

# *Productivity in Academe: What's Education For?*

*By J. W. Powell*

**W**e hear from all sides that higher education must be more efficient, more productive.

Chancellors and vice-chancellors and provosts of state university systems from California to Florida to New York call for increased productivity.

Nonprofit foundations like the Pew Charitable Trusts and the Johnson Foundation's Wingspread group have set up increased productivity for higher education as goals for initiatives they fund.

This call for increased productivity trickles down into specific changes in classrooms. We're told we need to generate more outcomes with fewer inputs.

The changes this requires range from increases in class size and increased emphasis on computerized instruction to upward pressure on workloads and increased pressure to hire cheaper—part-time, nontenure track-faculty.

Faculty are also being pulled

into activities generated by this call for productivity. For example, I went to Monterey recently as one of Humboldt State's delegates to do strategic planning for the California State University. Our charge: figure out what changes to make over the next few years. One of our four main themes is productivity.

Surely there is something right about this, though a look back at history of educational reforms may make us wary. But before we become more productive, shouldn't we be clearer about what we produce?

Calls for increased productivity in higher education are built on oversimplifying the purposes of higher education.

An elementary survey of the possible answers to the question *What is education for?* demonstrates that we are not ready to properly address calls for increased productivity. There is some philosophical work required that is logically prior to changing structures

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or doing strategic planning. What's an education for? I've been interested in the question since shortly before I ran away from home at seventeen. I was raised in the Missouri Ozarks as a Jehovah's Witness, among whom there was a conviction that higher education was the work of Satan.

Those who believed this had a good argument. Jehovah's Witnesses who went to college did not usually remain Jehovah's Witnesses. By their fruits shall ye know them. What education is for is furthering the devil's work. What it should be for is the glorification of God. Here are two answers to the question: What is education for?

Looking at the history and philosophy of education, it's not too hard to put together some other candidates for answers. I'm going to remind us of some of these answers, not with an eye toward plumping for any of them so much as getting us to take the question seriously. Then I want to draw implications for making higher education more productive.

One set of answers to the question of what education is for has to do with whether education is for private or public ends. One answer might be that it's for individual fulfillment of potential. Another side might claim education is preparation to take on the role of citizen as part of the polis.

A fair amount of ink's been spilt since Plato's *Republic* on the side of educating people for taking their places in a state in which for most citizens the agenda's been set by someone else. Since Rousseau's *Emile*, a like amount of ink has been spilt on the side of individual self-fulfillment and the irrelevance of social agendas.

The attacks on those two views can help us think this question through.

Another facet of the issue might lead us to consider the division between thinking of education, on the one hand, as a way to prepare for change, and, on the other, of coming to know Eternal Verities and Eternal Questions.

**I**mpending changes in the economy and social fabric are rationales for claims that higher ed must become more productive. But change shows up as a driving force in other arguments about higher education as well.

A common argument for making courses in critical thinking a part of general education requirements is that students need to prepare for changes among vocations, changes within disciplines, and changes in economic life.

This view of critical thinking tends to emphasize problem-solving approaches more than developing "higher-level thinking

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skills” or learning logic or mastering appraisals of fallacies or acquiring facility with describing and evaluating arguments.

Those who think of critical thinking as a way to solve problems generated by change find themselves biased toward a view that education must be made more productive for the same reasons.

An opposing view might endorse learning a canon—that is, some might think a cure for barbarians at the gates will be to make us all culturally literate and allow only those who are literate in this way to have a shaping voice in the country’s policy debates—debates among minds properly American and somehow, at the same time, no longer closed.

Again, it may be these two opposing positions could be either attacked or reconciled, with the resulting arguments providing some benefit for those of us trying to think the matter through.

Perhaps education is for doing what families no longer can, teaching parenting and values like discipline. Catastrophic changes in family life may require us to make sure our students get a chance to find what it takes to raise children who do not become sociopaths.

There are other possibilities that should be mentioned here. Education can serve as propaganda to help indoctrinate and dominate a society’s citizenry. Conversely, edu-

cation can serve the ends of revolution and liberation from domination.

Both of these can be thought of as education within and for a set of values—but education can also take up values as issues. That is, education can help a society think through which values it wants to endorse.

Education can, for instance, expose citizens to debate between those who wish to endorse consumerism and those who wish to call for other, more spiritual, values. And it might be that some learning is intrinsically valuable. Learning about our relations to the earth, for example, might ensure that we don’t kill ourselves off or so that we don’t kill off the earth. But it might also be taken up because it’s good to know whether it pays off or not.

**T**his survey of possible answers to our question about what education is for is the first part of an attempt to draw attention to an oddity in the debate about productivity in higher education. The oddity: In debate, the assumed answer to this question is that education is for economic ends: supplying the labor market, preparing for working and for getting and spending.

Education is important because work is changing and education

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prepares for dealing with those changes. Education prepares us for competing in the face of economic change. Compete means hold a job, make money, spend it, produce goods and consume goods, play our economic roles. This seems the most prominently endorsed goal I read wherever questions about educational reform come up.

Anyone who has considered our question about the purpose of education could say what I want to say. Slow down. Let's take the question seriously. Let's work on it before we start in on some restructuring based on believing that one, not very plausible nor complete, answer is the right answer

**O**pinions differ on the purpose of education—public vs. private, individual vs. societal, spiritual vs. consumerist, change vs. eternity, knowledge vs. skills—but the main thing is that the question has not been answered. We are playing with high stakes when we act as though we all know the answer.

Take the question of whether education is preparation for change. The view that it is seems to be a commonplace. Yet the dramatist Eugene Ionesco once remarked that much of the highest drama since the Greeks has been about the same truths, some of them hard, which do not change and

from which we hide: We die. You'll die. Me, too, and all my family, all my beloveds, and all my friends.

Love and hatred may last as long as we do, or may not. Possessions guarantee nothing of value. Learning about ethics does not make us good. My parents, my children, I myself may be capable of atrocity or heroism. Wretched outsiders get insights, may be wiser than we. Suffering is not evil. Intelligence is a strength, but not always stronger than malevolence or generosity. State is not family. And so on. If education is partly about these things, then it is not entirely preparation for change.

Perhaps it is a commonplace, now, what Heraclitus told us: The only thing permanent is change. It is also not quite true, even if its truth were not its own counter-example.

As we restructure higher education we may try for relevance anew—echoes of the '60s—or prepare our students to cope with change, or make them more skilled for getting and spending. Certainly new skills can help.

My History of Ancient Philosophy fall semester had our own list-serve, argued online about Heraclitus, changes in the concept of argument, and how ethics got split off from logic, and we found relevant papers on the Web.

We did similar things spring

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semester in Perspectives on Science, Social Science, and Humanities. All new, all to the good, and certainly a big change from how I taught these courses the first time. But, in these courses, we also recall—maybe are helped by this technology to recall—truths and questions that do not change.

We might teach those truths and questions clearly and early in hopes that they will not come to our children so hard later. That is, part of what education is for may be to teach our students these eternal verities and eternal questions.

This is not to say that's all of education. I've been teaching critical thinking for 20 years now and am convinced that—despite the uncritical theory that forms the sclerotic cartilage rather than backbone of that discipline—there's something there that can help.

**T**hink about faculty productivity in higher education. Consider the different ways teachers can be crappy teachers. Consider those teachers who don't teach but just hurl texts and lectures at students, who then have to teach themselves. This approach is productive on an economic model, this sorting rather than teaching. There also are teachers who just live to go home and tend their gardens or their wine cellars and do the minimum. Likewise with teach-

ers who live to be administrators and change the academic world and have status and an auditorium named after them when they die.

But all of these are likely to make teaching less productive if you understand that what we wish to produce are good teachers and if you understand what good teachers are.

Good teachers are varied, from the seminar leaders in graduate school thinking through problems right before our eyes to the lecture hall performers who do not know how to deal with a class of less than 60 students—and many others: fierce critics, nurturers, strategists, humorists, big-picture persons, brilliant technicians.

Then there are the productive teachers whose products don't get attributed to them even 30 years later when someone publishes or uses ideas in teaching or parenting or engineering or biology, depending on insights for which they no longer remember their sources. Teaching has villains not unmasked and heroes not yet sung. And that's old news.

There is such a thing as productivity in higher education; it's not hard to figure out some of the main parts. There are lots of oversimplified and convenient measures available, from numbers of student credit hours generated per thousand dollars or per full-time faculty

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member, to time-to-degree.

Trying to improve productivity by changing those measures is dangerous. The history of educational reform is a cautionary tale. Ask even brilliant thinkers who have been out to reform or to clarify education, from Plato to Cicero to Milton to Newman to Arnold to Veblen to Dewey to Conant to Skinner to Mao to Barzun to Freire to hooks to Gatto—well, reading them should be part of our education. Then talk.

The view being bruited about by business leaders, with the help of the Pew Trusts and the Johnson Foundation's Wingspread Center, could be put beside this history and these thinkers. It may be they have left out some of what education is for. Isn't their view interestingly like Mao's Cultural Revolution?

Captains of industry who form the bulk of Boards of Regents and directors and trustees around the country must not forget that our question—What is education for?—is not one they are particularly well-qualified to answer.

The economist Thorsten Veblen early this century in his book, *The Higher Learning in America*, sketched out some of the biases from business that can be predicted to drive out good answers to this question. If you don't know what education is for, but you are hell-bent on making it more productive, it takes no great gift of prophesy to

tell what the results will be.

Or have been. Some trail-blazing universities can already show us what's going to happen. For one example, my daughter's expensive private women's university has cut credits loose from seat time—three hours a week in class now gets four credits, an academic moral equivalent of the Wonderbra—and she gets cheated in subtle ways she has a built-in interest in not noticing.

**A**nother example: We in California have cut access to higher ed for those students who are going to require too much in resources, namely those whose disadvantaged backgrounds leave them needing remedial education and very good teaching, no matter how brilliant those students are.

For another, we have emphasized in the California State University's strategic plan outcomes and outcome assessments, all based on assumptions about product and measurement. They are assessments, we all know, that would put Socrates, Mohammed, Jesus, and Buddha into the slow group.

If, instead, we were to consider that perhaps we should produce more MacArthur Fellows, more good parents, more skeptics about the goals of higher education, how will we do outcomes assessments on those things?

Here is one of the places where our vaunted talk of diversity is put to the test; let's hear and argue some diverse views.

What should we do? Well, there's a kind of irony in a philosopher recommending philosophy—since lots of people think of philosophizing as a lot like doing nothing—but that looks like what's needed. We need to take up a prior, foundational question before we get back to the agenda we had.

The good part of debating this topic is that—as is common in philosophy—there's no license required.

The debate need not even be limited to higher education. High schools and even elementary schools are finding their curricula shaped by either articulated or assumed answers to this question, buried in documents from Washington, D.C. or state offices of education with titles like Education 2000 or Tech Ed or A+ Schools but without much debate.

We need to check to see what

we mean and what we are endorsing unawares by calls in those documents for higher achievement, more accountability, higher test scores, better employability.

Debate is what is called for. It will be a debate that requires us to be careful in how we set up the questions, and requires us to entertain carefully a wide variety of possible answers and to look at the arguments.

Worry is also what is called for, a worry whether we might have been wrong in our current planning efforts to increase productivity. Any teacher, any parent, any professor, any graduate, any student, my God, even any administrator, might be able to offer arguments to help us do the worrying in a productive way.

The actions we need to take are to debate and to worry—these are, paradoxically, very difficult actions to take when it seems urgent that we respond to felt needs. It is clear, though, that in skipping these steps we have made a mistake. ■

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