New Englanders continue to provide leadership in criticizing higher education for too narrow a definition of mission and purpose. Producing research papers and competent graduates cannot be the only measures of success.

Universities also have civic responsibilities and, as former Harvard University President Derek Bok pointed out a decade ago, these should include attention to the unsolved issues of poverty, inequality, hunger, disease, racial injustice and crime. Ernest Boyer while at Carnegie asked whether people might think colleges and universities were part of the problem.

What’s worse, a bipartisan national commission chaired by Democratic ex-Sen. Sam Nunn and Republican William Bennett discussed the decline in citizen participation including voting, without ever analyzing whether our colleges might help reverse the decline. Other than Robert Putnam of “Bowling Alone” fame, do faculty members care and could colleges make a difference?

New Englanders, led by Zelda Gamson, then at the University of Massachusetts Boston, and former Indiana University President Thomas Ehrlich, once of Cambridge, chair an American Council of Education (ACE) Commission on Civic Engagement.


Civic Responsibility features the working papers and best presentations from a major ACE session on what different types of colleges have done or might do to elevate the priorities of service and citizenship.

Ehrlich and Elizabeth Hollander of the Campus Compact based at Brown promulgate a “Declaration of Civic Responsibility of Higher Education” signed by dozens of campus presidents to dramatize the potential of university initiatives. Bentley professor Ed Zlotkowski reviews the enlightened decisions by more than 20 academic societies from Accounting to Zoology to incorporate service-learning in course offerings and programs, described in a full series of volumes produced through the American Association for Higher Education with support from the Pew Charitable Trusts.

University of Vermont President Judith Ramaley argues that older notions of public service or professional service by faculty should be subsumed under the broader term “civic engagement” in collaboration with communities. The faculty role must be redefined and rewards provided for faculty who apply their research to serve the public good. Hampshire College President Gregory Prince calls for a new public philosophy, a commitment to promoting social change, both individually and institutionally. He praises Connecticut College and Marlboro College for embracing total community participation as a vital strategy.

Teaching and research remain core functions of any university but service and citizenship were seen as fundamentals by early founders including Ben Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. Most of this volume calls for a restoration and renewed commitment to citizenship education and problem-solving. Legislators, trustees, faculty committee members and administrators should read it to see where our colleges might have lost their way and how the new century might be better served by academia.

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The title itself conjures up Ivy League pomp—and this series of essays edited by Pulitzer Prize-winning Boston
Some of the essays are best left in broadside against computers in education. Among other things, Alison Armstrong and colleague Charles Casement charge that school districts’ headlong rush into technology has come at the expense of art, music and physical education, and they use the Massachusetts town of Mansfield as an example.

But their argument is too choppy to gain strength. Computers cause eye-strain. Classroom computers are out-dated. Computers get stolen. Schools are left high and dry when technology grants run out. Employers want social interaction skills that technology doesn’t teach. At times, it seems as if Armstrong and Casement are seeking revenge for some catastrophic system crash in their pasts.

Their chapter on how the pervasiveness of the computer screen corrupts young readers is well argued. And their point about computers being no replacement for good teachers is well-taken. But even in this, they go overboard. “Computers cannot match a good teacher’s ability to inspire interest and excitement in learning. They cannot speak with passion and commitment about ideas,” the authors note. “Although a computer program may post a word or two of praise when a child gives a correct answer, the computer doesn’t care whether the answer is right or not.”

(For a more constructive assessment, consult Tech Savvy, the recent report by the American Association of University Women Educational Foundation, which recommends, among things: “The focus for professional development needs to shift from mastery of the hardware to the design of classroom materials, curricula and teaching styles that complement computer technology.”)

Armstrong and Casement leave the reader thinking that there really are arguments to be made against excessive reliance on computers in education. But they don’t make them.

John O. Harney is executive editor of Connection.

The New Boob Tube
John O. Harney


Just as some innovative American schools—and at least one governor—begin talking of laptops for every child, a pair of Canadian writers launch a