



What women knew about universities long before we asked.

Women Who Refused to Let Universities Off the Hook.

WISDOM ... RECOVERED · ISSUE 02

Prof. Bassem Khafagy
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WISDOM ... FORGOTTEN · ISSUE 02

In This Issue

March 8th of every year is International Women's Day, and we chose for this issue to return to two academic female voices whose wisdom can shape how we think about what universities owe to those who enter them.

We did not choose these two books only because their authors are women. We chose them because their arguments are essential, and because the field of higher education has not yet given them the weight they deserve. That the two most urgent voices in this issue happen to be women is not a footnote. It is a fact worth naming.

Martha Nussbaum asks what kind of human being the university is producing. Kathleen deLaski asks whether the university was ever designed for the majority of learners who walk through its doors. Both questions cut at the core of what universities can become. Their ideas have been circling the edges of mainstream discourse for years, cited in footnotes, assigned in seminars, and rarely acted upon.

This week, we bring them to the center.

Dr. Christopher Washington and I each bring a different book to every edition, a different lens, a different experience. But we share a conviction: the future university will not emerge from incremental adjustment. It will emerge from the courage to remember what we once knew and the imagination to act on it. We invite you not just to read, but to respond, to challenge, to build with us.

To those who dare to reimagine.



ARTICLE ONE

Excellence in Education After the Degree Monopoly

Re-reading Kathleen deLaski as *Wisdom Reappearing* · Christopher Washington, Ph.D.

What does educational excellence look like when learning occurs and is valued close to where human competence is applied? How might universities help learners update their competencies more frequently, especially those skills for learners whom college was never originally designed?

These questions sit at the center of Kathleen deLaski's *Who Needs College Anymore? Imagining a Future Where Degrees Won't Matter*, a book that explores how learning pathways are rapidly changing in an economy where human competence requirements evolve faster than the speed of traditional degree cycles.

A former ABC News reporter and longtime education policy leader, deLaski does not argue for the end of college. Instead, she examines how colleges and universities might adapt to a world in which learners update their knowledge and skills more frequently, and move in and out of education across their working lives.

DeLaski's thesis raises a more unsettling possibility. She asks whether the degree monopoly, the popular assumption that educational excellence culminates in a four-year credential, serves the broadest population of learners in a labor market organized around continuously evolving skills.

“Who needs college anymore?” is not posed as an anti-intellectual question. It is a structural one.

It asks whether colleges and universities can redesign the architecture of learning to incorporate shorter, more adaptable forms of education, including micro-credentials, that respond to rapidly changing occupational demands and to a broader population of learners whose needs do not align with the traditional four-year degree or the rhythms of a conventional academic calendar.

In other words, the question is not whether universities should abandon degrees. It is whether they can expand their learning ecosystem to include modular, stackable pathways that allow individuals to enter, exit, and return to learning as professional and technological conditions evolve.

According to *Micro-Credential Innovations in Higher Education: Who, What, and Why?* from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, higher education systems around the world are already confronting this transition. The report documents how short-form credentials, initially developed by non-university providers, are increasingly being adopted by universities themselves as institutions attempt to respond to shifting labor market signals and new patterns of lifelong learning.

The significance of this shift is not merely technical. It reopens an older question that universities have confronted at several points in their history: how closely should learning opportunities align with occupational and professional opportunity?

In that sense, the current debate about micro-credentials may represent less a rupture with the past than a rediscovery of a persistent challenge, how universities can sustain intellectual depth while remaining connected to the evolving structure of work and society.

When Degrees and Work Were Aligned

DeLaski's central insight is that the college degree once mapped tightly onto vocation. When her ancestor John Wise graduated from Harvard in 1673, the institution trained ministers. Learning and livelihood were closely aligned. However, as the twentieth century unfolded and occupations diversified, what one learned in college and the knowledge, skill and ability needed for employment began to diverge. The degree remained the currency, but the alignment frayed.

Excellence in education once meant coherence between education and vocation. Today, that coherence is contested.

Universities did not lose their intellectual mission. Instead, the degree gradually came to carry more weight than it was originally designed to bear, serving simultaneously as education, occupational signal, and gateway to opportunity. Over time these purposes fused into a single pathway that became a surrogate for academic excellence and workforce preparation.

The current conversation about micro-credentials and alternative pathways is therefore not entirely new. It is part of an ongoing effort to restore the link between learning, signaling what one has learned, and opportunities in society and professions.

Durable Skills: Excellence That Becomes Invisible

There are friction points in higher education today when it comes to realigning learning to opportunities. Critics often assume that competency-based movements diminish liberal learning. DeLaski resists that framing. Durable skills, critical thinking, collaboration, and creative problem-solving, are, she argues, as important as ever. Employers say so. Surveys confirm it.

The problem is not their importance. It is their invisibility. Students complete what she calls the “four-year gauntlet” of university coursework, and many graduate unable to signal these capacities in ways employers recognize. Excellence may be experienced in the university but not translated beyond it. Academic transcripts often list courses completed rather than competencies.

This is a painful tension for institutions committed to educational depth. If liberal learning truly cultivates durable skills, why do so many graduates struggle to articulate them? And if they cannot be articulated, can students reasonably be expected to trust that they exist?

For deLaski, the challenge is not to abandon excellence but to make it legible.

From “College for All” to “Pathways for All”

DeLaski’s shift from college-for-all advocate to pathway pluralist reflects experience rather than ideology. During the early 2000s, expanding access to four-year institutions for low-income and first-generation students felt morally urgent. But as completion data accumulated, a harsher reality emerged: access without completion is an empty promise of equity.

This creates a tension higher education cannot easily resolve.

- If the degree remains the primary route to mobility, expanding access is essential.
- If many students do not complete, insisting on a single pathway becomes ethically problematic.

Academic excellence cannot mean designing a single learner pathway and expecting everyone to succeed within it. Nor can it mean lowering standards to improve completion statistics. It must mean building multiple high-quality pathways that cultivate capabilities and support one's economic dignity. In this sense, deLaski offers up a higher bar for academic excellence, not a lower one.

Micro-credentials and the Return of Plural Pathways

Universities are no longer the sole designers of valued learning credentials. Increasingly, they are participants in a wider ecosystem of learning. As the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development observes, many micro-credential systems initially developed outside traditional academic structures and only later attracted university participation.

In this sense, universities are not so much inventing alternative learning pathways as rediscovering and reconnecting with a broader ecosystem of learning that has long existed alongside formal degrees. Apprenticeships, professional training, and workplace learning have historically served as parallel routes through which individuals acquire valued knowledge and skills.

Yet the emergence of micro-credentials introduces new challenges for universities. Because many programs originated outside the traditional processes of faculty design, peer review, and accreditation, the micro-credential landscape can appear to some educators as an evolving and unevenly structured learning marketplace, one expanding rapidly while shared definitions, quality standards, and assessment practices continue to develop.

The deeper issue, however, is not simply one of quality control. Universities now face a strategic choice within this emerging learning ecosystem. The real question for academic leaders is not whether micro-credentials will exist. It is whether universities will help define their standards or inherit them from others.

DeLaski points to early university efforts such as data collaboratives, shared naming conventions, and industry infrastructures designed to bring coherence and transparency to the evolving credential landscape within the context of higher education.

Skills Wallets and the Future Transcript

Perhaps the most provocative element of deLaski's vision is the skills wallet, a next-generation learner record organized around competencies rather than courses. The implications are substantial.

The “skills wallet” is a next-generation learner record organized around competencies rather than courses.

A dynamic transcript showing skill adjacencies, career pathways, and learning gaps could transform learner advising and planning. Learners might approach higher education as a stepladder rather than a single leap.

Skillification and Intellectual Formation

For Kathleen deLaski, faculty concerns about excessive skillification are legitimate. Reducing education to discrete competencies risks fragmenting intellectual formation. Design thinking, historical interpretation, and moral reasoning resist easy modularization.

Strong curriculum design therefore must hold two commitments simultaneously.

1. Knowledge has intrinsic value, cultivating habits of mind that cannot be reduced to checklists.
2. Learners deserve clarity about what they can demonstrate and do.

These tensions grow sharper as artificial intelligence enters the learning process, accelerating both personalization and the potential fragmentation of knowledge.

Who Still Needs College?

DeLaski's answer to the question is pragmatic. Some learners may thrive through alternative pathways: connected career switchers, motivated independent learners, apprenticeship participants, and what she calls “maybe-laters.” Others continue to benefit profoundly from universities.

- Learners seeking upward mobility.
- Those entering licensed professions.
- Those seeking institutional legitimacy.

The implication is subtle but significant: the key performance indicator for higher education shifts from universal attendance to alignment among learner, pathway, and aspiration.

Wisdom Reappearing

DeLaski’s provocation is not that degrees will disappear. It is that the degree’s historical monopoly over recognized learning pathways is weakening. Universities can respond to this emerging learning ecosystem not by abandoning degrees, but by strengthening their role within it. This means:

- Designing stepladder pathways from credentials to degrees.
- Embedding verifiable competencies within broader intellectual programs.
- Partnering honestly with employers and professional communities.
- Preserving spaces for intellectual depth, civic formation, and discovery.

At their best, universities have never been defined by a single credential. They have been architects of opportunity, helping learners move between knowledge, work, and purpose across a lifetime.

The deeper question, then, is not whether the degree will survive. It is whether higher education will remember that excellence has never belonged to a single pathway.

Christopher Washington

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11 March 2026

ABOUT THE BOOK	
TITLE	Who Needs College Anymore? Imagining a Future Where Degrees Won’t Matter
AUTHOR	Kathleen deLaski
PUBLISHER	Harvard Education Press
YEAR	2025
PAGES	272
ISBN	978-1-68253-952-1
CORE INSIGHT	Higher education was designed for a student who no longer represents the majority. By placing human-centered design at the heart of institutional reform, universities can rebuild around the learners they have been failing, before the learners stop coming entirely.

#WisdomForgotten #KathleendeLaski #FutureOfWork #WorkforceDevelopment #LifelongLearning #AIinEducation #ArtificialIntelligence
#EducationReform



ARTICLE TWO

When Machines Master Expertise

The University Forgot Its Most Important Question · Prof. Bassem Khafagy

We measure everything a university produces. Except the one thing that actually matters. What kind of human being walks out the door?

In 1997, Martha Nussbaum, philosopher and classicist at the University of Chicago, asked that question with the full weight of Western philosophy behind her. *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* is not a book about curriculum reform. It is a reckoning with the soul of higher education itself.

Nussbaum did not invent the question. Socrates asked it first. She simply refused to let universities pretend they had answered it.

Her argument is built on three capacities she insists every university must deliberately cultivate, in every student, across every discipline.

The first is critical self-examination. Not the examination of others' ideas, but the willingness to interrogate the assumptions we carry without knowing we carry them. Socrates called the unexamined life not worth living. Nussbaum calls the unreflective citizen the greatest threat democracy faces.

The second is world citizenship. The capacity to see oneself as bound to all human beings by ties of concern that no border, culture, or tradition can dissolve. Not the erasure of identity, but the expansion of it.

The third is narrative imagination. The ability to enter another person's life, to feel what they feel, and to act from that understanding rather than from fear or indifference.

Socrates called the unexamined life not worth living. Nussbaum calls the unreflective citizen the greatest threat democracy faces.

These are not decorative virtues. They are, as Nussbaum argues, the prerequisites of democratic life itself. Her warning has grown sharper with every passing year: “There is no greater threat to democracy than the unreflective, assertive citizen.”

Read that again. Not the uneducated citizen. The unreflective one.

Universities in the late twentieth century faced a choice. They could hold the Socratic line, insisting that education exists to form human beings capable of living thoughtfully in a complex world. Or they could surrender to the logic of the market, measuring their value exclusively in employment outcomes and economic returns. Most chose the second path. Quietly, without announcing it.

Nussbaum saw it happening and named it. She visited classrooms across America, at research universities, small liberal arts colleges, and religious institutions, and documented both the courage of those who held the line and the cost paid by those who abandoned it. What she found was that the institutions producing genuinely reflective, genuinely engaged citizens were not the most prestigious. They were the most intentional.

The institutions producing genuinely reflective, genuinely engaged citizens were not the most prestigious. They were the most intentional.

The crisis of democratic life we witness today, the collapse of civic reasoning, the hardening of tribal certainty, the disappearance of genuine public deliberation, is not only a political crisis. It is, in part, what happens when universities stop asking what kind of human being they are producing.

Nussbaum’s book does not mourn the past. It insists on the future. A university that takes its mission seriously must ask not only what its graduates can do, but who they have become.

That question was forgotten. It is time to recover it.

To those who dare to reimagine.

Bassem Khafagy

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Prof. Bassem Khafagy, Chairperson, World Universities Foundation · connect@wisdom-forgotten.com · 24 February 2026

ABOUT THE BOOK

TITLE	Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education
AUTHOR	Martha C. Nussbaum
PUBLISHER	Harvard University Press
YEAR	1997
PAGES	338
ISBN	978-0-674-17949-3
CORE INSIGHT	As universities surrender to market logic and measure themselves by employment outcomes alone, they abandon the Socratic mission that democracy depends on: producing citizens capable of critical self-examination, genuine empathy, and reasoned engagement with a complex world.

#WisdomForgotten #MarthaNussbaum #LiberalEducation #HigherEducation #FutureOfEducation



BEFORE YOU GO

Two More Worth Your Time

Two books did not make this issue's main selection, not because they lack merit, but because they arrived too recently to be forgotten. A couple of other books are worth mentioning too.

Mary Beard's *Women and Power: A Manifesto* (2017) traces the Western tradition's deep, structural exclusion of women from public voice, reaching back to Homer and Cicero to explain why universities with the right policies still produce the wrong outcomes.

Sara Ahmed's *Complaint!* (2021) follows that structural argument into the daily reality of institutions, documenting with philosophical rigor what happens to those who challenge power from within.

Together they form a necessary extension of everything Nussbaum and hooks began. If this issue moved something in you, these two will carry it further.

#WisdomForgotten #WomenInAcademia #InternationalWomensDay #FutureOfUniversities #UniversityLeadership #ReImagineUniversity

Read with us ... Think with us ... Reimagine with us.

If you like *Wisdom ... Forgotten*, and want to support it, there are a few ways.

- Forward the newsletter to a colleague with an invitation to join us.
- Share your comments, and let us all learn from you.
- If there is a book that you believe deserves a place in this conversation, tell us. Recommend it. Make the case for it.

About this newsletter • *Wisdom ... Forgotten* is a weekly newsletter by Prof. Bassem Khafagy and Dr. Christopher Washington. Together, they bring six decades of combined experience spanning global higher education strategy, institutional leadership, governance, workforce innovation, and organizational transformation across multiple continents. Each week, this newsletter surfaces ideas from two classic academic works that were often written for moments very much like the one higher education is navigating today, and asks what becomes possible when those insights are brought back into active practice. This newsletter is not a book review. It is a conversation between two thought leaders and a growing community of academics, university leaders, and practitioners who believe the future of the university is strengthened when we reconnect with the intellectual foundations that shaped the field and reinterpret them for today's realities. Many scholars and leaders have carried these ideas forward. Our goal is to help reconnect them to everyday leadership, policy, and institutional design decisions.

Dr. Christopher Washington • Provost Emeritus of Franklin University, is the Founder and CEO of ResiliencePlus Advisors LLC, an executive coaching and advisory firm focused on equipping leaders to navigate complexity, disruption, and rapid organizational change. He also serves as President of the ILI Think Tank at the Innovative Leadership Institute, leading a global network of scholars and senior practitioners advancing the theory and practice of innovative leadership. A contributing author to Forbes Nonprofit Council, Dr. Washington publishes on leadership innovation, organizational culture and performance, and learning ecosystem design.

Prof. Bassem K. Khafagy • An academic leader, best-selling author, award winning researcher, and strategic thinker whose work spans the United States, Europe, and the Middle East. He is currently dedicating his time to rethinking the "University" as a transformative force in society. Prof. Khafagy is the founding force behind several global academic initiatives, most notably the World Universities Foundation, WUF, the World Summit on Universities, WSU, and the Re-Imagine University Newsletter & book series.

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The visual compositions • throughout this newsletter and the series are original works by Prof. Bassem K. Khafagy. They are crafted using advanced technological tools, including artificial intelligence, guided entirely by the author's artistic vision and design sensibility. In a series about reimagining the university, it felt only right that the art itself reflect that spirit of creative possibility.

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