



What's College For?: The Struggle To Define American Higher Education

Zachary Karabell

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President Clinton declares that a two-year education should be the right of all Americans. Congress passes a \$40 billion package of tax breaks and scholarships aimed at making a degree accessible to everyone. Almost two-thirds of high school graduates now go on to some form of higher education, and yet at the same time, those colleges and universities, inundated with a new kind of student, have been slow to respond to this revolutionary change. Zachary Karabell spent over a year traveling the country interviewing students, graduate students, faculty, and adjunct teachers, and the result is a portrait of American higher education that is neither conservative nor liberal and that needs to be taken seriously. There is a quiet revolution occurring that will—that is—changing the nature of education in this country. “Higher education is becoming mass education,” writes Karabell. The crucial clash on today’s campuses is not between traditionalists, multiculturalists, and tenured radicals, but between the competing needs and desires of students, professors, administrators, and the larger society. The overwhelming majority of today’s students are working-class people seeking education to get a job; they are not seeking a liberal education, nor planning to go on to graduate school. Most faculty members, products of the elite graduate schools that have insulated them from the needs of real-world people, are often profoundly ill-equipped to handle this changing student body. By exploring the myriad perspectives of these conflicting expectations Karabell concludes that a radical democratization of higher education is not only inevitable, it is desirable, and it will require dramatic changes in the structure and presumptions about education beyond the high school level. Topping \$175 billion a year, spending for American higher education will join health care and welfare as one of the top national issues, yet there is precious little real or broad-based understanding of the issues and social forces at work. Eschewing any political agenda, yet unafraid to ask as many questions as he answers, Zachary Karabell has provided the first reasoned examination of what has become a national concern. Sure to spark intense debate, *What’s College For?* is a clarion call for reform.

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