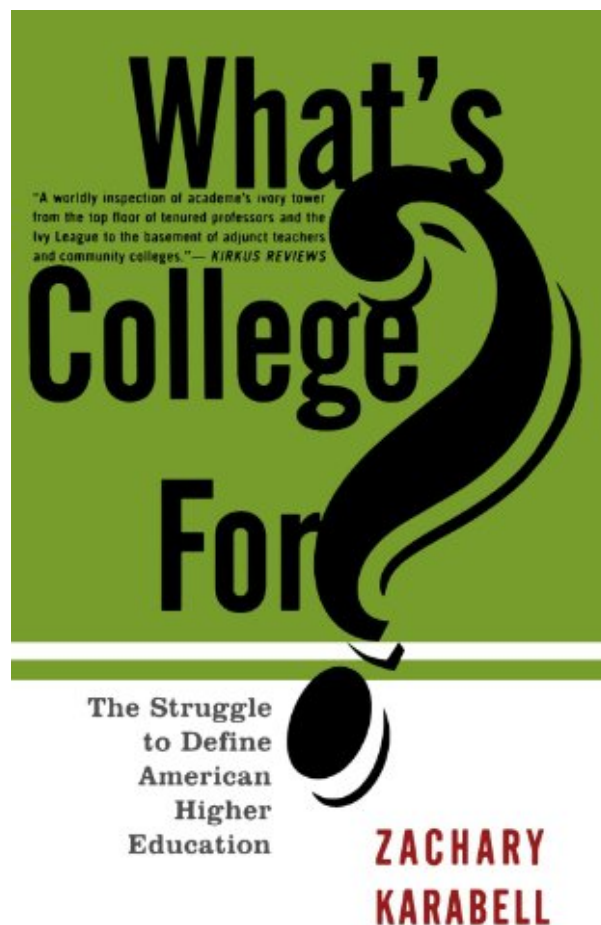
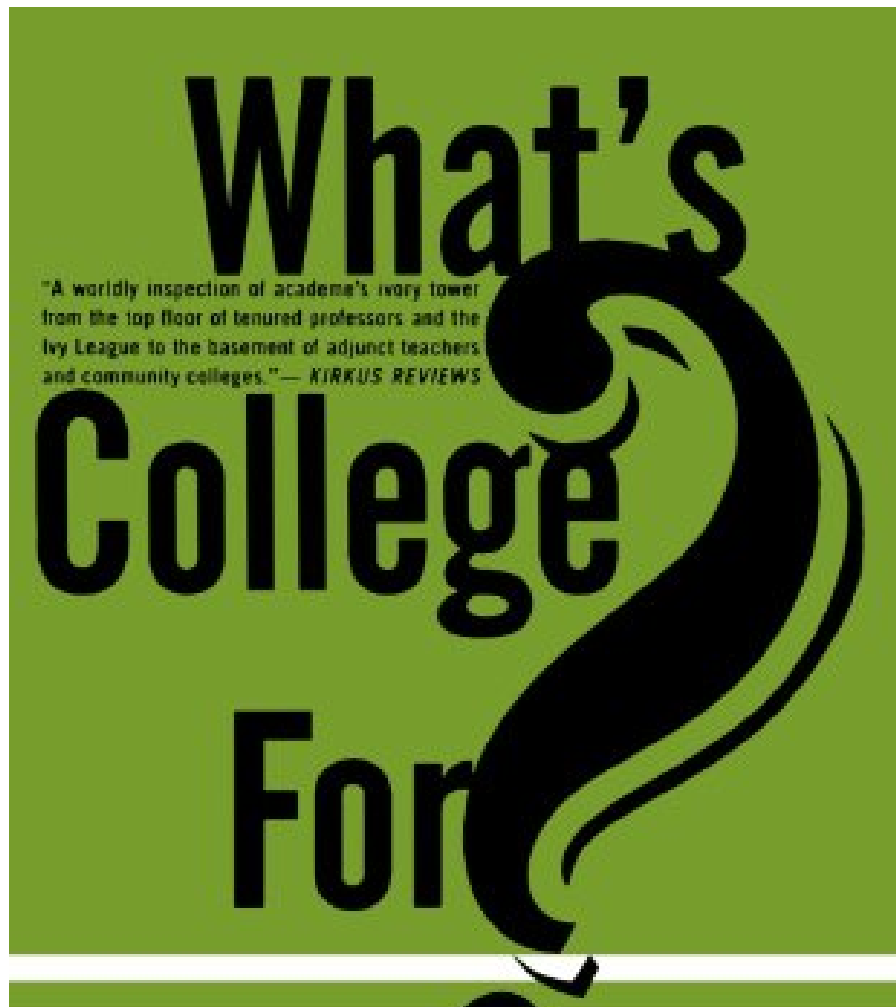


WHAT'S COLLEGE FOR?: THE STRUGGLE TO DEFINE AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION BY ZACHARY KARABELL



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What's College For?

"A worldly inspection of academe's ivory tower from the top floor of tenured professors and the Ivy League to the basement of adjunct teachers and community colleges." — *KIRKUS REVIEWS*

**The Struggle
to Define
American
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About the Author

Zachary Karabell was educated at Columbia (BA), Oxford (M. Phil.) and Harvard (Ph.D.). He has taught at Harvard University and Dartmouth College, and is a frequent contributor to the Washington Post, The Village Voice, The Nation, Smithsonian, and other publications. He lives in New York City.

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PDF

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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About the Author

Zachary Karabell was educated at Columbia (BA), Oxford (M. Phil.) and Harvard (Ph.D.). He has taught at Harvard University and Dartmouth College, and is a frequent contributor to the Washington Post, The Village Voice, The Nation, Smithsonian, and other publications. He lives in New York City.

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basically worth reading, but could have been much better

By Sean Burke

This book asks the titular question "What's College For?", and tries to answer parts of the question from the perspectives of various parties.

This book is not, as I first feared, an opinion piece about what doe-eyed 17-year-olds should extract from their humanities education. Instead, it's the author's attempts to discover and consider opinions on the purpose of college, in the minds of various kinds of people -- society at large, undergrads (both right out of high school or "non-traditional"), grad students, tenured and untenured faculty, and so on.

The book raises many difficult questions, and points out many basic (and worsening) flaws in the US college system, flaws that are, more often than not, never raised in discussions of the system you hear elsewhere.

Karabell's method is to answer the larger question in the title via some smaller bites at it, which you could paraphrase as "what's grad school for?", "what's tenure for (and why are so few people getting it)?", "what're adjuncts for (and why do they get paid slave wages)?", "what's the history department for?", "what's research for?", "what is undergrad education for?", etc.

The point of this book is that the parties involved often have very different, even contradictory answers to these questions, reflecting different goals about every aspect of college in the US. The book succeeds in establishing this very important point, as well as in suggesting that the current situation requires readjustment (with there being multiple ways to readjust it, not just one big answer that'll suit everyone), so that everyone (undergrads, grad students, adjuncts, and faculty of various kinds) gets at least some of their goals fulfilled.

There are some notable and basically inexcusable flaws to this book:

* The question "what's college for?" immediately gets replaced by "what's college IN THE U.S. for?", as if college/university education, elsewhere, past or present, were nonexistent, or were totally irrelevant to the situation in the US.

* The author too easily goes from observing that something is true of the discipline of history in the US (he's a history professor), to assuming it's true of all academic disciplines. Sometimes this works, but often it /really really/ doesn't.

* And there's some production problems -- lack of basic fact checking (producing no fewer than three imaginative ways to misspell "Cal State Northridge"), and an endnotes section that's unnecessarily hard to work and is riddled with stupid typos.

But the greatest failing of this book is that it spends too much time on questions other than what I think is the most important one: what do undergrads want/expect out of college? (And to an extent, what does society want them to want from it?) Karabell doesn't /avoid/ this question by any means -- it's what the book starts out (chs 1 and 2) discussing, and what it basically ends with (ch 9). But too much of what's inbetween is too long while contributing too little to answering the larger question in the title (notably Ch 8, "History

Standards", which could have been completely deleted without detracting from the rest of the book at all).

Chapter 9, "Society in Higher Education" is so /very/ good, but so very short, that my only reaction to it was that all of the book before it should have been shelved, and replaced with more of what was in chapter 9 -- the asking of questions like: WHY do Americans think college is right for /everyone/? (In fact, do they think this?) WHY do Americans think college is necessary background for so many jobs where it's plainly not? Why do Americans get the willies at the term "vocational education", and yet flock to majors that are not basically just preparatory to the work force -- comp sci, business, accounting? Or, in fact, is this the case? I'd agree, I guess, that a business degree is basically vocational education, but is that really true of, say, comp sci degrees in general? How about medicine? Chemistry? Applied physics? Statistics? I, for one, would like to know /how many/ people are majoring in solidly academic things (Classics, say), how many people are majoring in what Karabell sees as vocational education (business), and how many people are in the grey area. And I'd like to know why they're going to school (at great expense of time and money) and why they're majoring in what they're majoring in -- i.e., how each undergrad student answers for himself the question "what is college for?".

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