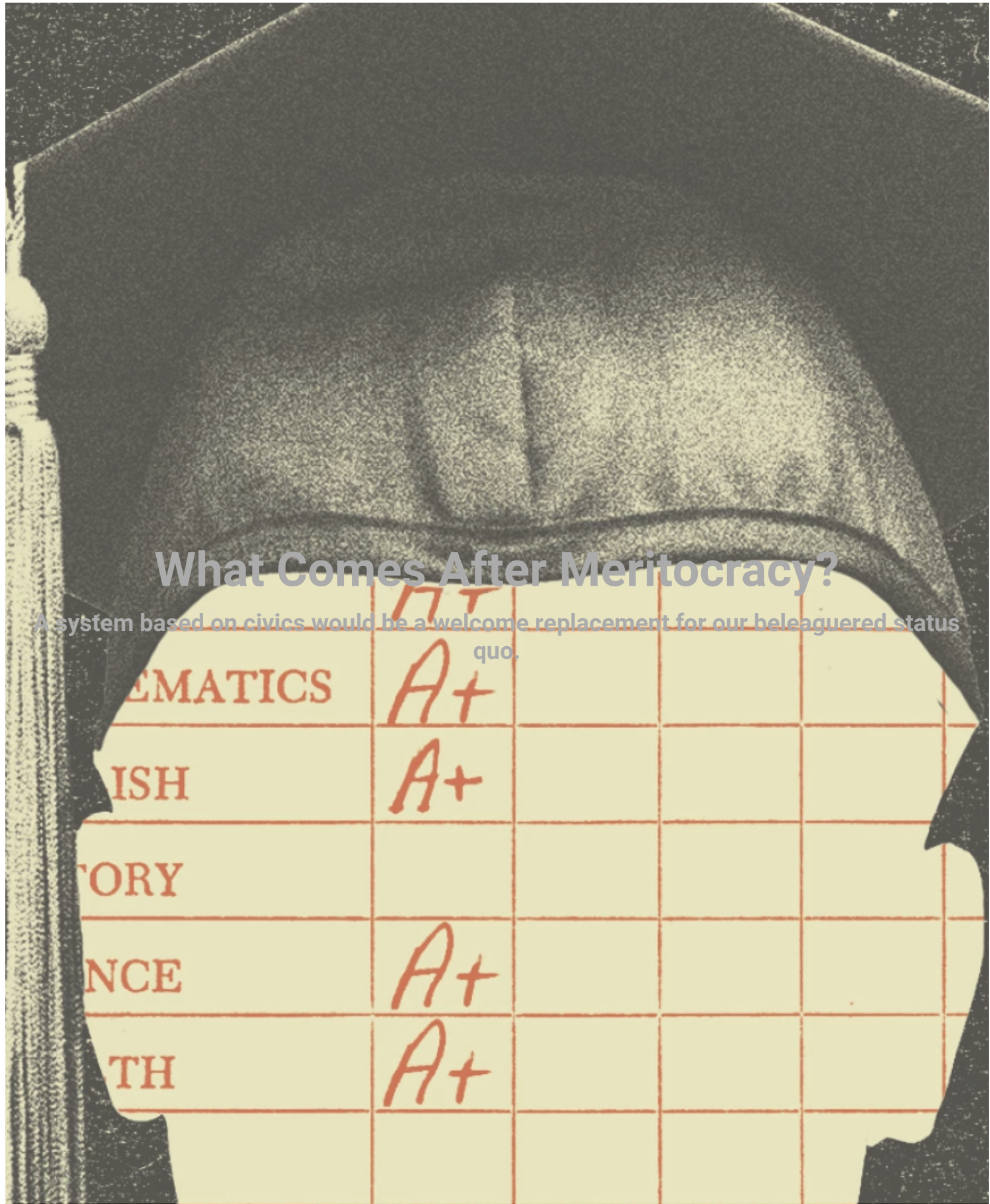


THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION



What Comes After Meritocracy?

A system based on civics would be a welcome replacement for our beleaguered status quo.

By *Steven Brint*

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In its modern American form, the meritocratic idea owes much to James B. Conant, the Harvard president who, beginning in the 1940s, worked to eliminate the advantages of inherited status in Harvard undergraduate admissions. He began recruiting nationally and selecting for accomplishments rather than lineage, relying heavily on standardized tests. Harvard's practices gradually spread throughout the Ivy League and beyond. Meritocracy was a revolutionary idea at the time it was introduced, and it worked as intended — at least for a while. Between 1945 and 1980, many high-scoring, highly motivated students who would not otherwise have been admitted began their ascents into positions of prominence by virtue of their admission into highly selective undergraduate colleges.

The system of educational selection based on standardized testing to identify the intellectually talented is now under withering attack, and it is in the process of failing. The projects to replace it with more representative systems are appealing but ultimately inadequate for addressing the range of problems the country faces. Fortunately, it is possible to identify an approach that is adequate to our condition. That approach focuses on selection in line with the civic ideals elite colleges already profess but do not fully engage.

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By the 1980s, critics of the system began pointing out damning flaws. These critics acknowledged that meritocracy was an opportunity-enhancing practice, at least when compared with a more aristocratic model, but, they argued, it also contained its own social biases. These biases rested on the capacity of highly educated parents, regardless of their own social origins, to pass on education-related advantages to their children. In addition to whatever inherited advantages the offspring of this cognitive elite may have enjoyed, their parents were also able to prepare them for success by transmitting an endowment of education advantages: early intensive reading experiences, travel and museum visits, excellent elementary and secondary schools, motivated peers from the community, tutors and test prep, etc. For these critics, meritocracy was turning into a new kind of aristocracy.

This trend has only accelerated since the '80s. At virtually all Ivy League-type colleges, two-thirds or more of new admits — up to three-quarters at some colleges like Brown and Princeton — come from a family in [the top quintile](#) of income. Students whose parents' incomes fall in the bottom two quintiles constitute, with rare exceptions, fewer than one of 10 students at these colleges.

Today, the insurgents in this 40-year campaign are on the verge of toppling the citadels of meritocratic selection. The system's single most consequential symbol — the standardized test — is now disappearing before our eyes. More than [three-quarters](#) of four-year colleges and universities in the U.S. no longer require the SAT or ACT or have gone “test optional.” The recent decision of the 10-campus University of California system to drop the SAT could be considered the coup de grace for testing as a principle of college admissions. There will be some holdouts to test-optional admissions and [some retrenchment](#), but it appears the meritocratic era is ending, and we should be thinking about what comes next.

This is unsettling of course for those who have succeeded under the half-century rule of the testing and striving regime, and it is not surprising that we have seen some stirring defenses of meritocratic selection in this twilight period. The defenders have

[good arguments](#) to make, but their defenses are not strong enough to resist the accumulation of evidence about the advantages of highly educated parents, the mobilization of under-represented groups who want to claim a larger share of places, a sense that our democracy is at risk from people who are taking advantage of the system, and, yes, a sprinkling too of exhaustion with the rat race coming from the winners of the competition.

[The new critiques of meritocracy](#) go beyond the now widely accepted criticisms of its unfairness and seek to strike a more fundamental blow against it. For these critics, it's not just that meritocratic selection is biased, it's that even in a fairer world meritocracy would still damage American society. By focusing selection on mental ability and exceptional work effort, 21st-century critics argue, we have created social divisions that are driving Americans apart, while producing misery on both sides of the meritocratic divide.

In *The Meritocracy Trap* (2019), the Yale law professor Daniel Markovits argues that those who lose out in the meritocratic struggle are condemned to think of themselves as unworthy, while the winners are deformed by requirements for ever harder work, minimal opportunities for self-actualization, and repetition of the alienating process in the next generation. In a similar vein, the Harvard political theorist [Michael J. Sandel](#) argues in *The Tyranny of Merit* (2020) that meritocracy “diminishes our capacity to see ourselves as sharing a common fate” in large part because educated elites “fell into the habit of looking down on those who do not rise.”

There are differences between the two: Where Markovits offers a Marxian-style analysis of class exploitation and alienation with the power of educational attainment substituting for the power of capital, Sandel evokes a spiritual crisis of democratic life due to an over-emphasis on “smarts” and an under-emphasis on practical wisdom and civic virtue.



Sadly, anthropological accounts of elite college life are as dispiriting as these critics suggest. Natasha K. Warikoo's *The Diversity Bargain* (2016) highlighted the extent to which undergraduates are supportive of more-inclusive college classes only in so far as diversity does not harm their opportunities for career success. These students "check" their privilege, but only for strategic purposes. Other studies, such as those from Amy Binder and Lauren Rivera [show how](#) kids who have gilded their résumés with hours of volunteering in the run-up to college admissions end up four years later flocking anxiously to dull but well-remunerated jobs in management consulting and finance. Sandel rues that auditions are now required for nearly every organized activity on these campuses, and that freshman year is now sometimes seen as "Rejection 101." According to Sandel, the competitive gantlet hones a compulsion to relentless striving without larger purposes in mind. The students emerge "triumphant and wounded."

These two books overreach at times, and plenty of evidence can still be found on the meritocratic side of the argument. Members of the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine are [disproportionately educated](#) at highly selective colleges as undergraduates, as are leading journalists, public intellectuals, and think-tank experts. Similarly, people who have many patents to their credit are [much more likely](#) to have attended highly selective science-oriented campuses, such as MIT, Stanford, and Georgia Tech, even accounting for a wide range of potentially relevant background characteristics.

At the same time, the graduates of highly selective undergraduate colleges are less dominant in leading positions than Markovits and Sandel imply. A few years ago, [my research](#) found that about 18 percent of national business and political leaders attended one of the top 40 undergraduate colleges — a great over-representation to be sure, but nothing like the level of dominance one might expect from those who believe

that it is a straight path from the halls of Ivy to Fortune 500 executive suites. Only a few industries are dominated by people who attended the leading colleges. These tend to be highly visible industries such as finance, entertainment, and internet services. But industries that engage in the transformation of the material world [rarely recruit](#) from the top 40 colleges; only about 10 percent of top executives in automobiles, chemicals, construction, and food production have undergraduate degrees from the top colleges.

Markovits and Sandel also attribute to meritocratic selection sins that properly belong elsewhere in the American institutional structure. Two to three percent of high-school students enroll in highly selective private colleges — *two to three percent*. This thin sliver of high-school achievers can hardly be solely to blame for a half-century of ever-greater national wealth disparities. Instead, a host of economic forces and policy failures are at work in creating income and wealth gaps: globalization, the decline of unions, and technological change surely deserve some credit for these unwelcome shifts. Tax breaks and loopholes benefit the ultra-rich, misguided wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have squandered the funds for our social safety net, and a hyperpartisan media has reduced our capacity for collective actions. To the extent that the beneficiaries of meritocracy are fine with all this, meritocracy is at least indirectly implicated. But it is not the root cause of all our ills. Indeed, it is possible that only a professor could think that the largest portion of the misery we find among those who are struggling in American society can be attributed to failures in the classroom or standardized testing.

A high proportion of Ivy League graduates now funnel themselves into a narrow set of occupations. These jobs are located primarily in finance and management consulting as well as other business-services occupations. About [a third](#) of Harvard University students, for example, follow these paths. At science- and engineering-centered places like Stanford, an analogous funneling occurs into tech firms. During the course of their college careers, students experience a transformation from idealistic, community-minded high-school students into

anxious young adults who flock into what are rather routine jobs working on spreadsheets and algorithms. The transition is fostered by the flood of invitations that flow into student mailboxes, the lavish parties the firms provide during recruitment, and of course the six-figure salaries and excellent benefits they can afford to offer. Students worry about repaying loans and starting careers justifying the sacrifices they and their parents have made. Some think of these first jobs as temporary way stations until they get their financial bearings set and can move onto jobs that are more meaningful. Social currents guide them along this path.

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But more finance and high-tech startup workers is not what American society needs most at this time from its most ambitious, hard-working, and intellectually able college graduates. Read a newspaper and this conclusion becomes very nearly self-evident. Climate change is an overarching threat, requiring extensive applied work on alternative energy sources, carbon capture, environmental protection, and planning for mitigation. A second great challenge is rising inequality and its consequences — the United States is now [one of the most unequal](#) among the world's highly developed societies. Other enormous challenges loom. Political polarization has imperiled our society's capacity to solve problems. Resentment associated with racial politics is perhaps as intense now as it has been at any time during our nation's post-Civil War history. The impressive capacity and efficacy of China creates incentives for countries to partner with it, and it has successfully expanded its sphere of influence through projects such as the [Belt and Road Initiative](#) and the [Asian Infrastructure Investment](#)

[Bank](#). Maintaining U.S. competitiveness and its international standing is a task that will require the best efforts of many young Americans.

Just below this flashing-red-light level lie other formidable problems: the continued outsourcing of jobs, small towns that are drying up for lack of industries, the largest decline in expected longevity since World War II, a slowdown in the birth rate and family formation, schools that allow students to graduate without basic skills, low-income students abandoning college but without viable alternative paths, and the continuing plague of gun violence.

Viewed in this light, the fact that our leading colleges funnel students into relatively routine if well-paying jobs in consulting, financial services, and high tech looks like something more than a mismatch; it looks like a massive waste of talent.

Fifteen of the mission statements of the 20 leading private universities mention in one way or another improving or serving society. The proportion is even higher among the leading public universities, all 20 of which endorse this purpose. How better to serve than by contributing to the solution of the country's most challenging problems? Most graduates now show by their actions that they are primarily interested in obtaining a comfortable and well-paid first job, but the colleges could if they wished to do so provide incentives for a change of perspective.

The Roman term “civica” and the honor to which it gave its name, the “civica corona,” were expanded under guild and bourgeois influence into the medieval conceptions of the citizen — those who inhabited the same town and, at least ideally, were responsible for contributing to its security and well-being. Shouldn't the same expectations hold for our best educated population under the conditions the United States and the world face today? A new system requires a new name. I propose “civocracy.”

A civicratic system would not (and indeed *could not*) diminish the individual struggle for eminence, which is such an important part of human nature and societal progress. But it would channel that striving in different ways from our current meritocratic system, and it would highlight a different set of end goals. Just as meritocracy maintained some aristocratic elements, such as a preference for those with high levels of cultural sophistication, a civicratic system will share some features with the meritocratic selection regime that precedes it. It would certainly prize intellectual ability and work ethic. It would take equality of opportunity seriously, more seriously than meritocracy has for decades. But it would connect these qualities to broader societal purposes and would not fetishize test scores far above other qualities that matter for the realization of an improved common life.

Some, including Sandel, have proposed addressing the problem of meritocracy by putting in place a “lottery of the qualified” to replace current admissions procedures. Such a lottery, the researchers Dominique J. Baker and Michael N. Bastedo [have shown](#), could easily lead to a reduction in the proportion of students from underrepresented minority groups. It would also fail to address the concern that the talents our society needs are not well matched to the career objectives of those who now graduate from selective colleges. It is easy to imagine that the literal “lucky few” chosen through a lottery would continue to flock to the same first jobs that their non-lottery predecessors coveted. At most we could expect change around the edges as employers realized that desirable but non-admitted students were leaking out into a somewhat broader set of institutions.

There’s a better way to yield a more representative class while at the same time renewing the civic purposes that elite colleges claim to promote. A civicratic admissions system would give greater weight to indicators that applicants are motivated and prepared to contribute to the well-being of the broader community through research, problem-solving, and innovation. The implementation of this approach would depend on an adjustment in the weighting of elite college interests. If our leading colleges are primarily interested in graduates who will obtain highly

remunerative positions in elite professional services and high tech, then the current system is optimally designed to deliver this outcome. But if college websites are not simply pieties parading as principles — and if colleges truly want to produce people who are equipped and motivated to help us meet the many challenges we now face — then it is possible that they can be persuaded to adjust admissions criteria to produce classes whose members will do more than mouth the right-sounding aspirations in their admissions essays and then follow their classmates into the highest-paying sectors.

Those who work in admissions have the expertise to rethink the mechanisms of selection, but new approaches could include credit for effective follow-through on high-school projects (rather than for offices held); credit for taking a service year (or more) between high school and college; essay and interview prompts that explore applicants' approaches to researching a civic problem; general-education curricula that focus to a greater degree on pivotal issues of today and the future; new forms of recognition for students who make outstanding public-oriented contributions; more lecture invitations to people who are working on the great issues facing the country and the world; and, funds permitting, the reduction of tuition or room-and-board charges for those who pursue careers outside of management consulting, finance, corporate law, or high tech.

Should the profile of admitted students and the kinds of discussions on campus begin to change, peer effects will reinforce students' commitments to engage with society in a civic spirit, whether this takes the form of research and action to solve pressing problems — or contributions through artistic production, humanistic inquiry, scientific studies, and ideas for new business ventures. Ambitious prospective students and their parents will pick up on the new emphases and adjust accordingly.

These ideas may repel those who believe that the most pressing challenge for highly selective colleges is to increase their representation of students of color. Clearly, the most active current pressures on elite college admissions

come from this direction; they are led by professional associations and foundations as well as civil-rights organizations and mobilized students and faculty. Judging from their public statements, the leaders of the colleges are highly sensitive to the remaining racial inequities and injustices in American society and strongly supportive of remedies like affirmative action. There are good reasons for this: The drive for social inclusion has brought tremendous new talent and ambition into the university. It has certainly broadened academics' research scope to encompass previously neglected populations and regions of the world. And it has contributed, albeit modestly, to reducing the racial inequalities that have plagued American society.

The Supreme Court [has taken on two college admissions cases](#) and appears likely to rule against the affirmative-action policies of Harvard and the University of North Carolina. If it does, it will fuel the search for new methods of social selection that are both constitutionally acceptable, *per* the Supreme Court, and consistent with higher education's commitment to inclusive admissions. Civocracy's criteria, if designed with the court's ruling in mind, can do both. These criteria would likely have the additional benefit of removing some of the more egregious preferences that the colleges use when forming their classes, those that favor legacy and so-called "developmental" admits whose parents have been donors or are very likely to be donors in the future. Unless these privileged students can demonstrate, against skeptical admissions officers, that they intend to use their inherited advantages for the benefit of the country or the world, they will gain no special consideration.

In a civic system, colleges would make strenuous efforts to provide opportunities for young people from groups that have been excluded in the past, and they would continue to monitor closely how well they are doing. Students who have experienced hardships will have a leg up on the competition when it comes to insight on solving the problems of poverty and inequality, provided they can turn their observations and experiences into ideas that can make a difference. If they can do it, the new admission criteria will have the effect of further equalizing representation on university campuses.

Rather than simply bowing to the most highly mobilized forces in their environments, selective colleges must become instruments of national renewal and progress, with a broad view of what that means. Speaking at another time in which renewal was in the air, Ralph Waldo Emerson [called on colleges](#) to, by “concentrated fires set the hearts of their youth on flame.” He added, “Forget this, and our American colleges will recede in their public importance, whilst they grow richer every year.” These sentiments resonate today. As the eminent political scientist Robert Putnam put it in a recent book:

We re-created the socioeconomic chasm of the last Gilded Age at an accelerated pace. ... We replaced cooperation with political polarization. We allowed our community and family ties to unravel to a marked extent. And our culture became far more focused on individualism and less interested in the common good.

Putnam later continues:

We must undertake a re-evaluation of our shared values — asking ourselves what personal privileges and rights we might be willing to lay aside in service of the common good, and what role we will play in the shared project of shaping our nation’s future.

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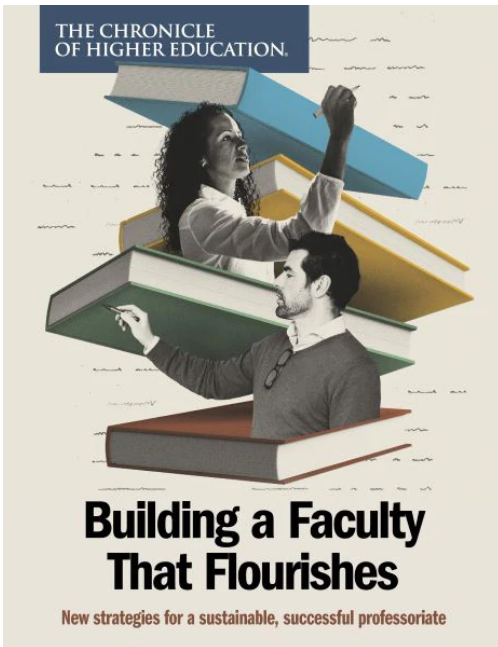
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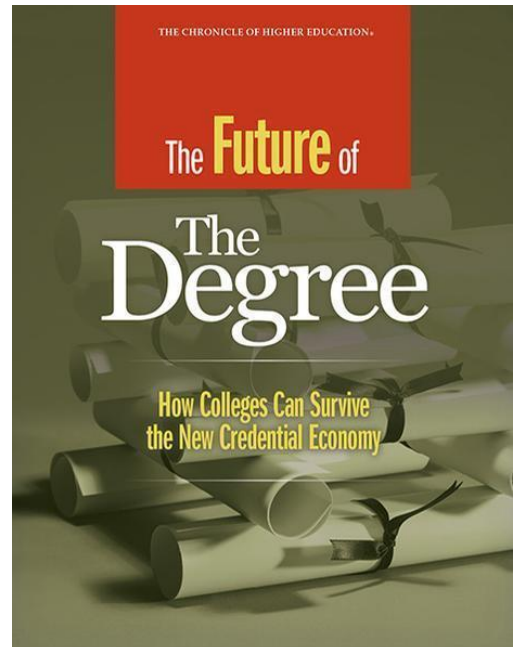
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