

PostEverything

College is not a commodity. Stop treating it like one.

What truly makes an education valuable: the effort the student puts into it.



By Hunter Rawlings June 9 at 6:00 AM

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Pick up any paper or magazine, and you're likely to see a front-page article on college: It costs too much, spawns too much debt, is or isn't worth it.

I entered academia 52 years ago as a student of Latin and Greek expecting to enter a placid sector of American life, and now find my chosen profession at the center of a media maelstrom. With college replacing high school as the required ticket for a career, what used to be a quiet corner is now a favorite target of policymakers and pundits. Unfortunately, most commentary on the value of college is naive, or worse, misleading.

Here's what I mean. First, most everyone now evaluates college in purely economic terms, thus reducing it to a commodity like a car or a house. How much does the average English major at college X earn 18 months after graduation? What is the average debt of college Y's alumni? How much does it cost to attend college Z, and is it worth it? How much more does the "average" college grad earn over a lifetime than someone with only a high school degree? (The current number appears to be about \$1 million.) There is now a cottage industry built around such data.

Even on purely economic grounds, such questions, while not useless, begin with a false assumption. If we are going to treat college as a commodity, and an expensive one at that, we should at least grasp the essence of its economic nature. Unlike a car, college requires the "buyer" to do most of the work to obtain its value. The value of a degree depends more on the student's input than on the college's curriculum. I know this because I have seen excellent students get great educations at average colleges, and unmotivated students get poor educations at excellent colleges. And I have taught classes which my students made great through their efforts, and classes which my students made average or worse through their lack of effort. Though I would like to think I made a real contribution to student learning, my role was not the sole or even determining factor in the value of those courses to my students.

A college education, then, *if it is* a commodity, is no car. The courses the student decides to take (and not take), the amount of work the student does, the intellectual curiosity the student exhibits, her participation in class, his focus

and determination — all contribute far more to her educational “outcome” than the college’s overall curriculum, much less its amenities and social life. Yet most public discussion of higher ed today pretends that students simply *receive* their education from colleges the way a person walks out of Best Buy with a television.

The results of this kind of thinking are pernicious. Governors and legislators, as well as the media, treat colleges as purveyors of goods, students as consumers and degrees as products. Students get the message. If colleges are responsible for outcomes, then students can feel entitled to classes that do not push them too hard, to high grades and to material that does not challenge their assumptions or make them uncomfortable. Hence colleges too often cater to student demands for trigger warnings, “safe rooms,” and canceled commencement speakers. When rating colleges, as everyone from the president to weekly magazines insist on doing nowadays, people use performance measures such as graduation rates and time to degree *as though those figures depended entirely upon the colleges and not at all upon the students.*

This point is made succinctly by an apocryphal story about a university president who said this to new freshmen each year: “For those of you who have come here in order to get a degree, congratulations, I have good news for you. I am giving you your degree today and you can go home now. For those who came to get an education, welcome to four great years of learning at this university.”

So let’s acknowledge that college is *not* a commodity. It’s a challenging engagement in which both parties have to take an active and risk-taking role if its potential value is to be realized. Professors need to inspire, to prod, to irritate, to create engaging environments that enable learning to take place that can’t happen simply from reading books or watching films or surfing the Web. Good teachers “supply oxygen” to their classrooms, in the words of former Emory University president Bill Chace; they do not merely supply answers or facts. And good colleges provide lots of help to students who face challenges completing their degrees in a reasonable amount of time.

But students need to make a similar commitment to breathe it in and be enlivened by it. They owe this not only to their teachers but also to their parents and themselves. After all, the decision to go to college is a decision to make an investment in their future, an investment of time and money. And for many, a college education is expensive. Students have to play a major role in making sure it’s money well spent.

Students need to apply themselves to the daunting task of using their minds, a much harder challenge than most people realize, until they actually try to do it. To write a thoughtful, persuasive argument requires hard thinking and clear, cogent rhetoric. To research any moderately complex topic requires formulating good questions, critically examining lots of evidence, analyzing one’s data, and presenting one’s findings in succinct prose or scientific formulas.

For many students, being required to produce critical thought in front of a class is a new sensation, often a not very pleasant one. I remember too well my feelings when I had to read my first freshman paper in front of my classmates

and English professor. It was a disaster, a sort of primal humiliation because it took only four or five sentences for the class to make it clear to me that I should not read any further. I learned more that day about the requirements of effective writing than in the previous 18 years of my life.

The ultimate value of college is the discovery that you can use your mind to make your own arguments and even your own contributions to knowledge, as do many students pursuing research in college. That too is a new sensation, and a very good one. Yes, it generally leads to higher career earnings. But it is the discovery itself that is life-changing.

To create what is, for most of us, that “new sensation,” you need a professor who provokes and a student who stops slumbering. It is the responsibility of colleges and universities to place students in environments that provide these opportunities. It is the responsibility of students to seize them. Genuine education is not a commodity, it is the awakening of a human being.