The Whole Student

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The first five weeks of this course, I noticed one theme that kept returning to me, higher education has never been neutral, and we still have a long way to go. Higher education is shaped by histories of power, economic ideologies, and institutional decisions that determine who belongs, who benefits, and what success means. For me, higher education should be about cultivating ethical grounding and critical thinkers who can participate meaningfully in society. The classroom, my classroom, is where this purpose becomes real or fails. We can reproduce hierarchy and compliance, or we can create spaces for critique and growth. Whether that transformation happens depends not only on instructors committed to their students, but also on whether institutions and systems support liberation and holistic development or reduce education to a commodity. In this essay, I pull from four readings that deeply resonated with me and challenged me to think about difficult questions. I explore how they shape my understanding of what higher education should be, what role classrooms should play, and what forces help or hinder institutions in achieving this purpose.

bell hooks (1994) describes education as "the practice of freedom," emphasizing teaching that respects students as whole people and invites them into critical awareness and engagement. In that sense, higher education is not simply the transfer of information or accumulation of credentials, it is a transformative process that supports intellectual, social, and ethical development. I like this because it keeps the human aspects of education front and center. In my own classroom, I see this most clearly when students engage deeply not during lectures, but when they are invited to question, discuss, and connect course material to their lived experiences. The purpose of higher education, then, should be to expand students' capacities to interpret the world, ask questions, communicate across differences, and make thoughtful decisions that affect not only themselves but also their families, workplaces, and communities.

At the same time, a meaningful understanding of higher education's purpose must begin with honesty about its history. Nash (2019) argues that land grant colleges, often celebrated as "democracy's colleges," were materially enabled by Indigenous dispossession and functioned as part of settler colonial expansion. This challenges narratives that present higher education as inherently benevolent or purely democratizing. If institutions were built through extraction and erasure, then a modern purpose rooted in democratic values must include accountability beyond symbolic gestures. Learning this history has changed how I understand the institutions I participate in. It has made me more aware that teaching within higher education also means teaching within systems shaped long before any of us entered them.

Defining the purpose of higher education also requires resisting the narrowing effects of neoliberal ideology. Mintz (2021) explains how neoliberal assumptions, privatization, market competition, reduced public investment, and personal responsibility, have reshaped higher education into a marketplace where students become "customers" and education becomes a private investment rather than a public good. When education is framed primarily as job training or return on investment, its democratic function weakens. Intellectual exploration and ethical growth become secondary to value defined by earnings and rankings. I see this tension regularly when students ask whether an assignment will be "on the test" or directly tied to a career skill rather than asking what they might learn from it. A stronger purpose would hold multiple goods together, workforce preparation, democratic participation, and human development.

Purpose must also account for students as whole people rather than academic outputs. Blankstein and Wolff Eisenberg (2020) argue that traditional student success measures, often focused on retention, credit accumulation, and completion, miss key dimensions of the "whole student," particularly in community colleges. In my own work with community college students, I have

witnessed how factors like work schedules, caregiving responsibilities, and financial stress shape academic performance far more than motivation alone. If higher education truly aims to broaden opportunity and strengthen democracy, institutions must care about whether students are supported, not just whether they persist through systems that may not be designed for them.

If the purpose of higher education is democratic, holistic, and accountable, then classrooms are more than instructional sites, they function as civic and ethical training grounds whether we intend them to or not. hooks (1994) emphasizes engaged pedagogy, where students are not passive consumers but active participants linking reflection with practice. In classrooms shaped by this approach, students learn that their voices matter, that knowledge is constructed through dialogue, and that learning connects to life. This is especially important for students who have been taught, through schooling or social messages, that education is about compliance and proving worth through performance.

Classrooms also carry a responsibility to confront institutional histories and present day inequities. Nash (2019) shows that higher education's foundations include the systematic production of Indigenous absence and the normalization of dispossession. A classroom that takes purpose seriously cannot treat these histories as side notes. Instead, it should help students develop what might be called institutional literacy, the ability to understand how policies, funding structures, and traditions shape who benefits and who is harmed. This kind of literacy is not about guilt, it is about ethical clarity and informed participation. I have found that when students are invited into these conversations, they often become more engaged rather than less because they begin to see education as connected to real systems rather than abstract theory.

At the same time, classrooms are where neoliberal pressures often appear most clearly. Mintz (2021) describes how the student as customer model changes campus priorities, often expanding amenities and services while instructional spending declines proportionally. In that environment, classrooms can drift toward customer satisfaction rather than rigorous learning, and students may approach coursework as a transaction, minimal effort for maximum credential payoff. I have encountered this mindset in subtle ways, such as students calculating the minimum work needed for a grade rather than focusing on what they might gain intellectually. A classroom committed to the broader purpose of higher education must push against this logic so that education is not merely purchased but practiced.

Classrooms are also one of the most immediate places to operationalize whole student commitments. Blankstein and Wolff Eisenberg (2020) note that many student success frameworks overlook belonging, wellbeing, and basic needs. When students experience classrooms as humane, structured, and intellectually engaging, their participation often increases because they feel seen and capable rather than simply evaluated.

Several forces block institutions from fully achieving a democratic, holistic purpose. One is the structural weight of history. Nash (2019) demonstrates that higher education's growth was entangled with settler colonial projects, including dispossession and erasure. That legacy persists when institutions treat land acknowledgements as sufficient, when curricula remain narrowly centered, or when equity efforts are disconnected from budgeting and decision making. In these cases, history becomes a present day barrier because institutions preserve comforting origin stories rather than confronting entangled pasts and material responsibilities.

A second barrier is neoliberal marketization. Mintz (2021) argues that long term funding changes and ideology have helped produce the student as customer phenomenon and a related cost crisis. When public funding declines, institutions compensate through tuition dependence, enrollment competition, marketing, and prestige seeking strategies. Recruitment and revenue become survival priorities, often crowding out investments in instruction, community partnerships, and equitable access.

A third barrier involves narrow definitions of success. Blankstein and Wolff Eisenberg (2020) show that traditional metrics often reduce student success to what is easiest to measure rather than what matters most in students' lives. This is especially harmful for community college students balancing employment, caregiving, and financial pressures. When institutions define success primarily through completion metrics, they may unintentionally reward practices that improve numbers without improving student experience.

Still, some forces can help higher education move closer to its purpose. Engaged pedagogy is one. hooks (1994) argues that teaching grounded in respect, participation, and wholeness can foster critical awareness and agency. Institutional honesty is another. Nash (2019) suggests that confronting historical realities and building meaningful relationships beyond symbolic statements can reshape institutional priorities. A third is adopting holistic student success frameworks that recognize belonging, wellbeing, and support systems as educational concerns rather than distractions (Blankstein & Wolff Eisenberg, 2020). When institutions invest in instruction, advising, mental health resources, and culturally responsive teaching, and when those supports are integrated rather than isolated, students are more likely to thrive.

In my view, the purpose of higher education should be to cultivate whole people who can participate in democratic life with awareness, skill, and care. Collegiate classrooms are central to this purpose because they shape how students experience knowledge, belonging, power, and possibility. Yet higher education's ability to meet this purpose is constrained by histories of dispossession (Nash, 2019), market logics that frame education as a commodity (Mintz, 2021), and narrow success measures that overlook lived realities (Blankstein & Wolff Eisenberg, 2020). hooks (1994) offers a compelling direction forward, engaged pedagogy that treats learning as a practice of freedom. For higher education to fulfill its promise today, institutions must align their missions, resources, metrics, and classroom practices with that liberatory and holistic vision so education becomes not just an individual investment, but a public good grounded in truth, accountability, and human growth.

References

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