

## Why Go to College?

~ Kim Pereira, PhD, Director of the Honors Program, Professor of Theatre

More than 150 years ago, Cardinal Newman described a university as “a school of knowledge of every kind, consisting of teachers and learners from every quarter.” In some ways that is still a good definition, although the idea of a fixed place in space has somewhat changed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Today we have “virtual” universities, online teaching and learning, interlibrary lending, traveling professors, and transferring of credits.

The ivory towers of learning, where scholars pored over thick and ancient tomes of knowledge, have been superseded by seminars, discussion groups, and team projects, interpersonal interaction not unlike an even more ancient time when teachers and gurus sat under trees and discussed with their students and disciples the mysteries of the world through stories, legends, songs, and parables.

Why do we go to a university? The most common answer, it truth be told, is that a majority of us go to college so we can find a job. The statistics bear this out—college degree holders, for the most part, find better-paying jobs. But in a changing world there are increasing opportunities for talented people with particular skills and no college education. For example, if you’re a brilliant hacker, Microsoft and Google wouldn’t care if you have a degree or not. Bill Gates famously dropped out of college. Of course, those are exceptions.

So what does this mean for those of us who do go to college? It appears that so many young people out of high school know precisely what they want to do in college; they know what courses will best prepare them for particular jobs. In fact, it has become common practice to take college courses while still in high school, where the focus seems to be on “getting to college.” Once there, the goal shifts to getting a degree as quickly as possible so that we can find a job and get on with our lives.

College has become a halfway house between adolescence and adulthood, a vocational institution where we pinpoint what we need to do to fetch the best occupational returns—do such and such and you will get this and that. This is part of the larger context of our culture where we seek immediate gratification and rewards for everything we do. College-going is now a finely-honed craft which begins with standardized tests—we know what ACT or SAT scores will fetch us in terms of admission and scholarships. In India and China there are institutes that prepare millions of students each year for American standardized tests and can virtually guarantee a certain range of scores.

Once we get to college we carry that same attitude to our work. Grade-chasing is part of the great paper chase toward a degree. How many of us would take a course that didn’t count towards graduation just because it looked interesting enough? How often do we ask around before taking a course to find out if “it’s an easy ‘A’”? How many of us angrily confront our professors (or wish that we had the courage to do so) when we don’t get the grade we expected? How many of us define ourselves by our transcripts?

Caught in a maelstrom of courses, grades, peer pressure, family pressure, finding internships and jobs, and justifying the exorbitant costs of attending college we sometimes lose sight of the wonderful opportunities a university offers. The idea of “getting an education” is lost in the rush to “get to a job.” Of course, if we get an education along the way...?!

Perhaps it's time to pause for a bit and ask ourselves how we arrived at such a state. When did the idea of a liberal arts education get obfuscated by the demands of a noisy marketplace? What happened to wisdom and true knowledge, both of which we can only acquire after years of ceaseless pursuit but are unattainable without the foundations we need to lay in our formative years? If we dabble in the superficial aspects of subjects we are doomed never to know the real meaning of the world around us, a world that is gloriously impure, complex and profound, and full of ambiguities and contradictions.

Most universities have a plethora of programs and events designed to offer students a broad spectrum of experiences—speakers from different disciplines, fine arts events, colloquia, symposia, clubs, organizations around a host of subjects, and courses that may not be central to one's Major but will expand our horizons, force us to look at life differently, take us out of our comfort zones, and make us better educated.

When was the last time we read a book that was not prescribed reading for a particular course? How often do we read national and international newspapers and journals to get in-depth reflections of complex problems beyond the narrow sound-bites of CNN's meager capsules? Do we sit in a quiet corner of the university with other students and faculty to chat about current events? Why do fine arts students not attend science fairs or research presentations? Do math majors frequent the theatre or poetry readings or the symphony or the art gallery? Why are we so isolated in the cubby-holes of our narrow majors or departments when life itself spills over all boundaries and artificial fences?

If we do not take advantage of the magnificent diversity offered us at a university we might as well sit at home and read our text-books, because we will have forgotten that the best education happens when we learn from one another. Unless we probe the spaces between us and our fellow human beings we are destined to flounder through life in our own petty, secluded corners, out of touch with the cross-currents of a marketplace replete with multifarious personalities.

We need to stop thinking about all the programs on campus as extra-curricular and remember that they are co-curricular. Education is what we acquire throughout the day, in a myriad forms and from unexpected sources. The challenge is to keep ourselves open to all possibilities. We should realize that whatever our chosen profession we can succeed at it only if we are fully-developed human beings, which means that we must learn to see everything we do against the larger context of the society in which we live, remembering also that with each passing decade that context is expanding globally as the world shrinks towards our doorsteps.

Once we leave the university we will be thrown into daily contact with scientists, artists, construction workers, plumbers, garbage cleaners, waiters, and everyone else. Success in this global society depends upon understanding how to communicate intimately with everyone around us. It depends on learning about people and places far removed from us physically but intricately related to us in the web of human society. And is there a better place to learn how to do that than in college, the microcosm of society?