

## Preparation for the April 9, 2025, Topical Seminar at the Lewes Library at 3 PM

### Topic: Higher Education

I would suggest that you quickly read through this document and choose the subtopics that most interest you and focus on them. Then write a response of at least 200 words. Writing prompts are at the end, but don't feel bound by them. Approach the topic in any way you choose. **Email your response to [lewesseminar@gmail.com](mailto:lewesseminar@gmail.com) by Monday, April 7.** Before our meeting on Wednesday, April 9, please read the responses submitted by fellow participants.

While some of the linked articles are behind paywalls, they are often accessible by creating a free account or signing up for a trial. Additionally, some articles are available on our website.

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The higher education system in the United States is often considered one of its greatest assets. U.S. universities consistently dominate global rankings, with institutions like Harvard, MIT, and Stanford frequently securing top positions in the QS World University Rankings and the Times Higher Education Rankings. American universities attract a significant number of international students and lead in research funding and innovation.

Supported by federal agencies such as the National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, and the Department of Energy, U.S. universities also produce a substantial share of Nobel Prize winners, groundbreaking technological advancements, and scientific discoveries.

Yet, despite these strengths, higher education in the United States faces significant challenges.

In a recent article for *The New York Times*, Paul Tough reports that public confidence in higher education is declining, with many questioning whether a college education remains a worthwhile investment. This document is also on the website.

Americans Are Losing Faith in the Value of College:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/05/magazine/college-worth-price.html> But

what is the purpose of higher education?

A foundational text on this subject is Clark Kerr's 1963 essay, *The Uses of the University*, presented in his Godkin Lecture. A PDF of this essay is available on our website. Although the essay is lengthy, it is worth reading. Below is a reflection on its impact, and a summary is also available on our website:

Clark Kerr's Classic *The Uses of the University* Turns 50: <https://alumni.berkeley.edu/california-magazine/winter-2013-information-issue/clark-kerrs-classic-uses-university-turns-50/#>

Is higher education solely about the production of knowledge? Robert Rubin argues that it also plays a crucial role in the economy. His article can also be found on our website:

Higher Education Isn't the Enemy: <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2024/05/higher-education-isnt-theenemy/678434/>

Most discussions of higher education focus on universities, or what Kerr calls the “multiversity.” However, higher education encompasses more than just traditional universities. Nearly half of today’s college students are enrolled in community and twoyear colleges, which blend academic education with workforce development and job training while keeping costs manageable.

For further insights into community colleges:

Introduction to Community Colleges:

<https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/introduction-community-collegesstudents.pdf>

The Changing Role of Community Colleges: <https://www.stlouisfed.org/publications/bridges/fall-2009/the-changing-role-ofcommunity-colleges>

(Additional resources are available at the Community College Research Center:

<https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/>.)

Yet public support for higher education has diminished in recent years, and there are notable differences in opinion between Republicans and Democrats.

Colleges Viewed Positively, but Conservatives Express Doubts:

<https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2012/03/01/colleges-viewed-positively-butconservatives-express-doubts/>

What accounts for this decline in confidence? Is it merely a question of the relative economic value of higher education, or are broader cultural issues at play? In recent years, university campuses have been at the center of debates over free speech, the IsraeliPalestinian conflict, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), and accusations of political bias. Criticism of “wokeness” in higher education has become a frequent talking point, with figures such as Vice President J.D. Vance emerging as an outspoken critic.

J.D. Vance on Higher Education: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0FR65Cifnhw>

What stance should universities take on controversial political and social justice issues?

One influential perspective is articulated in the Kalven Report from the University of Chicago, which advocates for a policy of “principled neutrality.”

The Kalven Report:

[https://provost.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/documents/reports/KalvenRprt\\_0.pdf](https://provost.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/documents/reports/KalvenRprt_0.pdf)

In response to recent congressional hearings on campus protests, several universities—including Harvard, the University of Michigan, Vanderbilt, UNC-Chapel Hill, Northwestern, and Stanford—have adopted the University of Chicago’s approach. But is “principled neutrality” a genuinely principled stance, or merely a strategy to avoid political repercussions at the expense of a university’s moral responsibility?

For an alternative perspective, consider:

University Leaders and the Israel-Hamas Conflict: <https://time.com/6339107/universityleaders-voices-israel-hamas-war/>

Discussions about higher education inevitably lead to broader debates about free speech. What does free speech protect, and where are its limits? Moreover, how does it differ from academic freedom? Louis Menand examines these issues in an April 2024 essay for *The New Yorker* (also available on our website):

Academic Freedom Under Fire: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/05/06/academic-freedom-under-fire>

## **Writing Prompts**

### **The Purpose of Higher Education**

- What should be the purpose of a college education?
- What types of post-secondary education or training does society need today?

### **Higher Education and the Culture Wars**

- Why do so many people disparage a college education today?
- How important is academic freedom?
- Do universities have a responsibility to take moral stances on controversial issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

### **The Economics of a College Education**

- Should parents encourage their children to attend college?
- Why does college cost so much? **The Future of Higher Education**
- Why is the percentage of students attending college declining in the U.S. while increasing in most other countries?
- Given the economic, political, and social pressures on higher education, what reforms (if any) would strengthen its role in American society?

- What types of post-secondary training and education should be prioritized?
- Should a college education be for everyone?

## Works Cited

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**Addendum: Rich Harris recommends including the following article for our discussion.**

<https://www.compactmag.com/article/how-business-metrics-broke-the-university/>