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## The State of Higher Education: Linking the Past and Present

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## The State of Higher Education: Linking the Past and Present

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*The state of higher education: Linking the past and present*Jose Arauz<sup>1</sup>

To understand the present state of higher education, it is essential to understand its past. Andrew Delbanco's recent publication, *College: What it was, is, and should be*, chronicles the origins of higher education in America up to its present and progressively controversial state. Regrettably, contemporary education is increasingly characterized by rising tuition costs and budgetary reductions that negatively impact the academic experience for instructors and students alike. Delbanco (2012), a literature professor and Chair of American Studies at Columbia University, explores the current commercialization of higher education and the resulting consequences on the undergraduate populations that universities purport to serve. The author details the fundamental aims of college, its beginnings in Puritan society, and the gradual progression from religious colleges to universities esteeming research pursuits and monetary status. The purpose of the book is to explore the fragmented system of higher education and offer viable solutions to addressing its weaknesses. For example, in the opening chapter, Delbanco argues the true goal of attaining a college education is not based on monetary incentives, but rather on attaining knowledge that benefits the individual "in both calculable and incalculable ways" (Delbanco, 2012, p. 28). By utilizing historical comparisons, the author creates a compelling narrative that describes how universities gradually lost sight of the strict, Puritan ideals that merged the attainment of knowledge with development of character and moral integrity.

Further, the text touches upon the rising division between the privileged few and the majority, and the unique challenges facing the nation's undergraduate population. The latter is illustrated by the struggling economy and budgetary constraints that threaten the ability of millions to pursue or continue schooling past the secondary level. Additionally, Delbanco explores the decline of traditional universities and the rise of for-profit institutions who "at best, offer narrow training in vocational subjects" and at "worst, take money in exchange for worthless credentials" (Delbanco, 2012, p. 154). Accordingly, the book is a necessary addition for those interested in the current context of education. This context encompasses the economic aspects of education. For instance, how do "reduced library hours, cutbacks in advising, remedial tutoring" and instruction by "underpaid, overworked faculty" (Delbanco, 2012, p. 123) impact minority students and the economically disadvantaged?

Perhaps the biggest strength of the text is Delbanco's talent to draw upon his literary background and utilize numerous quotations from historical and present-day public figures to deliver an effective argument against the commercialization of higher education. In its opening pages, before the preface, introduction, and subsequent chapters, the text features the following statement by W.E.B. DuBois (1903): 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. Thus, Delbanco investigates the origins of University life in America as founded

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by Puritan idealists, and argues that these influences are often incorrectly disregarded by today's educators. These clerical instructors deemed college not as a "road to wealth or as a screening service for a social club" but rather as a "training ground for pastors, teachers, and more broadly, public servants" (Delbanco, 2012, p. 65). Puritan academic values stressed the development of character alongside the attainment of knowledge; in contemporary times, the emphasis appears to be placed on wealth and the research prominence of universities. Thus, in arguing for the importance of earlier teaching approaches, the author illustrates the strengths of past educational methods and the flaws of present approaches.

Most notably, the book covers an important issue, meritocracy. As scholarship funds are increasingly awarded to those who achieve rather than those who need, the author openly questions the practice and its effect on those unable to afford SAT prep courses and expensive tutors: America's economically disadvantaged students. Having overcome the challenges associated with low socio-economic status, these aspiring applicants encounter questionable admission methods biased towards the privileged few. Accordingly, the effectiveness of the writer's ability to expose and critically analyze higher education is both exemplary and impressive.

The quality of Delbanco's writing and use of historical data highlight the impact of the changing educational landscape on college students. Though certain sections are trite and tedious to read, Delbanco's investigative efforts allow the author to achieve his objective of exposing a broken system. Further, the book provides a beneficial framework to addressing the fragile state of higher education. Ultimately, Delbanco sets up an important question: what is to be done? For readers seeking the answer, the present work offers the perfect opportunity to explore the origins of education and its controversial progression throughout American history.

## **Reference**

Delbanco, A. (2012) *College: What it was, is, and should be*. Princeton, N.J.