

# THE CHRONICLE of Higher Education

## PEOPLE

# How Academe Can Retrieve Its Good Name



Steven Jamison Exum  
Holden Thorp (left) and Buck Goldstein

By Peter Monaghan | NOVEMBER 25, 2018

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What can higher education do to reverse public and political skepticism about it — even hostility toward it?

More than anything, say Holden Thorp and Buck Goldstein in *Our Higher Calling: Rebuilding the Partnership Between America and Its Colleges and Universities* (University of

North Carolina Press), American higher education must work to restore the compact that has long underpinned it — a tacit agreement in which academe produces knowledge and well-educated citizens in exchange for stable public investment and the autonomy to get on with its job.

The standing of higher education is in peril, so "we now need to make explicit the terms of the partnership," write Thorp, provost at Washington University in St. Louis, who holds appointments in chemistry and medicine, and Goldstein, a professor of the practice in economics and the entrepreneur in residence at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

They suggest that higher education should present cogent statements describing its place in the compact. Administrators, faculty members, and trustees must emphasize academe's historical strengths and accomplishments while better aligning their institutions with contemporary needs and social demands, like career readiness. For most of higher education, Goldstein said in an interview, this is not the time to press for "a more pristine academic model that talks about knowledge for its own sake."

Thorp, a former chancellor at Chapel Hill, agrees. He said administrators must say to faculties — often reluctant to hear the message — that higher education has for many decades "been promising the public that they're getting something out of this deal, and it's about jobs and health care and economic development, and we're on the hook to do all of that stuff."

But, he said, they also need to tell the public and elected officials: "I know you like investing in our start-up companies, and you like it when the university is driving jobs in your town, and you like being able to come to an academic medical center for world-class medical care, but we can't give you all of those things without tenure and academic freedom and shared governance."

His and Goldstein's blueprint for raising American higher education's public standing includes accentuating positives — by saying, for instance, that, yes, enrollment can be expensive, but low-income students, if they shop carefully, can avail themselves of many sources of financial support to bring even elite institutions within reach.

Goldstein and Thorp also argue, however, that laying fresh claim to the compact requires that higher-education officials and faculty members own up to shortcomings. Those include a recent history of misconstruing students as "customers" and faculty members as "employees," while measuring outcomes primarily in terms of graduates' hiring and salary metrics and programs' performance as profit centers.

Many institutions have embraced an unsustainable business model in recent decades, they write, engaging in a sort of arms race, spending money they didn't have, "all in the name of increased prestige, more students, and improving the brand."

But won't Thorp and Goldstein's manifesto, which argues for pitching anew an understanding of what higher education's "higher calling" has long been, simply further provoke critics?

No, the authors contend, not if colleges' statements about their appropriate role are judicious and supported by such actions as paying greater heed to the realistic job prospects of the graduate students they admit for long, expensive training.

The stakes, Thorp and Goldstein assert, are high, because "virtually every American has a direct or indirect stake in our system of higher education." Indeed, they write, "it is critical to the national interest that American higher education grow and flourish in the face of the obstacles it is now facing."

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