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## Debating the Role of Higher Education in Society

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## Debating the Role of Higher Education in Society

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the narrowness of their interests. Those concerned with student debt and the lack of applied skills some graduates possess question the value of broad liberal arts learning. Institutions offering liberal arts type curricula defend their programs as being essential to a nation of people who have transformative power beyond the classroom, their discipline, and ultimately the university. Roth's book is most powerful in demonstrating that this debate has a long and convoluted history that takes the discussion 'beyond the university' and into the broader context of views on equity in society. He begins by discussing Thomas Jefferson's thinking behind his push to create the University of Virginia as a liberal alternative to the heavily prescribed curricula that dominated the Ivy League schools in New England. The book then deeply analyses some of the discussions on the role of education in society throughout history, some between major political figures (such as W. E. B. DuBois versus Booker T. Washington) and others by prominent figures reacting to what they perceived as the intellectual inertia of their time (e.g., Ralph Waldo Emerson, Benjamin Franklin, and Jane Addams). At times, reformers called upon the existing model to improve. In other cases, some felt that change could only occur if new institution types were created.

Faculty interested in reflecting on their role in the classroom, the research community, and the university's role in society will find this book to be a refreshing, holistic treatise of the ivory tower, unlike the pedantic ideas that tend to dominate today's discourse on higher education. Faculty book groups can use this book to engage in broad discussions with each other on how their particular institutions prepare students relative to historical and contemporary approaches. Personally, I found the debates on the history of education to have striking relevance to today's discussions on attrition and retention of traditionally underrepresented groups. In a similar way, I believe faculty will find new ways to contextualize their own efforts within a broader goal of creating a highly educated populace.

Given that Mr. Roth is president of one of the nation's foremost liberal arts colleges, it is tempting to see his work as a defense of an institution type in which he is personally invested. This view, however, should not take away from one of the few works of scholarship that dares to discuss institutional reform beyond teaching tools, teaching approaches, economics and diversity. He challenges us to rethink the university's entire mission as an organization meant to create educated citizenry, and the often fraught relationship we have with the society we are meant to serve. As higher education institutions continue to push reform agendas, especially with respect to teaching, this work can serve to re-engage faculty in a broader, deeper thought process about their craft, and the obligation these institutions have to society at large.

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### **Debating the Role of Higher Education in Society**

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Review of: *Beyond the University: In Defense of Liberal Education*, Michael S. Roth; (2014). Yale University Press, New Haven, CT. 228 pages

The value of a college degree these days might depend on who you ask. Economists report that, on average, the earnings of a Bachelor's degree holder will be greater than someone without one. Tell that to an underemployed middle-eastern-studies major mired in \$100,000 of debt and you might receive a slightly different opinion. Higher education institutions across the country are also going through a certain amount of forced rebranding. Shrinking federal dollars for research funding and a nationwide call to revamp pedagogy (especially in STEM) have led to multiple reports, peer-reviewed literature, and news articles calling for a new reflection on the role that higher education plays in society (1).

*Beyond the University*, by Wesleyan College President Michael S. Roth, provides exactly the kind of reflection this national conversation needs. By definition, stakeholders in this debate are primed to frame these discussions within

**REFERENCES**

1. **Cummings, W. K., and J. C. Shin.** (2014). Teaching and research in contemporary higher education: an overview, p 1–12. *In* Shin, J. C., A. Arimoto, W. K. Cummings, and U. Teichler (ed.), *Teaching and Research in Contemporary Higher Education*. Springer Science+Business Media, Dordrecht, Netherlands.