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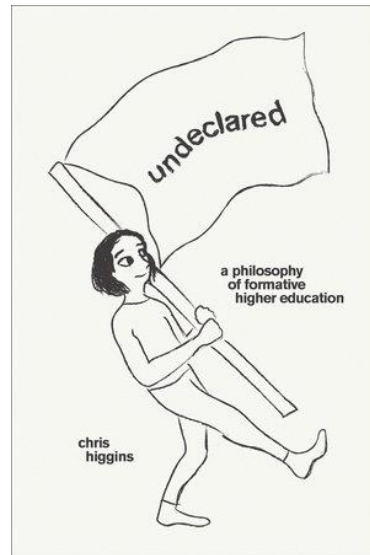
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Chris Higgins and the Question of Formation

Readers of book reviews sometimes wish to know something about the author. And with Chris Higgins' *Undeclared*, some information is warranted, as his own intellectual trajectory is relevant to the book's animating concerns. After undergraduate study in philosophy at Yale, Higgins pursued doctoral work at Teachers College, Columbia University, one of the two most influential American centers for philosophy of education. There he studied under Maxine Greene, whose existential and aesthetic philosophy emphasized imagination and the unfinished character of human becoming, and René Arcilla, who introduced Richard Rorty's anti-foundational pragmatism into the mainstream education discourse.



After completing his doctorate, Higgins joined the faculty at Teachers College and later moved to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the other premier American philosophy of education program, where he rose to become editor-in-chief of *Educational Theory*, the leading journal in the field. By conventional measures, Higgins had achieved considerable success: elite training, appointments at the two strongest doctoral programs in philosophy of education, and leadership of the field's flagship journal.

Illinois proved important for another reason. He there rediscovered his love of undergraduate education while also confronting "the pathologies of the modern multiversity." This sharpened his concern with questions that exceed disciplinary scholarship narrowly conceived: What is college for? How might

¹ This book is available as open access without charge at <https://direct.mit.edu/books/oa-monograph/5780/UndeclaredA-Philosophy-of-Formative-Higher>

universities support all students not merely in acquiring knowledge or credentials but in forming their lives?

In 2019 Higgins left Illinois for Boston College, joining a project aimed at re-centering questions of meaning, purpose, and value in higher education. There, within the university's Ignatian context, Higgins found an institutional setting more hospitable to the questions that preoccupied him. *Undeclared* emerges from this movement in Higgins' career, from narrowly disciplinary philosophy of education toward the more expansive question of human formation.

Undeclared is not an abstract argument about undergraduate education, but a sustained reflection by someone personally engaged in the questions he poses.

The Meaning of *Undeclared*

Undeclared begins with a familiar undergraduate predicament: a student visits Higgins during office hours to confess that he is "undeclared," uncertain about a major and his direction in college and life. To many faculty members, such a condition signals deficit; the student appears confused, delayed in entering the career pipeline. Rather than pathology, Higgins finds seriousness. The student is not drifting passively through college but struggling with who he is and what kind of life might be worth pursuing. Behind selecting a major lies a deeper question: what am I made for, and how shall I live?

In Higgins's hands, the undeclared student becomes a figure for a distinctly human condition: open to possibility, not yet captured by social expectations or inherited scripts. Such openness is uncomfortable, involving uncertainty about selfhood and purpose. Yet Higgins suggests that some version of this uncertainty belongs to anyone seriously engaged in becoming a person. The student in his office becomes an especially visible instance of a condition we all share.

Higgins does not romanticize this condition. Some students experience profound anxiety when confronted with questions of identity and vocation; others avoid them altogether, retreating into defensive routines or instrumental conceptions of education. Yet Higgins insists that colleges must somehow create spaces in which all students can confront such questions.

Undeclared takes this challenge as its point of departure. If students are, in some sense, undeclared, what forms of college life might support their formation? What kinds of teachers, practices, and institutions might sustain it?

***Undeclared* is a Set of Connected Essays, Not a Research Report**

Undeclared is not a scholarly monograph. Higgins does not proceed as a researcher assembling evidence for claims or constructing arguments toward definitive conclusions. Instead, he writes as an essayist in the *belles lettres* tradition of Montaigne: exploratory, reflective, provisional, following suggestive pathways of thought where they lead.

This choice matters. Higgins is not presenting "findings" so much as exploring what it means to live. The essay, an attempt, trial, or experiment, is particularly suited to such questions. Higgins draws freely upon philosophy, literature, aesthetics, history, educational theory, existential thought, Zen practice,

and pragmatism. The effect is less argument than intellectual wandering, illuminating formation from multiple vantage points. Higgins thus becomes something of an undeclared figure himself, approaching college education less as an authority than as a fellow traveler, offering readers not conclusions to accept but pathways of reflection.

The Architecture of *Undeclared*

The book consists of three major essays linked by shorter interludes and organized around a single question: What would it mean for higher education to take formation seriously? The first essay critiques the fragmentation of general education and reclaims the aspiration to educate the whole person. The second turns to Black Mountain College as a “proof of concept” for formative education organized around aesthetic and communal life. The third expands vocational education beyond technical preparation toward ethical development and continued self-cultivation. Together, the essays explore how universities might become places not merely of instruction, but of formation.

Essay 1, Soul Action: General Education and the Problem of Formation

Higgins opens his first essay with an unsettling question: What would it mean to take seriously the aspiration to “educate the whole person”? Universities routinely promise personal growth, civic responsibility, and ethical development. Yet Higgins argues that beneath this rhetoric lies a profound failure. Colleges rarely support the kind of formation they claim to value. Hidden within the platitude of whole-person education are four demanding tasks:

... to discover what you are made of, judge what aspects of yourself are most important to cultivate, develop each to some fullness, and integrate these separate lines of development into a unity of character and outlook. (p. x)

Contemporary general education, Higgins contends, is poorly suited to such work. Students encounter distribution requirements detached from coherent educational purposes. The result is “scattering and smattering”: curricular movement experienced less as sustained reflection than accumulation, boxes checked.

Higgins’s discussion of general education at the University of Illinois provides a vivid illustration. The university presents general education as a “gateway” into a distinctive “Illinois experience.” Instead, students face hundreds of disconnected options satisfying distribution requirements. What appears as freedom becomes bewilderment. Promised a path into university life, students instead encounter what Higgins calls “a labyrinth of forking paths,” a “vast decentered universe.” Of “the Illinois experience,” Higgins remarks, with irony, that “perhaps it is better to say that this maze-walking simply *is* the Illinois experience” (p. 53).

The first essay is thus largely diagnostic: before colleges can claim to educate whole persons, they must confront how existing structures obstruct such formation.

Essay 2, *Wide Awake*: Black Mountain College and the Growing Edge of Experience

Higgins' second essay asks: What might formative education actually look like? Higgins turns to Black Mountain College not as a scalable institutional model but as a "proof of concept" demonstrating that undergraduate life *can* be organized around the work of formation.

Imagine, Higgins suggests, a college built from the ground up to foster the development of the whole person. Faculty are recruited not to fill disciplinary slots but to exemplify "dynamic, integrated personhood." Students are not passive recipients but members of a self-governing educational community. Classes, artistic experimentation, governance, work, meals, and social life all lead to confrontations with enduring tensions of human life: freedom and discipline, individuality and community, work and play, thought and action.

At Black Mountain, a consistent aim was the creation of spaces where students—"including faculty as lead learners"—might encounter situations not yet fully mastered, situations requiring experimentation and heightened attentiveness. Formation depends upon occasions in which settled habits of thought and perception are interrupted.

The phrase "wide awake" names this aspiration; education for awakening of perception and responsiveness, students becoming fully present—more capable of noticing, questioning, and inhabiting experience consciously rather than mechanically.

Such wakefulness, says Higgins, requires teachers who are themselves still engaged in processes of formation - *undeclared teachers* who are themselves still searching, not merely occupying disciplinary roles. The college's extraordinary constellation of artists, writers, musicians, and intellectuals—among them Josef Albers, John Cage, M. C. Richards, Merce Cunningham, and Buckminster Fuller—provided students with unusually vivid examples of adults visibly working through the demands of creative life.

The culminating image of the chapter is Higgins's extended account of John Cage's famous *Theater Piece No. 1*. This radically decentered theatrical arrangement dissolved ordinary distinctions between audience and performance, center and periphery, silence and sound. No privileged viewpoint existed; from every seat one encountered something different. Higgins reads the piece as an educational paradigm. Participants are invited into "the anxious indeterminacy of meaning," confronted with the necessity of attending, selecting, integrating, and making sense. In Higgins's telling, participants gradually recognize that "it is you (they) who have made this whole, you who have directed the performance." (p. 184) Higgins's account of Black Mountain is thus not simply institutional history but a meditation on what kinds of experiences might awaken students to fuller possibilities of selfhood.

Essay 3, *Job Prospects*: Vocational Formation as Humane Learning

In the final essay, Higgins turns to a question central to contemporary higher education: the relationship between college and work. Vocational life itself, he

argues, is formative. Students must acquire skills for employment, but also learn how to grow into forms of work capable of sustaining integrity, service, and continued self-development.

Drawing in part on Alasdair MacIntyre's distinction between practices and institutions, Higgins argues that practices possess internal goods and standards of excellence, yet always exist within institutions that sustain them while also threatening to distort them. Medical care may come to serve the financial logic of hospitals or insurance reimbursement; educational life may become subordinated to revenue-generating structures. Vocational education therefore cannot be limited to technical mastery. More important are larger vocational questions: finding work to which one is suited, cultivating the ethical understanding necessary to practice with integrity and public purpose, learning to grow into and through one's work, and learning to grow out of it, if and when the time comes.

This final requirement seems unusual. Most discussions of vocation emphasize selection, preparation, and advancement. Higgins, however, also asks how one recognizes when a vocation no longer supports growth or service, when institutional logic squeezes the life out of it.

Here one begins to sense a biographical resonance in *Undeclared*. Higgins writes after confronting what he calls the "pathologies of the modern multiversity." His move to Boston College appears retrospectively as an enactment of the very principle he describes. Perhaps Higgins had had enough of the "Illinois experience" and recognized that, in his own terms, the time had come to leave. The book's unusual seriousness may arise in part from this resonance: Higgins writes not only about formation, but as someone evidently still engaged in it.

Reflections

Undeclared is exploratory. Higgins is not arguing for some new, well-defined college program. He is opening an inquiry into what higher education might become if it took formation seriously. Two further questions then seem especially worth pursuing. The first concerns whether the undeclared student adequately represents the undergraduate condition. The second concerns Higgins's embrace of Black Mountain College as a "proof of concept" for formative education and whether earlier traditions of liberal education might offer more promising models.

The Undeclared Student

Higgins is right that the undeclared student is not pathological. Questions of identity and meaning arise throughout life, and higher education has too often pushed them aside or buried them under institutional gibberish. Yet one wonders whether undeclared students represent the undergraduate condition. Higgins treats them not simply as one kind of student but as models for what all students ought to be. College, in his account, should awaken students from inherited scripts and instrumental understandings, inviting reflection on who they are and what they are living for.

In my experience, however, relatively few undergraduates experience themselves this way. Many arrive with settled practical expectations: one goes to college, acquires credentials, enters a profession, and gets on with life. Others attend because there seem few alternatives after high school. Such students may not be seeking self-formation nor expect it from the university. This helps explain resistance to required humanities courses and the temptation to treat education instrumentally, off-loading reading, writing, and reflection to AI tools.

Higgins might reasonably reply that confronting oneself is an unavoidable human task whether students recognize it or not, and colleges fail students when they merely reinforce habitual evasions. Yet one may still ask whether formation is best pursued as a universal requirement. Might formative education function better as a serious *option* within the university rather than an expectation imposed on all? Higgins recognizes that many students are anxious and defended. But if the college experience intentionally loosens inherited identities and routines, who is available to accompany students through the disorientation that may follow? And what happens to the institution if many decide to leave?

Black Mountain as a Formative Education Model

Higgins's discussion of Black Mountain College captures something important. Students are often transformed not simply by ideas but by encounters with accomplished yet unfinished adults. Black Mountain gathered an extraordinary faculty of artists, writers, musicians, and experimenters who modeled lives of creative becoming. Such examples matter.

Higgins is also right to emphasize the formative power of aesthetic and theatrical experience. His account of John Cage's *Theater Piece No. 1* shows how encounters with uncertainty and indeterminacy may bring students to life. Higgins wants students to experience what he calls "the growing edge of experience," where inherited scripts loosen and one becomes more attentive, receptive, and alive. Yet one wonders whether Black Mountain can bear the conceptual weight Higgins places on it. Higgins insists that he offers Black Mountain not as a scalable institutional model but as a "proof of concept." The question, however, is what exactly the proof establishes.

Cage's performance intentionally destabilized coherence and sequence, leaving participants bewildered, left to construct meaning from overlapping fragments. Higgins reads this as an invitation to attentiveness and self-discovery. Yet the episode also recalls the "scattering and smattering" of general education. Some may see Cage's theater piece as a concentrated version of the "Illinois experience." Must students arrive empty handed, constructing meaning all by themselves, wholly through openness and disruption? Or do they require vocabularies, models, and inherited forms of judgment? Can one even encounter the world freshly when arriving unprepared? Or when it is radically indeterminate?

Here one wonders whether Higgins's understandable preoccupation with the failures of the modern multiversity leads him to overlook resources already present in older traditions of university-based liberal education marginalized in the spread of research universities. Formative pedagogical traditions existed

before the rise of the research multiversity, ordered not toward knowledge transmission but toward the shaping of self-expression and character.

Earlier traditions of liberal education understood the teacher's role in explicitly formative terms. The classical grammar master, as described by Henri-Irénée Marrou (1956), did not simply transmit cultural information or literary appreciation. He guided students through a carefully sequenced encounter with important works designed to cultivate judgment, expression, and character.

Even before Quintilian, the grammar master's task had crystallized around a set sequence of stages. *Reading* required close oral engagement attentive to rhythm, meaning, tone, and expressive force. Students learned not merely to decode words but to inhabit language, often memorizing passages and internalizing them through recitation. *Exposition* moved from literal clarification to literary understanding: archaic language was translated into contemporary speech, while students examined themes, imagery, rhetorical devices, and moral tensions. This could be considered *aesthetic* education. The culminating stage, *judgment*, asked students not merely to admire texts but to evaluate them for personal usefulness. Young people studied exemplary figures and forms of excellence in order to *emulate* worthy patterns of speech, conduct, and practical wisdom and take possession of these as their own.

Such education was formative in the strongest sense. Students did not simply encounter openness or indeterminacy; they encountered persons, historical, literary, and philosophical, who struggled with enduring human problems and achieved, failed, or transformed themselves in revealing ways. Just as important, students encountered language itself as something to be judged, absorbed, and eventually possessed responsibly as their own. The point was not antiquarian reverence but self-development through encounters with models worthy of admiration, criticism, or emulation. And as Marrou notes, this pattern, with only minor modifications, persisted for two millennia, from the Hellenistic period until the rise of the research university.

Alexander Meiklejohn's Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin offers another "proof of concept," one squarely within the liberal arts tradition. Organized around what Meiklejohn called "important books," both canonical and contemporary, the program invited students to place older and newer voices into conversation about present concerns. Like Higgins, Meiklejohn (1932) understood college as a place for self-discovery and civic formation. Yet rather than continual experimentation at the edge of experience, students encountered sustained opportunities for reflection through texts, dialogue, theater, journalism, and participation in the wider university community. Formation emerged through disciplined engagement with inherited forms rather than their suspension.

Higgins rightly emphasizes theater at Black Mountain as a stage upon which students might try on selves and discover dimensions of themselves otherwise hidden. Meiklejohn also encouraged participation in theater, music, journalism, and the broader cultural resources of the university. But rather than constructing an entirely separate world, Meiklejohn sought to build a formative "college

within the college,” drawing on artistic, intellectual, and civic opportunities already present in the larger university.

Higgins rightly insists that institutional stability and longevity are poor measures of educational value. Experimental institutions may do extraordinary work precisely because they remain provisional, resisting the hardening of routines and external ends. Yet generativity may also matter: Can an educational experiment inspire imitation, adaptation, and renewal in new circumstances?

By this measure, Meiklejohn’s experiment deserves close attention. Its significance lies not only in what happened at Wisconsin between 1927 and 1932, but in the experiments it inspired. Joseph Tussman, himself a graduate of Meiklejohn’s Experimental College and later chair of philosophy at Berkeley, consciously revived the model during the upheavals of the 1960s. Similar experimentation appeared in Thomas Alexander’s New College at Teachers College, while Wisconsin itself still carries forward Meiklejohn’s spirit through its Integrated Liberal Studies, a small formative college within the larger university.

Black Mountain College shows what can happen when extraordinary artists and teachers create a radically experimental educational community. Meiklejohn suggests that formative liberal education may also be adaptable to ordinary universities, responsive to periods of cultural disruption, and capable of renewal without reconstructing the university from the ground up.

Universities need not become Black Mountain Colleges in order to take formation more seriously. Existing resources, theater, arts, journalism, civic organizations, and sustained mentorship, can be brought into closer relation to Higgins’s formative aims without radical institutional reconstruction. At the same time, Higgins is surely right that some students seek a more searching period of self-examination and self-transformation. For these genuinely undeclared students, colleges within colleges, along the lines of Meiklejohn and Tussman, may offer especially promising models: intentionally formative environments situated within the larger university and responsive to the distinctive concerns of a generation.

To conclude, Higgins leaves us not with formulas but with questions. Whatever institutional forms emerge, *Undeclared* succeeds in forcing us to remember that college education concerns not only what students know or what marketable skills they acquire, but what kinds of individuals they may become. Further discussion of undergraduate education reform will have to start from there.

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About the Reviewer



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