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INTRODUCTION

Editorial Introduction: Higher Education in Its Many Forms

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Do we value higher education? And if so, what does that mean?

Public perceptions about the college degree are riddled with contradictions that have lingered for decades. On the one hand, public sources and figures regularly question whether college is worth the cost. News outlets like the *Atlantic, Los Angeles Times, New York Times*, and *Washington Post* have long fanned the flames of doubt. Readers in the US have been awash in pieces like "College May Not Be Worth It Anymore" and "The World Might Be Better Off without College for Everyone."[1] Meanwhile, elected officials have acted on such doubts. Between 2000 and 2014, state legislators slashed higher education budgets by approximately 30 percent.[2] If value can be measured in terms of state appropriations, then nearly a third of the college degree's luster has disappeared. Contributing to the mood of discontent, celebrity billionaires like Peter Thiel have aimed their vast resources toward altering perceptions about higher education. To that end, Thiel now offers reverse scholarships: $100,000 per potential student to *stay out* of college and start a business instead. So far, more than 270 individuals have accepted the challenge.[3]

[1]Ellen Ruppel Shell, "College May Not Be Worth It Anymore," *New York Times*, May 16, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/16/opinion/college-useful-cost-jobs.html; Emily Withnall, "For Some Young People, College Is Not Worth the Debt," *New York Times*, Jan. 13, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/13/business/college-dropout-debt.html; Jeffrey Selingo, "Is College Worth the Cost? Many Recent Graduates Don't Think So," *Washington Post*, Sept. 30, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2015/09/30/is-college-worth-the-cost-many-recent-graduates-dont-think-so/; Bryan Caplan, "The World Might Be Better Off without College for Everyone: Students Don't Seem to Be Getting Much Out of Higher Education," *The Atlantic*, Jan./Feb. 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/01/whats-college-good-for/546590/; Collin Binkley, "Jaded about Education, More Americans Are Skipping College," *Los Angeles Times*, March 9, 2023, https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2023-03-09/more-americans-are-skipping-college.

[2]American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Public Universities: Changes in State Funding* (Cambridge, MA: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2015), 7, https://www.amacad.org/publication/public-research-universities-changes-state-funding/section/3.

[3]Kenneth Niemeyer, "Peter Thiel Doubles Down on His Program to Pay Kids Not to Stay in School," *Business Insider*, Feb. 24, 2024, https://www.businessinsider.com/peter-thiel-fellow-program-skip-woke-college-education-2024-2.

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On the other hand, when asked directly, Americans tend to have a high opinion of college. Gallup Polls and other national surveys consistently show higher education ranked among leading social values, right alongside freedom, homeownership, and social mobility. A steady trendline between the mid-1980s and mid-2010s shows that the vast majority—approximately 70 percent of respondents—view higher education as "very important."[4] Last year, among those considered part of Generation Z (twelve to twenty-six years of age), 83 percent of respondents identified higher education as "very important" or "fairly important."[5] And this year, a Gallup-Lumina study found that 94 percent of those surveyed indicated postsecondary education is "very valuable."[6] Despite increasing costs and bad publicity, Americans still see going to college as an important rite of passage.

But why? Return on investment certainly plays a role here: before policy elites began questioning the economic utility of higher education, they spent several decades championing it as the best way to get ahead. Yet that hardly explains the cultural importance of a college degree, the outsized role that colleges and universities play in the personal and professional lives of Americans, or the influence of the ivory tower on the marketplace of ideas.

This issue of *History of Education Quarterly* casts new light on the complexity of higher education and how it has always meant many things to many people. Around the world, stakeholders have created a diverse range of colleges and universities, debated their meaning and purpose, and struggled over their forms and reforms. This issue brings us four different perspectives—three views from North America, and one from the Basque region in Spain—on what universities can and should do, as well as on what forms would best advance those aims.

In "To Learn but Not Live Together?" Dale M. McCartney, Amy Scott Metcalfe, Gerardo L. Blanco, and Roshni Kumari tell the story of Canada's first "International House." Chronicling competing visions of international student policy and services at the University of British Columbia (UBC), they conclude that administrators triumphed over other campus stakeholders regarding the proposed "I-House." A social center, rather than a US-style residential housing unit, was the result. But along the way, the struggle over competing visions for this campus space provides insight into how Canadians—at least at UBC—viewed the social purposes of higher education, the place of international students, and the kinds of supports best suited for their community.

Scott McLean's "From Missionary Zeal to Holiday Appeal," meanwhile, analyzes the different messages sent to Canadian teachers by the Summer School Association of Queen's University. As he argues, the university consistently framed itself as a credentialing agent, reinforcing the symbolic boundaries between more and less professional teachers. Teachers, we learn, read the intended messages correctly. Higher education, in this case, served both social *and* economic purposes, as teacher sought avenues for upward mobility in both areas.

[4]Frank Newport and Brandon Busteed, "Americans Still See College Education as Very Important," Gallup, Dec. 17, 2013, https://news.gallup.com/poll/166490/americans-college-education-important.aspx.

[5]Tara P. Nicola, "Majority of Gen Z Consider College Education Important," Gallup, Sept. 14, 2023, https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/509906/majority-gen-consider-college-education-important.aspx.

[6]Gallup-Lumina, *The State of Higher Education 2024: A Valuable, but Obstructed Path to Great Jobs and Lives*, May 2024, p. 2, https://www.gallup.com/analytics/644939/state-of-higher-education.aspx.

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Turning from social and economic purposes, Aitor Anduaga's "'Para-University' on the Road toward Self-Governance" examines the political implications of higher education through the case of the Basque Studies Society. As he explains, the BSS functioned much like a higher education institution, but sought to unite the promotion of science and indigenous culture with a demand for educational and political autonomy. Ultimately, the piece sheds light on an experience far more common than many of us appreciate—the struggle for identity and purpose of higher education in stateless nations that exist in Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, and elsewhere.

The political dimensions of higher education are also explored in Timothy Reese Cain's "Isn't It Terrible That All These Students Are Voting?" In it, he examines the mixed reactions of local communities to the prospect of college students voting while on campus. In many cases, towns actively worked to disenfranchise students, and did so to maintain existing power structures. The efforts to stop college students from participating in democracy raises fundamental questions about the role higher education should play in promoting the civic life of a nation.

Collectively, the articles in this issue serve as a reminder to all of us—but perhaps especially to our friends in economics departments—of the complexity of higher education's historical roles. When value is measured in terms of income after graduation, we learn an important economic lesson. But it's hardly the only one. Colleges and universities are social and political spaces where different visions of the world are advanced, often in competition with one another.

This issue ends with a special collection of essays written by members of *HEQ*'s editorial board. Unlike the four feature articles, which focus on higher education, these essays examine the history of education as a field inquiry, and particularly in terms of its contemporary relevance. We believe that the history of education has never been more necessary; in a time of contestation and upheaval, it is more essential than ever to understand the past. At the same time, the field is shrinking in many parts of the world—both in its institutional footprint and in its membership. Signs suggest that other interests and priorities are displacing projects, programs, and places of employment for historians of education. What, then, does this mean for the future? How can the history of education continue to play a meaningful role in research, policy, and practice? *HEQ* editorial board members and their students—Kabria Baumgartner, Clémence Cardon-Quint, Jason Ellis, Rebecka Göransdotter, Adam Laats, Helen Proctor, Douglas S. Reed, Johannes Westberg, and Kathryn E. Wiley—all responded to the call. And we at the journal are eager to hear how *HEQ* readers respond to these essays.

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