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College: The Undergraduate Experience in America

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Book Review

Harmison: College: The Undergraduate Experience in America

College: The Undergraduate Experience in America, by Ernest L. Boyer. New York: Harper and Row, 1987. 328 pp.

In the four years since the National Commission on Excellence in Education appeared on the scene with *A Nation at Risk*, Americans have exhibited an increased interest in the state of education, its function, its successes, and ultimately its failures. While the focus has shifted from the rudiments of elementary education to the preparatory service of secondary instruction, the interest has far from abated. Now, with texts such as **Cultural Literacy** by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., and Allan Bloom's **The Closing of the American Mind** topping the non-fiction bestseller lists, the examination of this nation's institutions of higher education is at hand.

The most recent study by The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching is detailed in **College: The Undergraduate Experience in America** by Ernest L. Boyer. A companion to **High School: A Report on Secondary School in America**, the current text explores the next step on the continuum of knowledge, baccalaureate education. Focusing on eight primary problems identified by the Carnegie group as undermining the success of higher education, Boyer examines each not only from the standpoint of the individual, but likewise endeavors to analyze the implication the insufficiency of knowledge will have on the nation and

While the unearthing of problems in colleges and universities is obligatory in any such analysis, it is perhaps Boyer's attention to the role the college graduate will play in society that sets this study apart from the rest. What is college doing to prepare students for democratic leadership? Are steps being taken to close the gap between public policy and public understanding? Do graduates understand and appreciate the dignity of work? To Boyer the dual traditions of individuality and community in higher education must work in harmony:

"Colleges . . . should help students become independent, self-reliant human beings, yet they should also give priority to community . . . To serve private priorities while neglecting social obligations is, ultimately, to undermine self-interest."

With this study and the resulting analysis, Boyer and the members of The Carnegie Foundation call for a reduction of the depersonalization of the college experience. As the university setting is ideally to represent society at large, effort must be made to reduce the distancing of the student from his world. To meet the needs of the global community, that which is learned must be applicable to "humane ends."

The philosophical nature of this inquiry makes Boyer's text both readable and thought-provoking. While intended as a guidebook for American higher education, the tenets set forth by this study are no less relevant to institutions of higher learning throughout the world.

Reviewed by Susan Day Harmison
Book Review Editor