



# The Public Good: Productivity and Purpose

The TIAA Institute commissioned two papers to address the question of how to demonstrate higher education's contribution to the public good.

Genevieve Shaker, editor of a book on faculty and the public good, and William Plater, an emeritus provost, explore higher education's institutional responsibility to deliver civic value. A [companion piece](#) addresses the issue from the perspective of individual faculty members. Another [recent article](#) by Shaker and Plater speaks specifically to the responsibility of trustees to ensure higher education's commitment to the public is met.

## What is the “public good”?

The term “public good” serves as a proxy for the many and varied contributions colleges and universities make to societal well-being. Most agree on a few core elements that underlie higher education's responsibilities:

- Educating for citizenship
- Educating for employment
- Creating knowledge that benefits all
- Engaging with local and global communities to improve their general quality of life

The public invests more than \$200 billion annually in the form of public funding from federal, state and local sources ([about \\$158 billion](#)) and via tax deductible private philanthropic donations ([about \\$47 billion](#))—subsidizing [20 million enrolled students](#). This is aside from the [\\$1.56 trillion in student debt](#) guaranteed by the U.S. government.

## Demonstrating public good contributions

Public investment and trust present compelling reasons for accountability, transparency and productivity in higher education. Likewise, pressure to produce more highly skilled graduates at lower costs has brought questions about institutional expenses and productivity to the fore—accompanied by loud demands for quantifying returns on investment (ROI).

### Accounting for contributions to the public good includes measuring...

Citizenship preparedness

Graduates' workplace readiness

Institutions' contributions to economic development

Contributions to the general welfare of local and global communities



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Efforts to document ROI take many forms, but serious endeavors to measure and value the *public good* work of institutions remain elusive. Attempts to portray all public good accomplishments in exclusively economic and quantitative forms can diminish more holistic contributions. Likewise, economic models for higher education need to be complemented with concepts of civic value, civic return on investment, and civic productivity.

These concepts rest on a foundation of widely shared values that point to the four primary domains of institutional public good work. Each domain has leading models for reporting, assessing, and even benchmarking public good productivity:

### Measuring education for citizenship

Measures of citizenship evidenced by college graduates are largely absent from public and media consideration, but they do exist and there are some shared assumptions about them. Most rubrics make a distinction among civic knowledge, civic skills, civic values, and civic engagement, and are measured via assessments designed and administered by individual institutions. Examples include:

*Assessing Civic Competency and Engagement in Higher Education*, an Educational Testing Service (ETS) report, presents a “comprehensive review of existing frameworks, definitions, and assessments of civic-related constructs from approximately 30 projects relevant to higher education.”

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) VALUE Rubrics (Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education) are designed to assess how well institutions prepare “graduates for their public lives as citizens, members of communities, and professionals in society.”

Lumina’s Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) sets forth clear expectations for civic and global learning at associate’s, baccalaureate, and master’s degree levels.

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) includes a widely used module on civic engagement.

### Do college graduates...

Vote?

Volunteer?

Serve on community boards?

Write opinion pieces for newspapers or social media?

Communicate with elected officials on matters of public importance?

**Colleges and universities are not immune to the fallout from the decline in public trust in nearly all institutions, as well as what often seems like an all-out assault on evidence and facts—in short, the truth. Understanding higher education as a public good and believing that a college degree is a good value for individuals also is beginning to vanish.**

**Ted Mitchell, ACE President  
Higher Education and the Nation’s Future**



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Additionally, several states have high school or college attainment standards in coordination with the [Educational Commission of the States](#) (ECS). Most have fallen short of true assessment of civic competence, and few exist at the postsecondary level. [Massachusetts](#) is one exception.

### Measuring education for work

Clearly, both sustainable employability and effective citizenship are necessary for promoting the general social welfare. But, given public support of higher education and the implications of student debt for both individuals and the public that underwrites it, work readiness, employment adaptability, and adequate ROI have become the primary focus of policy and legislation.

Measures such as the [College Scorecard](#), [Essential Employability Qualities](#), gainful employment regulations, licensure rates, completion indices, and loan repayment are taking their place in economic models as proxies for workforce readiness. Whether these or similar metrics might eventually be used more extensively remains to be seen as Congress considers reauthorizing the [Higher Education Act](#).

### Measuring for economic development

Of all higher education's public good work, its role in economic development is the most documented. The work of the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (APLU)—for example, its [Economic Impact Guidelines](#) created with the American Association of Universities—is representative of the large number of associations, legislative offices, and policy institutes that have sought to measure, assess and publicize colleges and universities' contributions to economic success as a public good.

APLU's Commission on Innovation, Competitiveness, and Economic Prosperity created an economic engagement framework and developed specific tools to assist institutions in advancing their economic role, including a [New Metrics Field Guide: Measuring University Contributions to the Economy](#). Its purpose is to help leaders identify the "right" measures and indicators to evaluate the success of economic engagement.

The creation and use of knowledge for economic development raises the issue of just who gains from so-called "[academic capitalism](#)," a critique that has sharpened with the growing emphasis on the commercial potential of knowledge. Public good knowledge for all citizens needs to be balanced with gains for a few.

### Measuring community and civic engagement

Measurement of institutional community engagement is also well developed.

The most prominent and comprehensive assessment is the self-study protocol developed for the Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement. The [classification's documentation framework](#) is globally one of the most robust sets of measurements.

**Employability tilts the value scale toward private benefit and away from public good.**

A shift too far puts the nation at risk, graduating workers and leaders who lack an adequate understanding of civic responsibility or the capacity to enact that duty effectively.

### Seeking balance



Public  
Good

Private  
Benefit



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Campus Compact is a voluntary association of more than 1,100 colleges that share a commitment to “develop students’ citizenship skills” and “forge effective community partnerships.” The organization offers a number of resources for documenting and assessing community engagement.

Other organizations, such as the Democracy Collaborative, are developing tools to assess and publicize the contribution of anchor institutions, including colleges and universities.



### Final word

Development of clear, comprehensive and accepted measures that can “prove” the value of institutions’ contributions to the public good presents a difficult challenge. Whether approaches outlined here can be integrated into largely quantitative economic models remains to be seen but is a worthy goal.

### Read more:

Shaker, Genevieve G., and William M. Plater (2016). *The Public Good, Productivity and Purpose: New Economic Models for Higher Education*. New York, NY: TIAA Institute.

Shaker, Genevieve G., and William M. Plater (2016). *The Public Good, Productivity and Faculty Work: Individual Effort and Social Value*. New York, NY: TIAA Institute.

*Please note that the underlined text throughout this piece is hyperlinked in its online version so that you can readily access the resources cited herein.*

### About the TIAA Institute

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