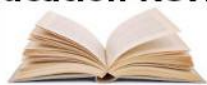


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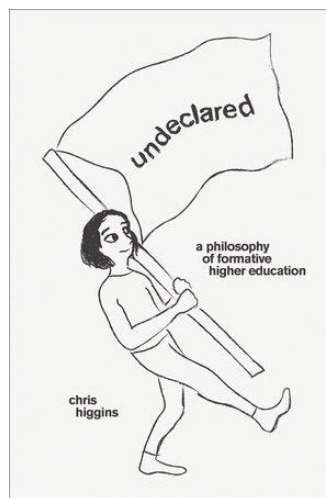
Higgins, C. (2024). *Undeclared: A philosophy of formative higher education*. The MIT Press.¹

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Chris Higgins's *Undeclared: A Philosophy of Formative Higher Education* appears at a moment when universities across much of the world face mounting pressures of marketization, credentialism, and political instrumentalization. In contemporary higher education discourse, institutions are frequently framed as engines of workforce preparation, innovation pipelines, or credential factories, while questions of meaning, character, and purpose are increasingly marginalized. Higgins situates his work within this shifting landscape, offering a philosophical critique of how contemporary universities increasingly operate through corporate branding and managerial logics, developments that contribute to the broader displacement of formative educational aims. Rather than proposing technical reforms, the book seeks to recover the deeper purposes of higher education by revisiting the idea that universities should contribute to the formation of persons.



Higgins's approach draws on a wide range of philosophical traditions, including Aristotelian ethics, Deweyan pragmatism, and hermeneutic philosophy associated with figures such as Gadamer and Oakeshott. These influences are evident in the book's emphasis on education as a process of formation that integrates knowing, valuing, feeling, and acting into a coherent life orientation. In the opening essay, Higgins critiques the familiar slogan of "educating the whole person," arguing that the phrase often functions as a truism that masks the demanding task of formation rather than clarifying it (see pp. 13–16). Genuine formation, he suggests, requires sustained reflection on one's capacities, commitments, and aspirations, as well as engagement with intellectual traditions that help individuals orient themselves in the world.

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

Within the broader literature on higher education, *Undeclared* engages directly with influential critiques of the modern university. Higgins invokes Bill Readings's diagnosis of the university as a "ruined institution," using this claim as a point of departure for examining the contemporary transformation of academic life (p. 1). In the interlude titled "Campus Tour," he explores how corporatization, managerial governance, and brand-driven institutional strategies have reshaped universities, often subordinating intellectual and civic purposes to market imperatives. Yet Higgins does not embrace the pessimism that sometimes accompanies such critiques. Instead, he argues that universities still possess the resources to sustain meaningful forms of intellectual and ethical life, provided educators remain attentive to the formative dimensions of learning.

The book's central concept—"formative higher education"—is developed most fully in the first essay, "Soul Action." Here Higgins proposes that education should be understood not merely as the acquisition of knowledge but as a process through which individuals cultivate coherence between thought, action, and character. Formation, in this sense, is inseparable from ethical reflection and self-interpretation. By framing education as an ongoing effort to integrate different aspects of one's life, Higgins situates his argument within a long tradition of philosophical reflection on self-cultivation and moral development.

The structure of *Undeclared* contributes significantly to the development of this argument. The book is organized around three extended essays—"Soul Action," "Wide Awake," and "Job Prospects"—interspersed with shorter interludes that examine institutional realities. This structure enables Higgins to move between philosophical reflection and concrete institutional critique. In the first essay, Higgins critiques contemporary general education for devolving into fragmented "scattering requirements," arguing that distribution systems often reduce the curriculum to a checklist of disciplinary exposures rather than encouraging meaningful intellectual integration or reflective engagement across fields of study (p. 46). Rather than fostering reflection on life's larger questions, general education programs frequently function as bureaucratic checklists disconnected from students' developing sense of purpose.

The second essay, "Wide Awake," turns to Black Mountain College as a historical experiment in aesthetic education. Higgins presents the institution not simply as a nostalgic example but as a case study in how artistic practice, communal living, and intellectual inquiry can be integrated into a holistic educational environment. Through discussions of figures such as Josef Albers and John Cage, Higgins illustrates how aesthetic education can cultivate attentiveness, creativity, and openness to experience. The significance of Black Mountain College lies not in its replicability but in its capacity to demonstrate the possibilities of integrated educational practice.

The third essay, "Job Prospects," addresses the relationship between higher education and vocational life. Here, Higgins argues that contemporary discourse has narrowed the concept of vocation by equating it with employability or professional credentialing. Against this reduction, he proposes a richer understanding of vocational formation that includes ethical reflection, self-cultivation, and responsiveness to the social goods embedded in professional

practices. Work, in this view, becomes a continuation of formative learning rather than merely its outcome.

One of the book's most compelling contributions lies in this reconceptualization of vocation. Higgins emphasizes that vocational formation involves not only preparing individuals for specific professions but also enabling them to evaluate the ethical and personal significance of their work. This perspective challenges dominant narratives in professional education that focus primarily on technical competence or economic outcomes.

Methodologically, *Undeclared* also advances an important argument about scholarly writing. Higgins also explicitly defends the philosophical essay as a mode of inquiry capable of sustaining reflective engagement with educational purposes. Contrasting the impersonal conventions of the research report with the dialogical character of the essay, he suggests that the essay reunites knowledge and self-knowledge by situating educational reflection within the broader task of making something of oneself. By adopting this form, Higgins attempts to enact the very ideals of reflective learning that the book advocates.

The book's arguments resonate with broader theoretical debates within educational philosophy. Higgins's critique of instrumentalization echoes Biesta's (2015) analysis of the "learnification" of education, which warns against reducing educational processes to measurable learning outcomes. Similarly, his emphasis on formation and uncertainty aligns with Barnett's (2021) conceptualization of higher education as a space in which individuals develop the capacities needed to navigate conditions of epistemic and social supercomplexity. These connections situate *Undeclared* within a wider philosophical conversation about the purposes of higher education in contemporary societies.

Despite its many strengths, the book raises several questions that invite further inquiry. One concerns the issue of scalability. While Higgins's discussion of Black Mountain College illustrates the potential of integrated educational environments, his account also emphasizes the institution's distinctive experimental conditions and close-knit intellectual community, leaving open the question of how similar formative practices might be implemented within large, bureaucratically complex universities. A second question concerns equity and inclusion. Although Higgins acknowledges the historical exclusions embedded in higher education institutions, the analysis could engage more directly with how race, language, and socioeconomic inequality shape access to formative educational experiences.

The implications of *Undeclared* extend beyond philosophy of education to fields such as language education and curriculum studies. Higgins repeatedly emphasizes that formation involves processes of interpretation, dialogue, and reflective engagement with experience. From this perspective, language education becomes a central site of intellectual and ethical development rather than merely a vehicle for communicative competence.

In terms of audience, the book will be particularly valuable for scholars and graduate students working in philosophy of education and higher education studies. At the same time, its accessible prose and vivid examples make it relevant

for educators, curriculum designers, and institutional leaders concerned with the future of liberal learning.

Overall, *Undeclared: A Philosophy of Formative Higher Education* represents a thoughtful and timely intervention in contemporary debates about the aims of higher education. Its principal strengths lie in its philosophical depth, conceptual clarity, and sustained attention to the ethical dimensions of educational practice. By re-centering formation, vocation, and meaning as legitimate concerns of higher education, Higgins challenges readers to reconsider what it means to educate persons rather than simply credential workers.

Acknowledgement

The reviewers extend sincere appreciation to Chris Higgins for his intellectually rich and philosophically grounded contribution in *Undeclared: A Philosophy of Formative Higher Education*. The book offers a thoughtful and generative reflection on the aims and possibilities of higher education, advancing important discussions on the formation of the whole person, the role of general education, and the meaning of vocation in contemporary academic life. By critically examining the instrumentalization and corporatization of universities while recovering a more humane vision of learning, Higgins provides a valuable framework for rethinking the purposes of higher education.

Gratitude is also extended to the wider community of scholars in the philosophy of education and higher education studies whose engagements with questions of human formation, liberal learning, and the ethical purposes of education have shaped the intellectual context within which this review has been written. Their continued scholarly contributions help sustain critical dialogue on how universities might cultivate meaningful learning, reflective citizenship, and the development of persons in an increasingly instrumental educational landscape.

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About the Author



Chris Higgins is professor and chair in the Department of Formative Education in the Lynch School of Education and Human Development at Boston College where he co-directs the BA program in Transformative Educational Studies and the Ph.D. program in Formative Education. He also serves on the board of directors for the Springboard Foundation for Whole-Person Learning. Higgins works to articulate the existential dimensions of teaching and learning, defend the idea of education as a public good, and recall education to its humane roots. He has written on the dynamics of the teacher-student relationship; action research and the philosophy of inquiry; ignorance and open-mindedness; humanism and liberal learning; imagination and aesthetic education; practice and vocational formation, and the experimental tradition in higher education. Higgins is the author of *The Good Life of Teaching: An Ethics of Professional Practice* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011). He earned his B.A. in philosophy from Yale University and his Ph.D. in philosophy and education from Columbia University. Prior to joining the Boston College faculty in 2019, Higgins taught at Teachers College Columbia and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

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