

## Book Review

# What's the Point of College?

Johann M. Neem

Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press. 2019

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*What's the Point of College? Seeking Purpose in an Age of Reform*, by Johann N. Neem (2019), provided a thorough and far-reaching analysis into the history and modern challenges that post-secondary institutions face. Advocating for a return to recognizing education as a valuable venture in itself, and strongly in support of liberal arts education, Neem posited that the true purpose of college is to generate well-rounded, critical thinkers and that the journey to the degree is more critical than the degree itself. Political and financial attacks on universities from hostile provincial governments in Canada are increasing, coming in the form of reduced operating grants and revised funding models that prioritize post-graduation earnings over equitable student access to different disciplines (Allen, 2019; Dhaliwal, 2020; Ojewole, 2019). In light of these changes, much can be learned from Neem's historical overview and rationale in support of institutions that function as locations for knowledge expansion and that are not simply designed to produce workers able to succeed in a capitalist landscape. Although Neem focused exclusively on the American context, which is structured differently from Canadian higher education, his core purpose for higher education remains universal, regardless of context. Throughout the text, Neem was careful not to romanticize higher education; he recognized that higher education has its place and is not going to be able to satisfy the unique goals and circumstances of every student. This acknowledgement is accompanied by the consistent assertion that though the need to stay true to core principles of higher education exists, higher education can and should adapt to changing realities. Neem did not shy away from his strong defense of the arts and humanities, and the text provides evidence-based support for retaining the core values of higher education in an ever-changing political and socioeconomic landscape.

### Synopsis

Neem provided a litany of sources and citations throughout each section and solidly supported his claims with historical and contemporary examples. The book overall is well researched and well written; it is accessible to a wide audience while remaining detailed enough to captivate higher education insiders. Despite a few sections of anecdotal examples, which detract from the overall flow of the text (see chapter two), Neem managed to build an argument that a liberal arts, in-person education is not only probable to survive ongoing higher education reforms but that it is an essential component of the true purpose of higher education. Any reforms that are made, therefore, should be consistent with the ultimate purpose of higher education, which is to create well-rounded citizens who are able to think critically and communicate concisely throughout their professional and academic lives. Maintaining support for a liberal arts education, Neem argued

successfully, is then critical to achieve this ultimate goal. Although Neem often used overly utopic language throughout the book—for example, on page 90, he claimed that all students should approach graduation with a sense of sadness alongside accomplishment, which is a lovely sentiment but not representative of the diverse experiences had by all students—the core message remained strong and well backed throughout the text.

Neem argued that in order to improve higher education we first need to understand why students engage in advanced education to begin with, and that it is the job of those working in higher education to recommit to valuing education as a worthy pursuit in itself, instead of one that aims to produce graduates with the highest earning potential possible (see also Smith, 2020). Throughout the preface of the book Neem differentiated between education and degrees and carried the theme of de-credentializing higher education throughout the book as a mechanism to support the core goal of higher education. Neem identified repeatedly, and from multiple angles, the ultimate goal of education as community and capacity building for students, so that they can enter the world with a breadth of knowledge and critical thinking skills that will make them well-rounded and productive citizens. He explored these topics over 12 chapters, breaking them into four separate sections: Context, Curriculum, Teaching, and Scholarship.

Within the first section, “Context,” chapter one reviewed the concept of disruptive innovation, immediately addressing the most obvious and imminent threat to the traditional higher education format. Neem identified the continuous pressure for institutions to change quickly in line with technological and social expectations, as well as to respond to students who treat education like a commodity and their professors like service providers. Though Neem acknowledged that innovation is a necessity, he highlighted the value of continuity for both learners and teachers. He noted that institutions can and do shape society itself and do not play an exclusively reactionary role. Chapter two, in contrast, provided two recent American examples of watershed moments in the history of higher education changes. The first of these examples is the appointment of Margaret Spellings to the University of North Carolina’s (UNC) Board of Governors, which is a position that oversees the operations of sixteen campuses. Spellings had previously produced a report during her time as U.S. Secretary of Education that emphasized education as a mechanism to serve American business, not as a means for students to obtain knowledge and skills, and her appointment to the UNC Board of Governors represented a commitment by UNC to shape education in this way. The second example that Neem discussed is the comments made by Mount St. Mary’s University (in Emmitsburg, Maryland) President Simon Newman. Newman said infamously that it is the responsibility of a university to “drown the bunnies” (p. 35); to identify struggling students early so they do not enter too far into debt in pursuit of an education they may not be able to complete. More poignantly, his suggestion was that it was necessary to remove them before the university needs to report retention and graduation statistics to the federal government. Instead of focusing on support for struggling students, Newman argued that they should simply be removed from the system so the university can report more positive rates of success. Although depictions of both of these incidents provide a high level of detail and an interesting look into recent American politics and some egregious acts of higher education leaders, Neem failed to link them to his larger argument concretely and consistently. Despite this blemish in an otherwise strong text, the examples provided food for thought for those involved in the post-secondary industry. Furthermore, the examples would likely be of little value to students or outsiders pondering Neem’s title question, given their specificity to how higher education is conceived of and structured, as opposed to the student experience.

Chapter three detailed the importance of understanding the fiscal policies of post-secondary

institutions, claiming that “for-profit education implies that education is a commodity bought for the advantage it provides” (p. 44), an inherently antithetical practice when considering the “true” purpose of college. Pulling no punches, Neem identified that for-profit institutions need to be regulated as businesses and not subsidized by public funds while cherry picking the best of both the public and private regulatory spheres. He asserted that operating in the pursuit of profit by commercializing higher education is an inherently corrupt endeavour. This section set the stage well for Neem to delve into the intricacies of higher education management, which he broke down by education type in the following section.

Chapters four, five, and six, “On STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics),” “On the Humanities,” and “On Business Majors,” respectively, reviewed the specific benefits and pitfalls of these different areas of study. Unsurprisingly, Neem championed the humanities and liberal arts education while suggesting a radical elimination of all business majors as a rather cheeky cost-cutting option for institutions that are struggling to fund all types of degrees. STEM majors largely escaped the most brutal of the critiques in this section, although Neem urged STEM faculties to recognize their roots in the arts disciplines, and expressed hope for a reunification of the social and natural sciences through a more holistic approach to higher education. Business programs were not afforded the same level of grace. Going so far as to call undergraduate business majors unethical, and providing a sound economic rebuttal to the notion that business majors hold higher salaries down the line than other types of majors, Neem lambasted the entire business education sphere as anti-intellectual and posited that the elimination of the entire degree path would be a significant societal improvement. Although the arguments against business education are well-sourced, the possibility of pursuit of business education by students purely out of interest and passion is missing from this narrative. In other spaces in the text, Neem spoke to the beauty of students being able to pursue exactly the education they seek out of pure passion (see page 123, “Humanities as a Calling”). Business students were not afforded this privilege of being able to pursue a business education simply because the student is passionate about the field. This oversight serves to dispel some of the strength Neem has built thus far by stepping too far in one direction without consideration for individuals who may have passions differing from the author.

The third section, on “Teaching,” contained some of Neem’s most salient and compelling arguments. He began chapter seven by asserting that physical delivery of higher education is crucial to nearly every ultimate goal of higher education. He made a strong case for the time and experience that need to go into pursuing a truly academic path, subtly degrading degrees that provide quick credentials but no substantive training. Reviewing the role of teaching, Neem argued that “by caring about the material and the student, teachers create a connection between the two” (p. 86). Chapter eight, “On Online Education,” presented a relatively balanced view that online education has its place in supporting accessibility, and will continue to evolve, although it cannot and should not replace a physical educational experience. Claiming that the institutional culture is a key tenet of a higher educational experience, Neem argued that online education may provide a reasonable supplement to traditional, in-person delivery but should not be presumed to replace it. Stating clearly that “college is more than about accessing information: it’s about developing an attitude towards knowledge” (p. 97), Neem reasserted that the experience of a college campus needs to retain priority by institutions as it provides a unique and formative experience that cannot be replicated electronically. The balanced recognition of the benefit of an educational format that Neem disagrees with ultimately is refreshing, given the author’s strong position on nearly every other section. In chapter nine, Neem made sweeping statements about the importance of critical thinking and knowledge acquisition as a crux for skill building,

democracy, and societal equality. Although critical thinking is often highlighted by employers as a key skill that they seek in employees, Neem argued that the focus should be on knowledge acquisition and the ultimate ability of students to think critically about important subject matter. Presenting critical thinking as a skill that students gain that ultimately increases their employability alongside their overall academic growth co-opted the language of Neem's opponents who promote an employment-centric approach to higher education. This tactic is an effective one to clearly demonstrate the value of liberal arts subjects and a robust higher educational experience, in the event that the previous sections did not convince the reader thoroughly enough.

In the final section, "Scholarship," Neem walked both sides of the job-scholar fence by claiming that graduate studies prepare students well for employment in both academic and non-academic sectors but also provides an opportunity for individuals to explore their passions deeply and develop a strong depth of knowledge. Likening graduate studies to ministerial work in chapter 10, he identified the ultimate goal of graduate students and degree holders as versatile experts. Instead of limiting students with a singular understanding of their field of specialty or focusing on what job they can do with a particular credential, they should be prepared to apply their knowledge and think critically about issues whenever and wherever they may be needed. Humanities graduates should be flexible enough to share their skills and advice wherever necessary, and to adapt to changing circumstances while providing a deep level of expertise. Neem asserted that a PhD must not be thought of as a portable degree like an MBA, which is applicable in many industries and in many professional roles, but instead as a highly specialized, practical degree like a JD or an MD. Chapters 11 and 12, "On Research" and "On Academic Writing," respectively, argued that the practical application of highly specialized research is self-explanatory when looking at governments and policy makers that use expert knowledge to guide practical decisions that have an impact on the everyday person. Despite pressure for academics to make their work widely accessible and palatable for non-experts, Neem argued that there is still benefit in creating knowledge for the academic community one works in, as solid research may ultimately be important for both academics and non-academics. Despite Neem's demonstrated distaste for business education, he used the metaphor of failed small businesses when discussing the value of research. Although most small businesses fail to achieve profit and longevity, entrepreneurship is still widely encouraged, and in the same vein, although most research may not have a dramatic effect on the public, the pursuit of creativity in both business and research has value in and of itself.

### **Further Discussion and Research**

Neem concluded the text with a call to educators, policy makers, and students to consider the next steps in higher education reform and the ways in which the systems can work better for all involved. "On the Future" called for an increase to public funding, more appreciation for high-quality instruction, and the expansion of academic thought beyond the academy. These specific actions would serve the achievement of the ultimate alignment of post-secondary institutional policies with the core purpose of higher education. There is much work to be done in order to see these changes through; universal higher education is not offered consistently, particularly throughout the Western world, and its benefits and pitfalls are an area rife for exploration. Neem's epilogue, "On Talking with Students," wrestled with the challenge of meeting students where they are socially, economically, and academically, and building systems that can be both reflexive and

proactive in meeting the needs of a diverse group of learners while maintaining the ultimate goal of the pursuit of knowledge and engagement in academe. An area of ongoing discussion would therefore include the ways in which higher education institutions can improve inclusivity for students with diverse goals and backgrounds while upholding the core principles to which Neem is deeply committed. The pursuit of higher education for the value of knowledge itself, unencumbered by grades or strict metrics that are tied ultimately to scholarships and academic “success,” is also an under-studied area, and the implementation of such a policy would represent an almost unfathomable shift to the post-secondary landscape. Neem’s text laid the foundation for research of this kind, which situates student experience and the ultimate pursuit of knowledge at its core. Overall, Neem’s book provided a thorough, strong argument to reconsider the ultimate goal of higher education and implement changes that are in line with these values. The text offers a great deal of value for students, educators, and administrators who seek to consider critically or re-evaluate their practices and education and who wish to (re)orient their work in an ever-changing higher educational landscape.

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