On College

Jon Baskin

August 15, 2021

Ever since *The Point* was founded twelve years ago by graduate students on a university campus in Chicago, it has faced in two directions at once. On one hand, the magazine's aspiration to provide a public forum for writing seriously about ideas was always meant, in part, as a criticism of the customary ways humanities scholars communicated about their subject matter. The problem was not merely that so much academic writing was inaccessible or boring, but that the journal system and other criteria of career advancement in higher education tended to alienate us from the passionate investments that had often driven us into the humanities in the first place. Accordingly, the magazine has sought to revive the tradition of the philosophical or humanistic essay, in which the writer is motivated to explore a topic—how to parent, what to eat, where to work, who to vote for, whether to have children—not because they are looking to fill in "gaps" in academic research, but because the question has become unavoidable for them in their own lives.

At the same time, the magazine has also been a home for essays that look back in the other direction, toward its roots in the institution that still remains the preeminent place where intellectual life takes place in America: the university or college. That we consider the life of the mind to extend beyond the walls of any campus does not diminish our interest in life on campus; in fact, it only raises the stakes of ongoing conversations about the role and function of higher education. For many of us, early experiences in humanities courses as undergraduates set the pattern for what it means to think critically, self-reflectively, creatively or aspirationally about the choices we face both alone and with our friends, colleagues and fellow community members. Even if our engagement with literature, art, history and philosophy does not culminate with the end of those classes, it is likely they will shape our habits of mind going forward, for better and worse. Hence the question of this issue's symposium ("What is college for?") is, in its own way, unavoidable—at least for those of us who care about the kind of thinking and writing we have always tried to promote in this magazine. It is because the topic is so essential to our project that we have decided, as with our intellectuals symposium in issue 16, to forgo our usual editorial letter and instead use this space as an introduction to the range of views you will find inside.

College is not only about thinking and writing, of course, and our symposium considers the university as a social, political and economic institution as well as an intellectual one. In his essay comparing the experiences of undergraduates, graduate students and "adult learners" at the University of Virginia, Chad Wellmon writes of the psychological costs exacted on students of all ages by the "Other University"—the network of deans, administrators and offices of student affairs that shadow all aspects of campus life, often confirming students' suspicions that the true purpose of the university is to prepare them to become efficient professionals in a society dominated by the values of technocratic managerialism. In a converse example of the way that extracurricular activities can inform the broader purpose of college life, Jelani M. Favors, in his essay on historically Black colleges and universities, speaks of a "second curriculum" that has always run alongside regular classwork at such institutions, "stirring dissatisfaction" with Jim

Crow America before laying the groundwork for the civil rights and Black liberation movements that would expand the reach and inclusiveness of American democracy. In both of those essays, college emerges as a concrete institution embedded in a larger network of political and economic relations, a presentation that runs counter to how universities often like to present themselves. In her contribution on the unionization movement in higher education, Ege Yumusak challenges the ideology of neutrality, or "placelessness," that allows so many university administrators and faculty to either lose sight of or intentionally obscure the specific, and often manifestly unjust, power relations that course through particular institutions and campuses.

At a time when much of the outside focus on universities has to do with declining enrollments and disappearing job prospects, however, some of our symposium contributors speak to a different danger, which consists in the tendency among commentators both inside and outside academia to forget entirely that colleges contain more than their most visible or measurable features. In response to the arguments about the college-admissions scandal of 2019, Agnes Callard laments how little of the discussion, despite being conducted by degree-holding op-ed writers and journalists, offered any sense of the intellectual activity that she considers central to the inner meaning of campus life. "The real scandal," she writes, "is the fact that so many people who attended college seem to have no idea what it's for." In a similar vein, Jonny Thakkar reflects on how attempts to eliminate "elitism" can often let faculty at selective colleges off the hook for the question they actually face on a daily basis: what to teach to the future elites who sit in their classrooms. As if taking up this challenge, Roosevelt Montás and Jennifer Frey both consider questions about what colleges should teach in their humanities courses. Montás, formerly an administrator in the Columbia University Core program, makes the case for the importance of "general education" as a staple of liberal arts curriculums. Frey, a philosophy professor, argues for the revival of the idea, advanced by Catholic thinkers like Alasdair MacIntyre and John Henry Newman, that the coherence of the "university" depends on some shared vision—even if not a theological one—of the coherence of the "universe."

Finally, in the tradition of always asking the symposium question to those who are most directly affected by it, we have used our survey section to query current undergraduates. Among other things, we ask them why they chose to go to college, whether they believe the humanities to be necessary and what *they* think college is for.

Some may notice that, although the essays in this symposium address issues that touch on all aspects of university life, we have nevertheless chosen "college" as our focal point. This choice was made partly for prudential reasons: universities play such a wide variety of roles in our society—as research hubs, job providers, credential mills and think tanks, to name just a few—that we worried a symposium built around them would be too sprawling. But the choice was also informed by our sense of the role that "college" continues to play in our cultural imagination. "College," writes Wellmon, "is both an individual experience and all the things we collectively assert, believe and hope for in its name." He goes on to disentangle the various experiences that are often

conflated under the banner of that collective assertion, just as Yumusak and Favors remind us that college is never just one thing, tied up as the experience will always be with specific places, power relations and political arrangements. Yet Wellmon's observation regarding the idealism the term "college" still connotes remains worth holding onto: college, in our society, names not only an institution, an important local employer or an obligatory step on the status ladder; it also names an aspiration to intellectual community. As with other aspects of our intellectual life, in discussions about what college is for, it remains as important to hold onto that aspiration as it is to identify the myriad ways in which we continuously fail, and fail again, to live up to it.

Jon Baskin
On College
August 15, 2021

Issue 25, Examined Life. <www.thepointmag.com/examined-life/on-college>