

Does college education serve any purpose?

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February 22, 2014

What is the purpose of college education? Do teachers know? Do students know? Does anybody know?! Do students need to know what the purpose of college education is or should they just play along because they have to? In fact, does college education serve any purpose at all?

In one view shared by a significant number of students, college is an extension of high school but with more freedom and, unpleasantly, with more uncertainty. The purpose of college education then seems to be an unnecessary delay to professional life. Another prevalent view is that college is (or is supposed to be) an introduction to professional graduate education. In this view, the purpose of college education is to provide an early start in the profession of choice. Since students are rarely told what the purpose of college is, they automatically fall into one of these two categories. Unfortunately, both lead to wrong expectations that clash with reality. For many students, college education does not make sense; it just costs money.

In the extended-high-school view, students' primary expectation is that nothing special is requested of them as long as they do their "homework". Quite understandably then, college should rather be done with sooner rather than later since nothing particularly good is to come out of it. In the other, pre-professional view, the primary expectation of students is that the curriculum should be targeted towards the specific needs of their selected profession. Consequently, it makes no sense to do anything else. "Non-professional" prerequisites are therefore barriers to professional futures.

College education does have a mission both for students and for society. However, in order to benefit from it, students need to know: 1) the purpose of college education and 2) what is expected of them while in college.

College is called higher education for a good reason: it is supposed to elevate learners to a higher level of inquiry and understanding than in high school. It is *higher* in the way it engages and challenges the mind. It is more strenuous on purpose, not by accident. It provides a framework for exercises of the mind in both real and imaginary situations. It is also a forum for open thought and debate, and a platform for challenging doctrines and pre-conceived ideas in the society. It does this by transferring the responsibility of learning from teachers to students: as opposed to high school, students are free to establish their own priorities and work habits (e.g. to attend class or not). At the same time, students are supposed to assume responsibility for their choices. A high school mentality is therefore no longer adequate. In high school, students are forced to learn. In college students are free to learn. College is supposed to differentiate between students who know what to do with this freedom and students who do not. (To be sure, high

school education has its own mission and challenges for both students and teachers, but this is not discussed here.)

Advancing from high school to college, students are expected to prove and improve their intellectual ability, oral and written communications skills, maturity, initiative, learning potential and discipline, critical thinking, imagination, enthusiasm, engagement, reliability, self-criticism, and personal responsibility. These are criteria that differentiate between students whether grades reflect that or not. (They should.) It is no accident that applicants to professional schools and high-end jobs are evaluated on these particular criteria.

It might then seem that college teachers are absolved of responsibilities since the "burden" of learning is placed on students. No, responsibilities for teachers are still there like in any profession. What students need to know is that college teachers have the responsibility to hold the standards of student learning sufficiently high so that the differentiation process mentioned above can take place. This is not something that students necessarily like, although students with good grades deserve to know that their grades really mean something. College teachers are then responsible to place quality over quantity. They have to resist pressures to lower quality standards in order to meet quotas or to please the majority. In a simpler translation: in college, not everybody gets an A.

Higher education (college) is also a general education. It is not professional school. It does not form researchers, medical doctors, or dentists. This is what professional schools do. General education is a collection of disciplines (often unrelated) that together contribute to mind broadening and self-discovery. It allows students to discover not only what they are good at but also, equally important, what they are not good at. The complete spectrum of abilities and lack thereof is what defines each human being in adulthood. College does that.

So what is the purpose of college education then? Ideally, it is to deepen and broaden students' capacity of thinking that can lead to progress and to solutions to social problems. From this perspective, college serves the society more than it serves the student: the society needs to form responsible and educated citizens who can decide for themselves and, when needed, decide for others in unforeseeable situations.

College students are expected to rise to the expectation of meeting quality standards. Not to steer away from challenges for fear of failure but to go beyond bare minimum in order to shine and impress. To demonstrate a sustained learning appetite instead of apathy. To appreciate the value of learning for its own sake. These are not easy things to do.

Suggested reading: Chan, R., Brown, G. T., & Ludlow, L. (2013). What is the purpose of higher education?: A comparison of institutional and student perspectives on the goals and purposes of completing a bachelor's degree in the 21 st century. Paper presented at the annual Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) conference. St. Louis, MO: November 15, 2013.