

## *What's the Point of Going to College?*

"But oh, Dean D., the difference between the dreams of a 20-year old, and my 20-year-old dreams!"

*Comment of a mother whose son was changing his concentration from neuroscience (pre-med.) to urban studies and sociology, in a letter to a colleague at Brown.*

As an Ivy League dean for more than a dozen years, I spent at least half of each day talking with students, one-on-one – from freshman to seniors, engineers and artists, activists and athletes, Greeks and geeks – about their academic and personal experience in college. I also conversed, at times, with their parents. What I particularly loved about my work was seeing and supporting these always amazing young people as they 'distinguished' themselves by discovering their particular skills and interests, and their limitations.

Early in our first conversation, I often asked students why they had come to college? Usually they looked non-plussed, shocked, I think, that a college dean would be asking such a question. After all, they were bright, interested in classes and activities, doing well . . . why was I making such a strange query? Going to college was, well, it was just what you did. Almost everyone they knew did it. Their parents expected it. They expected it. They came to follow a path they thought would help them find a good job, build a career, or go to law or medical school. It sometimes took a little more probing from me to find out what really interested them, what they were passionate about learning, and where their unique strengths and abilities lay.

Parents were clearer. They wanted their children to be in a relatively safe environment where they would learn self-discipline, would work hard, and earn the credentialing they hoped would open doors for their future economic security. Of course they wanted them to make friends with other disciplined, successful and stimulating young people who would be their friends and turn into future flourishing colleagues in the business or professional world. And yes, they wanted their children to have a goodtime and enjoy their college experience. Some parents, of course, had very definite plans for their children's futures. They had set them on a path and they expected their offspring to run the course and earn a good time and record in the process.

These responses seemed understandable enough. College was seen as an investment, and a rite of passage. To what? So the next question I asked was not the usual 'what do you want to be when you grow up', but 'WHO do you want to be when you grow up'?

Students (and parents) usually had simple answers. Successful (which usually had a financial component to the assumed definition). Motivated. Able to grasp and use the options available. Self-initiating and self-satisfied. A do-er. And students, thank goodness, saw themselves as able and willing to make a real difference in the world. Surely that vision is one that we all hope for . . . since we must rely on these able young people to make the commitment to further our own and our society's dreams.

As the mother of five who all graduated from colleges in the '90s, I completely understand the desire and the need to know that my investment in education can and will provide socio-economic opportunities for my children. But above all, I want my children to dare to be as great as they are. To practice and experience courage. To fail, and to dare again. To share and co-create with other young, vital, innovative minds. To be invested. To know there are many different ways of being or of evaluating issues, and have the confidence to choose . . . and then to change their minds. I hope that they discover their own limitations and accept them and learn to work with others to achieve goals they cannot accomplish alone.

Sometimes when talking with parents about their expectations, I asked what they look for when they hire an employee? The answers were very telling. They wanted people who had demonstrated achievement in competitive learning situations, had self-confidence, were willing and able to learn new material rapidly, were team players, responsible, self-initiated, respectful, flexible, diligent, creative and innovative, and got along with their colleagues.

Colleges don't offer courses or concentrations in these areas, yet these are the attributes that students can and do achieve in college if they are motivated, and the campus community is carefully-chosen and the right 'fit'.

Kids arrive on campus from different versions of what is basically the same place. The path has been quite confined, and those who have made it into the selective colleges have fought and jostled their way to be front-runners. They have high self-expectations regarding achievement. They have been well-'schooled' in a very limited curriculum -- basically the same one that I, or my parents, took. They take math, biology, chemistry, maybe physics, a language, 3 years of history, 4 years of English, and an occasional 'peripheral' course offered at some schools -- art history, or sociology, or economics, or a semester of psychology. Even though we're in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there is no planetary geology or cognitive/neuro science, no urban studies or public policy, no semiotics, no biomedical ethics. The twelve years of schooling prior to college seems to be about accumulating a shared, and narrow, body of information.

College is about expanding knowledge -- experiencing the interaction of modes of thought and perception, and developing the abilities to analyze and to express. I discuss

with students the satisfaction of focusing their studies deeply in one area, while discovering how to learn in different disciplines, assuring them that the combination will provide some of the most valuable assets they could gain at college. I urge them to take risks when they choose classes, so as to learn in ways that open the mind in fresh directions. Then they can develop the confidence to approach new information or situations with a flexible range of techniques for engagement. These things are not listed in the College Course Announcement Bulletin, but they are the product of the exploration of not only the curriculum, but of the self.

College is the time and space where young people can get 'off the path' and see farther. Only a part of what they learn in college – and any dean would agree – is found in the classrooms and libraries. In four years of college they don't become anthropologists, biochemists or art historians. But they do become men and women.

I appreciate our concern as parents for our children's future, and their safety, security and well-being. But I also know that college – that time between 17 and 22—is the best time, and often the first time, when young people dare to and learn to be great. As teenagers, they have been on the sidelines, watching the world, often feeling powerless. They are increasingly conscious and informed about the problems, the challenges, and they are eager to try their hands at fashioning solutions.

College, therefore, becomes less about marching along on the path to a career goal and more about developing flexibility and vision, and courage. We think of the years on campus as a very social experience, but they are also a kind of monastic experience. This is a time to be by oneself – between the worlds of family life and commitment and career. You can have 'a room of one's own' where you get to take a very good look at yourself as you balance your abilities against your desires. It is also a place to learn about building lasting collegial and personal relationships, and learning to be a friend.

So why are you going to go to college? And parents, why do you invest so much to send your children?

The college community is a relatively safe environment to learn things that go beyond any curriculum; to take risks and experience failures than help to test, measure, challenge explore, enjoy, acclaim, accept your self, and others. In college you learn to invest yourself in your community, nation and world in a way that is appropriate to your skills, and your limitations.

In the end, your college experience will not match the dreams of a twenty-year-old, or the twenty-year old dreams of your parents. But if you have taken the opportunity for self-reflection as well as for academic achievement and committed leadership, you'll graduate both chastened and empowered -- and both experiences will be equally valuable. Above all, you will understand why Howard Swearer, Brown University's 15th President said, "*Liberal education is preparation for appointments not yet made.*"