

## CREATIVE DESTRUCTION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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It is that time of year again: high school students around the country will soon find out which colleges and universities they got into. It is an anxious time for students, and for their parents. Why is it so important to us?

Reason number one: College graduates make more money. According to the College Board, college graduates earn on average 66% more than people without college degrees over their working careers.<sup>1</sup> But that differential is misleading because the people who get college degrees tend to be the sort who would have made more money anyway.<sup>2</sup> IQ and an attitude of persistence “screen off” most of the advantage that accrues from getting a bachelor’s degree.

Reason number two is the unstated but real consensus among the college-educated that one is a failure in life if one does not go to college. That is complete hogwash—and offensive hogwash at that. Any number of people—including United States presidents (Washington, Andrew Jackson, Grover Cleveland), Nobel Prize winners (Faulkner), and successful entrepreneurs (Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Michael Dell)—have succeeded splendidly in life without college degrees. The growing shortage, moreover, of skilled workers in manufacturing and labor markets further attest to the misallocation of resources that ever-larger proportions of students going to college is creating.<sup>3</sup>

So what exactly are we getting, then, for the anxiety, for the time, and for the billions of dollars we spend on higher education?

That is a real question. For many students, the actual value added from college instruction is negligible. Indeed, I would argue that the value added is often *negative* because those four years (or five or six) can, as often as not, train students in unproductive, even counter-productive, moral and intellectual habits.

Let us not kid ourselves: An awful lot of what goes on on college campuses is sheer nonsense. For thousands of professors and hundreds of thousands of students there is a mutual let’s-pretend pact: professors pretend to teach, students pretend to learn. There is also a let’s-pretend pact between administrators and professors: the administrators will tell parents and donors (and taxpayers) that high and noble and deep things are going on, and yet they will let professors do pretty much whatever they want.

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<sup>1</sup>See Becky Supiano, “Education Pays, But How Much?” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 21, 2010, available here: <http://chronicle.com/article/Education-Pays-but-How-Much-/124552/>.

<sup>2</sup>Charles Murray, *Real Education: Four Simple Truths for Bringing America’s Schools back to Reality* (New York: Crown Forum, 2008).

<sup>3</sup>See Ben Casselman, “Help Wanted: In an Unexpected Twist, Some Skilled Jobs Go Begging,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 26, 2011; and Adam Davidson, “The Dwindling Power of a College Degree,” *New York Times*, November 23, 2011.

Unfortunately, precious little of what actually goes on is high or noble or deep. In fact, students' actual daily lives in college consist of very little intellectual activity. A lot of goofing off, playing video games, going to football or basketball games, working out, hanging out at the spa/water park/rec center on campus, going to parties, "hooking up," getting "politically active," and, of course, drinking—lots and lots of drinking.<sup>4</sup> Add in sleeping, and you have more than 90% of college life.<sup>5</sup>

Consider: students on average do not attend almost one third of their classes; of those they do attend, they are properly prepared for only about half. Thus students are present and prepared for only about *one-sixth* of their classes. The work they turn in was hastily composed the night before, and they study only immediately before tests, forgetting most of it afterwards. Most of their "research" consists in Googling their assignments, and most of their studying consists of dorm-room bull sessions, surfing the web, texting, listening to music, and Facebooking. Another pervasive myth: so-called multi-tasking enhances learning. Numerous studies have confirmed what we all knew already: we cannot simultaneously focus our attention on more than one thing.<sup>6</sup> What we can do, instead, is serially move our attention from one task to another in rapid succession. The more tasks among which we move our focus, however, the more superficial our attention to, and thus mastery of, each becomes.

Very little of today's students' time, then, is spent on anything properly regarded as intellectual training or academic effort. But how can they get away with that? Is it because they are so much smarter than previous generations of college students? No. It is because professors pass them anyway. And not just pass them, but give them Bs. Please do not be too hard on the poor professors, however. No one likes confrontation, and it is far easier just to give a "B" to those non-students than to give them the low grade they earned and then have to deal with their, and their parents', angry sense of entitlement.<sup>7</sup> Professors are often put in an impossible position:

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<sup>4</sup>See the Center for Science in the Public Interest's report, "Binge Drinking on College Campuses," available here: <http://www.cspinet.org/booze/collfact1.htm>. The numbers on drinking are astounding: According to a 2008 Harvard School of Public Health study (available here: <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/cas/What-We-Learned-08.pdf>), about half of all students attending 4-year institutions drink alcohol "at the binge level or greater." About half of that group does so *more than once per week*. Thank about that. It means that about 25% of college students are drunk more than once per week (it is "six or more times a [*sic*] month" on average). How can that *not* be a central defining factor influencing their academic performance?

<sup>5</sup>See Murray Sperber, *Beer and Circus: How Big-Time College Sports Is Crippling Undergraduate Education* (New York: Owl Books, 2000).

<sup>6</sup>See, for example, Eyal Opher et al., "Cognitive Control in Media Multitaskers," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States*, July 20, 2009, available here: <http://www.pnas.org/content/early/2009/08/21/0903620106.abstract>; and Christine Rosen, "The Myth of Multitasking," *The New Atlantis*, Spring 2008, available here: <http://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/the-myth-of-multitasking>.

<sup>7</sup>And do not forget the deans who will chastise professors giving too many low grades. As one dean I heard put it, "We're letting them in the front door, and you're letting them out the back!" I took that as a compliment—quality control. The dean did not mean it as a compliment, however.

their students, regardless of IQ, typically have few actual academic skills when they arrive, and they know next to nothing substantive; yet they have an almost unassailable confidence in their belief that they are highly skilled and extensively knowledgeable. If a professor gives them honest feedback about the actual quality of what they produce, who would support him? The administration? The parents? The education school establishment? No: he would be on an island. That is a lonely place, and it is expecting too much that more than a few outliers here and there would persevere. The students that professors do care about are the small fraction who want to get PhDs. *Those* students professors nurture. For all the other students, however, professors' feelings tend to range from mild irritation to thinly veiled contempt. Can you blame them? But we cannot be too hard on the students either. Ask even the serious ones what proportion of their classes they believe is actually worthwhile. Their answer: maybe 25%. Alas, they are probably not far off. Many classes are a hodgepodge of quirky or arcane topics of peculiar interest the professor, and they do not combine into any coherent or integrated whole. Almost nowhere today are there curricula in the traditional sense of courses of study in what professors judge to be the most important things all smart young people—the future guardians of civilization—should know.<sup>8</sup>

What results from all this? For hundreds of thousands of students, it is billions of dollars and many of their most formative and some of their best productive years spent on: sleeping in, not working on Fridays, and not dressing or speaking professionally; on learning that almost anything is good enough to get a “very good” (what a “B” is supposed to mean); on learning that there is really no such thing as a deadline, but there is an endless supply of second chances; on learning that “trying hard” and “being passionate” are just as good as actually accomplishing something; and on learning that attending classes on any subject is probably just as good as attending classes on anything else.

These, I am afraid, are not good moral and intellectual habits. And it is probably not what anyone—including parents, taxpayers, and employers—wants from college.

Many things have contributed to bringing us to this sorry educational state, but let me cite two factors. The first is the denial of the obvious truth that *a good education is difficult*. It requires long, hard work on the part of both the student and the teacher. As Aristotle rightly said, “the roots of education are bitter.”<sup>9</sup> If what you are doing is easy, or involves a lot of sitting around doing nothing productive, then you are not becoming educated, regardless of what anybody tells you or what any piece of paper says. Yet neither students nor teachers like to hear that they are not really doing much that is productive or educationally worthwhile, and parents and taxpayers *sure* do not want to hear it. So we collectively, if tacitly, agree simply to believe otherwise. The second factor is the denial of another hard truth, which follows from the first: *not everyone is up to the task*. Anything that is difficult—running a marathon, playing Beethoven's

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<sup>8</sup>See Naomi Schaefer Riley, *The Faculty Lounges and Other Reasons Why You Won't Get the College Education You Paid For* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2011).

<sup>9</sup>Aristotle also said that the fruit is sweet. Having read Albert Jay Nock's 1932 essay “The Disadvantages of Being Educated,” however, I'm not so sure about that part.

*Hammerklavier*, mastering calculus, bench-pressing 300 pounds—will cleave the world into two groups: those few who can do it, and those many who cannot. And no one wants to hear that they do not have what it takes. This truth is especially hard to accept when the fanciful notion that “anyone can become anything they put their minds to” is so deeply engrained in our culture. Much of higher education today founders because it denies these two truths, and much of the nonsense that goes on results from the summersaults and cartwheels we have to do to avoid recognizing or acknowledging them. The reality is that good moral and intellectual habits of persistence, curiosity, judgment, discipline, and humility are unfortunately often not fostered, and indeed are often discouraged, in environments like those of most colleges and universities today.

Now of course I am generalizing. Of course there are students who learn good habits in college, and there are also some few campuses where the life of the mind is taken seriously. I am lucky enough to teach at a college whose students defy almost all of those generalizations. But these are rare, and proportionally tiny, exceptions. If the generalizations hold for so many students around the country, then, shouldn't something be done?

Yes, something should be done. But what? In general, what is required involves only commonsense reforms, like realigning incentives so that they encourage the things we want to encourage and discourage the things we want to discourage, and becoming serious about the educational realities we face. But let me be more specific, if brief.

Crises create opportunities, and education, especially higher education, is on the brink of crisis: years of being too expensive for the return are finally catching up. Ironically, the astonishing wealth generated by our commercial society has actually made true educational reform more difficult. We have so much money that we have been able to insulate millions of young people from the actual costs of their largely unproductive, even counterproductive, “educational” careers, and in so doing we have inadvertently created a large constituency of disgruntled, entitled, and angry “occupiers.” I believe we are like people in West Berlin in October of 1989: we do not know exactly when the wall will fall, but we can sense that it will, and soon. So we need to prepare now the alternatives we will place on offer when the moment and the opportunity appear.

At the policy level, no one needs to “do” anything—merely ceasing the positively destructive activities and allowing entrepreneurs full freedom would be more than sufficient. This requires letting people vote with their feet, and with their dollars; it requires easing back on—dare I say ending?—the subsidizing of demonstrably unsuccessful enterprises; it requires allowing genuine competition; and it requires giving entrepreneurs the freedom to succeed or fail, letting the chips fall where they may. Facing some challenge, and the possibility of failure, goes a long way toward motivating people to strive. Indeed, it may be the only thing that does so.

Everyone wants “education,” even if not everyone has the same idea about what that entails. But that is all right. That demand will spur innovation and initiative, and the variation in the demand will spur creative and unpredictable ways to meet it and to address the educational problems we

so palpably face. Get the obstacles out of the way, and the invisible hand of human ingenuity will take care of the rest. But that will happen only if we let it. Let us let it.