

What Does It Mean to Be an Educated Person Today?

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A quick glance at the polls seems to suggest exactly what the public wants from higher education—get graduates ready for jobs. According to a 2014 Gallup survey, nearly seven in ten Americans say that “the percentage of graduates who are able to get a good job” is one of their top criteria for judging the quality of a college or university.

But what, precisely, are people calling for when they voice sentiments like these? Do they want colleges and universities to reshape their programs to match the job market? Do they see any value to study and learning that doesn’t have a clear-cut connection to the student’s future line of employment?

To shed light on these questions, three nonpartisan organizations—the National Issues Forums Institute, American Commonwealth Partnership, and The Democracy Commitment—joined forces in 2012 to organize more than 125 public forums in twenty-two states. The topic was the future of higher education, and between 2012 and 2014, students, parents, professors, employers, and others gathered in libraries, schools, clubs, and on campuses to look at competing missions for the nation’s colleges and universities and to think about the benefits and trade-offs of each.

A MORE NUANCED PUBLIC VIEW

Overall, the forums suggest that public thinking about higher education is considerably more aspirational and nuanced than polls sometimes suggest. Moreover, as documented in a Kettering Foundation report, *Divided We Fail: Why It’s Time for a Broader, More Inclusive Conversation on the Future of Higher Education*, the forums show convincingly that a broad swath of Americans con-

tinues to hold “a rich, expansive, vivid—perhaps even idealistic—view of what higher education should be.”

At the same time, the forums reveal a potentially troublesome gap between the way policy makers and more typical Americans think and talk about higher education. Based on the forums, people outside leadership circles appear only barely aware of the historic changes occurring in higher education today. Few seem to be closely following front-burner debates over issues like outcomes-based funding and competency-based education. Many are just starting to think through what values and priorities in higher education are most important to them.

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SO WHO CAME TO THE FORUMS?

It is essential to acknowledge at the outset that the people who attended the forums in 2012–2014 were not a representative sample of the American public. They were a diverse group of individuals with enough interest in higher education to come to a meeting to talk about it. Moreover, by attending the forums, these people did something that is quite unusual—they invested some ninety minutes or more weighing different ideas about higher education’s role and exchanging views on the subject.

Most of the participants were college graduates, and more than four in ten were students. Many began their deliberations by

referring to higher education's impact on their own lives. Older participants often explained how their college experiences had changed their perspective on the world, even though they had completed their studies decades earlier.

To capture the gist of the discussions, representatives of the National Issues Forums Institute and the Kettering Foundation observed a number of forums and reviewed transcripts and moderator reports. They also examined more than 1,200 questionnaires returned by participants after the forum discussions. A detailed summary of what took place in the forums, *Divided We Fail* is available free of charge at <https://www.kettering.org/wp-content/uploads/PA-KF-Divided-We-Fail-Final.pdf>. Below are some of the major themes emerging from the forums.

THE VALUE OF CHALLENGING, WIDE-RANGING STUDY

As a starting point for the discussion, forum materials offered three broad goals for higher education's future: (1) emphasizing science and technology to help the economy; (2) offering students a rich, broad education accentuating values such as responsibility, integrity, and cooperation; and (3) expanding opportunity by helping more students attend college and graduate. Most participants saw important benefits in all three, and much of the discussion centered on whether higher education could do justice to all of them and what kinds of trade-offs were acceptable if it could not.

As they wrestled with these dilemmas, the participants often returned to one central question: What does it mean to be "an educated person" today? And in forums across the country—on campuses and off—participants repeatedly stressed their conviction that a well-educated individual is someone who has studied broadly and been exposed to a wide range of ideas and viewpoints.

At Kansas State University, one woman put it this way: "Granted, I'm biased towards the liberal arts, but if you have a higher education background, period, you've had opportunity to be exposed to different cultures, different lifestyles, different religions, different belief systems, and you have a heart. . . and a mind that are both opened. . . I think that's what education does for you."

A senior citizen attending a book club forum in Maryland talked about the importance of a broad and varied education in preparing the nation's leaders: "[It] used to be the kind of thing that created our thinkers and our leaders and our managers, because they would have that broad array of courses and ideas and cultures . . . The thinkers are the people [who] are going to do the kinds of things that build communities and make our lives [better]. . ."

Hardly anyone in the forums discounted higher education's role in preparing students for work after college, and students (and parents) often talked about the tensions in their own minds between the value and attraction of broader study versus the need to compete for jobs in a tough, exacting economy. Even so, many participants seemed to sense that something valuable was being lost with the increasing focus on jobs. "Thinking about

college solely [as career preparation]," a New Mexico woman said, "just makes you a resource to be optimized by society, rather than to be a real person and a free thinker."

Among those who returned post-forum questionnaires, the overwhelming majority agreed that college should be "where students learn to develop the ability to think critically by studying a rich curriculum that includes history, art and literature, government, economics, and philosophy." In fact, more than half indicated that they "strongly" agreed with this idea.

Moreover, most people in the forums seemed to value both a rich course of classroom study and a diversity of learning experiences. Among those returning questionnaires, solid majorities said "internships, community service, and campus projects that teach problem-solving skills" were also worthwhile parts of the college experience.

A SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT TAKE ON STEM

In recent years, a number of studies and reports have underscored the country's need for more college graduates with degrees in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields. Most forum participants seemed well aware of this advice, and in the follow-up question-



naires, strong majorities agreed that “our country’s long-term prosperity heavily depends on educating more students” in STEM.

But the discussions on STEM also contained a caveat. Participants frequently warned of the dangers in STEM education that is too narrow. Many worried that graduating legions of students whose college work consisted exclusively of engineering, math, or science courses would undercut American competitiveness—not enhance it. Many reiterated their belief that invention and creativity emerge when people have a wide-ranging education, not when students devote themselves single-mindedly to a specific field.

“Innovation is the strength of the United States in science and technology,” one woman explained. “That means a broadly educated and experienced person. . . . They need to be very good at their technology or science, but [they need more than that], or we’re going to be another China. They’re very good at technology. They’re not very good at innovation. That’s why they send their students here.”

A Kansas professor made a similar point: “I think it’s great to encourage mathematical and science education—and I think we need more of it, and if there’s stuff we can do, I’m all for it. [But I have] always thought [that] higher education—whether you majored in chemistry or art history or business or whatever—it taught you how to learn, and so if there were shifts in the economy, you learned how to learn the new thing. . . . Science [and] math [are] super important. We should encourage more of it, not less of it. . . . People in the arts should learn how to do calculus. . . . But if higher education becomes job training, we’re all in trouble.”

In Tennessee, a local employer made a similar point. Her company, she explained, was on the hunt for employees with work

skills in technology and engineering, but with broader and deeper capacities as well: “We’re really looking for people in the shop who are well trained and can think logically.”

A MEANDERING DISCUSSION OF COSTS

With costs in the headlines—and with about four in ten forum participants currently in college—it’s hardly surprising that worries about tuition and student debt would surface. Many participants told stories about their own or someone else’s financial struggles—anecdotes that were specific and heartfelt. Yet, few seemed to have thought much about why costs might be rising, and even fewer seemed on top of the contentious policy debates over how to control them.

From time to time, a participant would question whether the country and its taxpayers place enough “value” on higher education. Others zeroed in on solving individual problems such as how and where students could find scholarships. But when the conversation turned to more systemic questions, the deliberations often foundered and became unfocused.

AN OUTMODED DEFINITION OF “COLLEGE”

For most participants, the word “college” meant a traditional four-year residential program catering primarily to eighteen- to twenty-five-year-old students. Few mentioned community colleges initially, even though discussion materials specifically referred to them. Only a handful brought up older or nontraditional students. Nearly all seemed to understand that the US higher education system is diverse, containing many different types of institutions. Still, most of the discussion revolved around four-year college programs, with some participants pointing out that high school graduates who are not academically prepared for college or oriented toward tra-

ditional college coursework could benefit from a more diverse set of options.

It was evident that many people in the forums had thought extensively about how going to college (or not being able to go to college) affects individuals—themselves, people they knew, people they taught, people they hired, people they worked with. It was also evident, as some people freely admitted, that thinking seriously about the role and direction of the higher education system as a whole was new territory for them.

Overall, the forums showed that even well-educated, motivated, and interested Americans have much to learn about and think about when considering higher education’s future. But the forums also showed that many members of the public have ideals, concerns, and convictions about higher education that should be weighed as part of national and state policy making.

TOP-DOWN CHANGE OR A BROADER DISCUSSION?

The question the country faces now is whether higher education will be reshaped from the top down—with elected officials and higher education leaders and experts advancing changes and adopting solutions based on their own visions, values, and assumptions—or whether they expand their deliberations and give Americans outside their circles a meaningful chance to think seriously about what the United States needs and expects from higher education. ■

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