphasis on the development of critical thinking skills tied to personal responsibility and agency. They do so through a number of common factors such as small classroom size, residential experiences, and a unified value-laden aspect of mission. Research supports the effectiveness of these characteristics. Critics, however, contend that traits characterizing these colleges are not scalable to other higher education settings and therefore cannot be replicated as "best practice," if indeed such a concept even exists. Hansen points out that just as liberal arts colleges strive to develop in individuals capacities needed to be literate, thoughtful, and moral citizens, other higher education institutions can do so as well. They will, however, seek these goals through methods that are, pedagogically and otherwise, simply different. As do other contributors in this text, Hansen challenges the reader to consider how higher education can, regardless of type or setting, cultivate the development of a thoughtful, moral individual exercising agency in regard to society.

In chapter 4, scholars Paul Atwell and David Levine describe how the demographics of those seeking higher education have changed over the past several decades. The authors preface their discussion with the realization that indeed all majors are ultimately career-oriented. Again, it would be naïve to claim that an individual pursues higher education simply from intellectual curiosity. A college degree, from anywhere, is an expensive commitment. There must be some sort of payoff for the commitment in terms of both time and money that the students and their families make. Atwell and Levine do a commendable job of raising issues related to the changing demographics of students and what this means for pedagogy, curriculum, and policy. This is vitally important when we consider the role of any given institution in terms of its contributions to the public good. Community colleges contribute to the social good in ways that might in one sense be similar to those found in research-extensive institutions but are in many respects quite different. This is not to imply that the differences make institutions "better" or "worse"; their offerings are simply different, based on mission, role, and needs of the student body.

Author William Sullivan contributes a chapter dealing with professional education and an alignment to public purpose. Sullivan never completely defines the term professional education, and at times this omission makes it difficult to fully understand the unit of analysis for his arguments. As one aspect of delineating the term, Sullivan speaks toward the role that professional schools (as a reader I inferred that this meant graduate programs) play in aligning their courses of study to, among others, civic ends. Faculty of higher education institutions are typically graduates of programs offering advanced degrees, mostly master's degrees and doctorates.

The influence that these programs have on the future professoriate is consequently extensive. Sullivan asserts that because of this, coherent professional identities must include a full comprehension of the civic meaning of the profession. This chapter rests heavily on the idea that professional schools may be best positioned to cultivate the civic responsibility of professionals. One could argue that if higher education does not spend concerted effort cultivating these skills prior to graduate school, we have lost an opportunity to do so with millions of undergraduates.

The last chapter is closely tied to the preceding chapter and covers graduate education as defined. Catherine Stimpson provides a brief history of graduate education and rightly asserts that graduate schools have typically been bastions of detached expertise. This background is important because historically, the advanced technical expertise bestowed by a graduate school education has been considered a de facto civic good. It can be argued that there is a civic good to any profession if one looks closely enough. However, as Stimpson suggests, graduate education must do a much better job of embedding what these schools do into complex social realities and facilitating the immersion of the students' technical knowledge into social contexts. Simply put, Stimpson states that this synthesis can be achieved through an increased emphasis on engagement. Lastly, Stimpson provides strategies for making graduate education more transparent to the general public and discusses how this would help to reform and improve graduate education across the country.

The book does not end with a concluding chapter, a fact the editors make note of at the beginning of the text. I think such a chapter would have proved useful, but, as the editors suggest at the beginning, the idea of this book was not to be prescriptive per se regarding higher education and the public good. Rather, the editors wanted to raise awareness of the questions that must be considered in order for one to frame an understanding of the topic and move forward with improving this condition.

Serving the practical needs of the economy by educating the workforce is indeed an important role for higher education. More significant, however, could be the larger purpose of higher education in unleashing human capital in all aspects of human endeavor to move our society forward. There is a continued and persistent demand to alter the relationship between higher education and society as the needs of society change based on contemporary social, economic, or value adjustments. More than a century ago, John Dewey challenged members of the educational community to examine the role and involvement of education in the betterment of the community, through both philosophy and practical example. His challenge is as pertinent to higher education today as it was nearly 100 years ago.

About the Reviewer

Kyle Cecil is an extension educator at University of Illinois Cooperative Extension at Champaign-Urbana, Illinois. His research focuses on the social responsibility of higher education. Cecil earned his bachelor's and master's degrees from Western Illinois University and his Ed.D. from the University of Illinois.