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## Education for the Common Good

The goal of education needs to be more than individual success.

By Marcus Peter Ford

How would a university devoted to the common good differ from one dedicated to promoting individual success? To begin to answer this question, and to create such a university, we must take seriously the greatest threat to our common good: human-caused environmental disruption. Our common good as Americans, and as a species, is intimately connected with what is good for the entire biosphere.

According to the best scientists, the planet is on track to be 4°C warmer by century's end. Extreme heat waves, declining global food stocks, loss of ecosystems and biodiversity, life-threatening sea-level rise, and mass social instability are likely results of such climate change.

A university committed to the common good must begin by asking these questions: What should an educated person know at this point in human history, when the oceans are rapidly approaching levels of acidity not seen in 20 million years, when species are going extinct at a rate that is at least one thousand times faster than the normal background rate and perhaps is closer to ten thousand times faster, and when the earth's climate is becoming more violent and unpredictable? How can we live meaningful and responsible lives at a time of environmental disruption?

Colleges and universities, in their current form, are ill-prepared to answer such complex, difficult, and urgent questions.

### Changing Missions

The modern research university was created in the nineteenth century at a time when humans had little impact on the earth's environment and for the purpose of advancing "pure knowledge," not solving real-world problems. Such research demanded the creation of academic disciplines, each devoted to its own line of inquiry and employing its own methodologies. Moreover, unlike the great universities of medieval Europe, the modern research university sought to be value-free.

The university has since expanded its educational mission to include education for employment; indeed, this is now taken to be its primary mission. The disciplinary structure of the university, created for the purpose of research, proved perfectly suitable for this new educational objective. Like research, job education tends to be specialized and free of moral judgment. Research and job training have their importance, of course, but their importance presupposes a healthy society and a biologically stable world.

In his 2014 book, *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life*, William Deresiewicz bemoans both the individualistic nature of our society as a whole and the role that higher education plays in advancing and legitimating self-interest. The book is a jeremiad aimed at Ivy League students and Ivy League schools, but, at its core, it is also a critique of American culture and a call for a more socially cohesive and just society. "It is time,"

Deresiewicz writes, “to imagine what a different society would look like and to gather the courage to get there.”

The great moral projects of the past, Deresiewicz contends, have given way to excessive individualism and materialism. “Once, we dreamed of eradicating poverty, winning the Cold War, reaching the moon, ensuring racial justice, creating a more equitable society. Now—what?” Now we desire only to become wealthy, and the “best” schools—our oldest and most selective colleges and universities—are doing nothing to change this. In fact, they have legitimated this coarser version of the American Dream by not naming it for what it is—naked social Darwinism—and by credentialing the next generation of financial analysts, hedge-fund managers, and political leaders. Though Deresiewicz offers some suggestions for making elite colleges and universities more accessible to the masses, he is not sanguine about reform. They are, and always will be, tools of the rich, he argues. The hope for a better America, Deresiewicz maintains, lies not with the “best” private institutions but with public universities, the ones that educate the vast majority of Americans.

But are public universities any different from the Ivies? Public universities have the same internal structure and educational mission as elite institutions, and although the students who attend public universities are themselves more representative of the middle class, they are no less desirous of becoming wealthy. According to a 2013 survey by the Higher Education Research Institute, 82 percent of all first-year students say that making a lot of money is “very important” or “essential.”

Remarkably, Deresiewicz fails to mention that the human species—led by college graduates from both private and public universities—is in the process of destroying the planet. Educating for a better society, for the common good, will clearly require something more than increasing funding for public education. If we want a different kind of civilization, one that is more socially cohesive and just and that functions within the biological and physical bounds of nature, we will have to create a different kind of university.

## New Educational Model

The current disciplinary structure of higher education institutions makes it difficult to give serious attention to complex and value-laden real-world issues. Questions about how to structure the economy and our daily lives in ways that promote the well-being of those around us and around the world transcend any single discipline and cannot be answered without reference to how we understand what is morally acceptable. To address questions about living a meaningful life in a world in trouble will require more than minor adjustments to the current practices in the academy; it will require fundamental change.

More specifically, a college or university committed to the common good will foreground the grave challenges before us and make these issues central to an undergraduate education, not just for certain majors but for all students. It will encourage students to reflect on their moral beliefs and those of other people, it will push them to understand the real-world implications of their moral beliefs, and it will teach them skills for living and working together for the common good. None of these educational goals are central to higher education in its present form.

It is important to note that the university has changed before and that it can change again. The university as it exists today is radically different from the great universities of five hundred years ago, or even a hundred years go. There is no Platonic form of the university applicable to all civilizations at all times.

The only justification for an institution of higher education is that it serve the greatest needs of a particular civilization. The greatest need of our civilization, at this moment, is learning to live sustainably and justly within the bounds of the natural world.

Colleges and universities are complex institutions capable of carrying out multiple objectives simultaneously. Reorienting the focus of undergraduate education need not completely displace job-specific education and research. When the university shifted its focus from research to employment, it did not stop valuing research. Foregrounding real-world issues and social transformation over career-focused education would have a similar effect. Career preparation would continue but it would not be the primary objective of higher education.

Any proposal for fundamental change will meet opposition, both inside and outside of the university. Those in power will argue that we cannot afford to put career education in the background. Without a shred of irony, they will counsel us to forget the natural world and social justice and focus on the economy. Nothing, they will tell us, is more important than “growing the economy,” not even the long-term health of ecosystems or the creation of a more cohesive and just society.

Others will argue that the only hope for a more livable planet lies with more research and new technology and that colleges and universities, in their current form, are essential to this effort. They will point to new developments in clean energy, food production, and computing technology and to research on the effects of human-caused climate change and the loss of biodiversity.

The forcefulness of this argument lies in the fact that it is partially true. But a civilization is more than its technology, and no amount of technology can save a civilization built on the erroneous belief that human society can exist independently of the natural world. Moreover, no amount of technology or wealth can make us better people. Institutions committed to the common good should continue to support research; much good comes from it. But the primary function of higher education should be to promote our common welfare and the well-being of the planet on which we depend.

There will be those who oppose change simply because they do not like it. When it comes to thinking about higher education, faculty members, even politically liberal faculty members, tend to be extremely conservative. Many who advocate for prison reform, election-finance reform, health-care reform, tax reform, farm-policy reform, and other progressive causes see no need to radically reform higher education. Higher education, in their view, is the one thing that we got right.

For all of these reasons, it will be difficult to change how we educate ourselves and the next generation, but a better future is not achievable without first creating a different type of higher education. If there is hope, it may be because the consequences of failure are horrific. Absent an immediate threat, it is possible to dither and to find reasons for maintaining the status quo or to make only minor concessions. But, to echo the statement famously attributed to Winston Churchill, “Americans will always do the right thing . . . after exhausting all the alternatives”; perhaps colleges and universities, after resisting fundamental change for as long as possible, will do the right thing. Hopefully, it will be soon enough to matter.

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