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Why College Is Not a Commodity

By Gary Gutting

What is college for? We typically answer this question by citing a variety of purposes, of which liberal education is only one. Most other goals — marketable skills, moral and social development, learning how to learn — are tied to the demands of employers. Yes, young people need all of those qualities. But, apart from liberal education, our best colleges — say, the top 100 major research universities and the 50 best four-year colleges, which are our models of undergraduate education — aren't an efficient way to provide them.

These institutions are built around their faculties: the remarkable array of physicists, biologists, economists, psychologists, philosophers, historians, literary scholars, poets, and artists who do cutting-edge, highly specialized scholarly and creative work. Such scholars may be superb as teachers, but they are far from a cost-effective source of job training. Even if we include liberal education as a goal, colleges do not need such high-powered faculties to teach undergraduates. People dedicated entirely to teaching, with no special interest in research but with master's degrees in their subjects, could do an excellent job.

Given the role and the nature of its faculty, the only plausible *raison d'être* of a college is to nourish a world of intellectual culture: a world of ideas dedicated to what we can know scientifically, understand humanistically, or express artistically. In our society, this world is populated mainly by members of college faculties. Law, medicine, and engineering are included to the extent that they are still understood as "learned professions," deploying practical skills that are nonetheless rooted in scientific knowledge or humanistic understanding.

Support for our current system of higher education makes sense,

therefore, only if we regard this intellectual culture as essential. Otherwise we could provide job training and basic social and moral formation for young adults far more efficiently and cheaply. There would be no need to support, at great expense, the highly specialized interests of tenured academics. Colleges and universities have no distinctive purpose if we do not value highly the knowledge and understanding to which their faculties are dedicated.

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Many colleges — for example, branches of state universities and some liberal-arts colleges — participate in this project to a lesser though still significant extent. Others, like community colleges, have quite different goals, more akin to the job training provided by high schools and trade schools. But recognizing the diverse goals of various colleges does not affect the central role of intellectual culture in our premier institutions of higher education.

There are important questions about the precise value and role of various academic disciplines in our intellectual culture. Some think that literary scholars have been corrupted by politicized intellectual fads, others that philosophers are lost in the minutiae of logical hair-splitting. But it's absurd to say that this culture, over all, is not of fundamental importance in our society. Can we seriously say that we don't want a society that supports a high level of pure scientific research, art and music, historical understanding, and philosophical reflection?

There have been societies that sustained intellectual culture without universities (ancient Greece and Rome are clear examples). But most of our scientific research and almost all work in the humanities takes place in colleges; and increasingly, colleges are where poets, novelists, artists, and musicians are trained and employed. For us, the tie between intellectual culture and university life is so close that separation would destroy both.

Further, centering intellectual culture in colleges has a distinctive advantage. Specialists need contact with intelligent and challenging nonexperts. Otherwise, submerged in the complexities of their advanced research, they will lose sight of the general human significance of what they are doing. This is the wisdom of making universities not just research institutions but also centers of undergraduate education.

Of course, a college has functions other than the preservation, development, and transmission of intellectual culture. Students hope to qualify for better jobs, to make friends and find spouses, even to play sports. But none of these functions require the elite faculties at the heart of our colleges. They could all be carried out by vocational schools with dormitories, social events, and athletics facilities. The only justification for our major investment in college professors is transmitting knowledge and an appreciation of intellectual culture to the next generation. We could readily eliminate professors if the main point of college were not for students to open themselves to new dimensions of knowledge and understanding.

This conclusion, however, conflicts with another common presupposition: that college teachers need to focus on "making their subjects interesting" to students by showing how they relate to students' vocational and pop-cultural interests. On the contrary, students need to see how academic subjects are intrinsically interesting. It is more a matter of students' moving beyond their current interests than of teachers fitting their subjects to interests that students already have. Good teaching does not make a subject more interesting; it initiates students into a fascinating part of intellectual culture — and so makes them more interesting.

Here we need the Aristotelian distinction between instrumental knowledge and knowledge for its own sake. An education centered in a research university will focus on knowledge for its own sake: knowledge that forms a major part of a fulfilling life.

An obvious objection: If going to college is primarily for nurturing students' intellectual culture, how can we provide

the training they need to get good jobs? Well-qualified employees require instrumental knowledge: information and skills of no special value in their own right, but essential as means to providing the goods and services a capitalist society requires. For those interested in careers in traditional "knowledge professions," such as engineering, law, and medicine, universities can simply maintain the standard graduate schools and undergraduate programs. This makes sense because these professions call for a combination of liberal education and high-level vocational training.

Current thinking about education, however, assumes that college is the natural place to acquire the relevant instrumental knowledge not only for these elite professions but also for the vast majority of good jobs. This leads to the supposition that almost everyone should go to college. But the basis of this belief begins to collapse once we ask how college in fact prepares students for the workplace. For most jobs, it merely provides certain basic intellectual skills: the ability to understand complex instructions, to write and speak clearly and cogently, to evaluate options critically. Earning a college degree shows that you have the moral and social qualities that employers need. You have for a period of time, and with little supervision, deferred to authority, met deadlines, and carried out difficult tasks even if you found them pointless and boring. What better background for most jobs?

Such intellectual and moral/social training, however, does not require studying with experts on Homeric poetry, particle theory, experimental psychology, or Kant. It does not, that is, require the immersion in intellectual culture that a college faculty is designed to provide. So why think that almost everyone should go to college? Because — and here we encounter yet another widely held supposition about education — we believe that college is the only place for most young people to gain the instrumental knowledge they need for good jobs.

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This is an odd assumption. Why shouldn't a good elementary- and high-school education provide the needed instrumental knowledge? What is needed, intellectually, to succeed in most of the "good jobs" in our society? Here's one plausible and traditional model: a background in literature, art, science, history and politics adequate to read and comprehend the articles in national media; a grounding in precalculus mathematics; an ability to write well-organized and grammatically sound business memos and blog posts; and an intermediate level of competence in a foreign language.

Students with that sort of education would be excellent candidates for most satisfying and well-paying jobs (sometimes with the addition of an M.B.A. or other specialized master's degree). From the standpoint of employment, high-school graduates with such training would not need a college degree unless they wanted to be accountants or engineers, pursue preprofessional programs leading to law or medical school, or train for doctoral work in science or the humanities. Apart from that, the primary reason for going to college is its intellectual culture.

Of course, many high schools do not provide the needed instrumental education, and we make up the deficit with remedial work in college. This is an enormous waste of resources. In principle, there is no reason why elementary and high schools could not provide the instrumental knowledge that employers require. We hear various explanations for this failure: overcrowding, lack of technology, low teacher salaries, lack of parental involvement. Those factors are important, but, apart from the hard work of students themselves, the results of education depend mostly on who does the teaching. The other possible explanations for failure are relevant only because they make it impossible for students and teachers to do what they ought to do.

But isn't it clear that our K-12 teachers are not able to provide this sort of education? Even many students from the best public schools, which have small classes, lots of computers, well-paid teachers, and concerned parents, enter college far below the level I'm suggesting they should have achieved. The obvious explanation is the stunningly low standards we set for our K-12

teachers. For every other knowledge-based profession — law, medicine, university teaching — we recruit from the top 10-20 percent of our undergraduate students. Not so for K-12 teachers.

There was a time when outstanding women chose elementary- and high-school teaching because other professions excluded them. Now that these other professions are more open to women, we have come to accept that precollege teachers will, on the whole (and with admirable exceptions), be our less successful students. We try to work around that fact by emphasizing training, credentials, and external accountability. But in the end, as in other professions, there's no substitute for talent.

Even the best teachers may be ineffective if they have to work with the oversized classes, lack of discipline, and inane bureaucracies that plague so many of our schools. Above all, they may not be able to reach students with lives devastated by poverty. In fact, there is little chance of attracting the best students to teach in schools with such problems. Alleviating those problems has to be part of the effort to attract a better cohort of teachers. Why not adopt the same model for elementary- and high-school teaching that works for other professions?

One objection is that the best students have little interest in teaching. But there is reason to think the opposite. Top doctoral programs, designed for those who want to be college teachers, have far more applicants than they can accept. Further, many excellent students who would find satisfaction in teaching don't apply to graduate school, either because they lack certain specialized research skills or because they do not want to risk the highly competitive academic job market. Those students would form a natural pool for noncollege teaching if the pay and working conditions were anywhere near those of most colleges. There are also many top students who have no interest in the advanced research that is the focus of doctoral programs but who would prefer noncollege teaching to less intellectually engaging and less socially useful work.

Another objection is that teaching children and teenagers requires social and emotional abilities — to empathize, to nurture, to

discipline — that may not come along with the intellectual qualities of the "best" college students. But there is no reason to think that people who are smart, articulate, and enthusiastic about ideas are in general less likely to have those pedagogical abilities. We need only choose those who have both high intellectual ability and the qualities needed to work successfully with students at a given grade level. Moreover, it's important that teachers be — as they now often are not — credible authority figures. Teachers with the justified self-confidence and prestige of an elite professional will more readily exercise such authority.

A high level of intellectual ability may not be required to understand subjects in high school, not to say those in elementary school, but with our current low standards, it is not uncommon to find teachers who lack even this basic understanding. Moreover, it requires considerable intelligence to respond adequately to the questions and needs of students.

Most important, the greatest intellectual challenge of teaching at any level is to present the content effectively. Our current system seems often to assume that K-12 teachers will need the guidance of "experts" on this. There's considerable doubt as to the existence of this alleged expertise. For decades, educational theory has produced a series of failed panaceas (new math, whole-language reading, writing across the curriculum, discovery-based learning, group projects). But, in any case, more-intelligent teachers will be both more likely to develop better methods of teaching on their own and better able to understand and apply any wisdom that may come to them from above.

The final objection is that, sensible as it might seem, turning K-12 teaching into an elite, highly respected profession is too expensive. Can we seriously expect to compensate the three million people who teach elementary and high school at the level of doctors and lawyers? How can we afford to?

Judge teaching by the enduring excitement it generates, not by the amount of knowledge it passes on.

First we need to overcome our self-destructive aversion to raising taxes to pay for what we need. But beyond that, several factors would reduce the cost. We don't need to pay teachers on par with doctors and lawyers. College teaching (apart from the wage slavery of adjuncts) is strongly attractive at far lower pay levels, and K-12 teaching would not require the pay of full professors at elite institutions. Further, in the long run, the model of a faculty of elite professionals to whom we can entrust the education of our youth may pay for itself. There would be far less turnover of teachers who aren't up to the job. We would no longer need the current elaborate — and demoralizing — processes of external evaluation and the continual retraining of teachers in accord with outside experts' latest ideas. Nor would we need the extensive and expensive network of nonteaching administrators who oversee these processes.

Further, if we professionalize elementary- and high-school teachers, we could rely on them to provide the knowledge and skills that most people need to qualify for good jobs. College will be for those seeking to enter certain professions (law, medicine, engineering, teaching) and those who want to take part in intellectual culture at levels beyond that required by most jobs. This means that we could transfer to K-12 schools the considerable resources that colleges now use to teach students what they should have already learned.

At the core of this discussion is the conflict between liberal education and capitalism. If capitalism alone determines a society's fundamental values, intellectual culture will be marginalized. But what we have seen is that, in our society, the de facto privileged status of universities as centers of intellectual culture shows that our values are not entirely determined by the capitalist system. That is why we must separate education for instrumental knowledge from education for knowledge for its own sake.

A professionalized K-12 faculty can meet the instrumental needs of capitalist enterprises, leaving to college the pursuit of knowledge that makes us happy simply because we have it. In that way, college education would function as a counterforce to capitalism's

materialistic values.

Simply put, the fate of liberal education depends on improving K-12 education. Colleges would then be freed of the burden of educating for the job market. Absent this improvement, colleges will have to compromise their commitment to intellectual culture to take up the instrumental slack from elementary and high schools. Avoiding this disaster requires remaking K-12 teaching as a desirable profession.

Even if our commitment to capitalism has not eliminated our commitment to liberal education, it supports ways of thinking that can distort what goes on in our classrooms. The system encourages us to suppose that everything we value is what Marx calls a commodity: something that has a measurable value and that can be produced and transferred impersonally. We speak of knowledge as a commodity, saying that the amount of it is growing rapidly, and that schools transfer it to students. This way of thinking distorts the purpose of education, the role of tests, and the nature of teaching.

Teaching is an action. Philosophers have paid considerable attention to actions, and their reflections provide useful ideas for talking about the action of teaching. An action is something we do, as opposed to something that happens to us. If my head drops as I'm falling asleep in my chair, the dropping is an event, not an action. By contrast, nodding my head in agreement is an action. Going back to Plato and Aristotle, most philosophers who have addressed the topic have concluded that the nature of an action depends on its purpose, the goal (or as philosophers often put it, the object) that the intention aims to achieve. The same physical movement — say, my hand's moving an electric switch — may be intended to turn on a light, startle a thief, or signal the start of a revolution.

In the commodity view, teaching is an action that has as its object the transfer of knowledge to a student, either knowing how (skills) or knowing that (information). If an argument is needed for this view, it seems enough to note that we need tests to measure the results of our teaching. What does a test do if not determine what

knowledge (and how much) teaching has imparted? Therefore the object of teaching is to increase the quantity of a commodity — knowledge — that students have.

But let's think about the many tests we have taken in the course of our education. How well would most of us do on those we aced even just a few years ago? Here's a quick quiz:

Discuss the causes of the Thirty Years War.

Mary is 20 years old, which is twice the age Ann was when Mary was the age Ann is now. How old is Ann?

How do Shakespeare's early comedies differ from his late romances?

Give a brief summary of Mendel's Laws.

If the object of teaching is knowledge, then its effects seem short-lived. We may know enough to do well on a test at the end of a course, but unless we return regularly to the material, we will forget everything except a few disjointed elements. Of course, almost everyone eventually learns how to read, write, and do basic arithmetic, along with the rudiments of other subjects, such as history and geography. But that's because such knowledge is constantly reviewed as we deal with life — texting, paying bills, keeping up with the news — and not because we learned it once in third grade.

The same is true of more-sophisticated adult knowledge, even in areas in which we specialize. I know a lot about certain philosophers whom I studied in college and graduate school, but only the ones whom I've repeatedly returned to in my teaching and research. In general, this is the sort of knowledge we retain. But what we studied once and haven't taken up again and again is largely lost. At best the traces of learning serve as signs of an "educated person" (you say madeleines and I'll say Proust).

The commodity picture falls far short of what actually goes on when students "learn." There is some knowledge acquired, but in most cases only for the short term. The object of education — especially liberal education — is something that endures, and that

object is not usually knowledge.

But if the object of teaching is not knowledge, what is it? In recent years I've taught a seminar to first-year honors students in which we read a wide range of texts, from Plato and Thucydides to Calvino and Nabokov. We have lively discussions that require a thorough knowledge of a given text, and the students write excellent papers that require close readings of particular passages. But I'm sure the half-life of their detailed knowledge is less than a year. The real goal of my teaching, I've come to believe, is that my students have close encounters with great writing. If the object of my teaching were knowledge, then my efforts would be mostly in vain. My actions are successful only if their object is helping students have certain experiences: intellectual, emotional, aesthetic, even moral experiences of reading, discussing, and writing about classic works.

What's the value of such experiences? They make students aware of new possibilities for intellectual and aesthetic fulfillment — enjoyment or, perhaps better, happiness. They may not enjoy every book we read, but they enjoy some of them and discover that — and how — this sort of thing (Greek philosophy, modernist literature) can bring them happiness. They may never again exploit the possibility, but it will remain part of their lives, something that may start to bud again when they see a review of a new translation of Homer or a biography of T.S. Eliot, or when *Tartuffe* or *The Seagull* is playing at a local theater.

College education introduces students to our intellectual culture mainly through a proliferation of such possibilities: the beauty of mathematical discovery, the thrill of scientific understanding, the fascination of historical narrative, the mystery of theological speculation. We should judge teaching first by the enduring excitement it generates, not by the amount of knowledge it passes on. Knowledge — or, better, understanding — may emerge as students sustain and deepen their initial encounters and eventually come to grasp something substantial about Sophocles or Beckett. But such understanding is a later arrival, flaring up in the fullness of time from the sparks that good teachers plant in their students' souls.

The fruits of college teaching, therefore, should be judged by the popularity of museums, theaters, classical concerts, book discussion groups, and publications like *Scientific American*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The Economist*, and *The Atlantic*. These are where our students are most likely to reap the benefits of their education. And this benefit is less possession of a commodity and more access to a world of probing thought and creative imagination that helps free students from the commodity values of capitalism.

Capitalism is not entirely averse to this cultural world. Employers often say they want to hire people who think critically and creatively, who can detect tacit but questionable assumptions and develop new ways of understanding issues — all virtues associated with liberal education. But critical and creative attitudes go only so far in the business world. The premium is almost always on ingenuity in adapting standard procedures and established values to make profitable but seldom fundamental changes. In film, for example, you'll usually make more money from sequels than from trying to achieve a new artistic paradigm. The model for what works is not the radical thinking of Thomas Kuhn's revolutionary science but the problem solving of what he called "normal science." Moreover, encouraging revolutionary thinking might lead to embarrassing questions about the capitalist system.

Despite Bell Labs and a few other (increasingly rare) examples, profound conceptual changes typically come from outside the bureaucracies of big corporations or even from entrepreneurs seeking large profits. In general, those seeking relatively short-term practical results are constrained by the demands of standard expectations. It's our intellectual culture — physicists and poets, psychologists and musicians, philosophers and visual artists — that generates significant criticism and creativity. Those not tuned in to this culture lack the primary source for new ways of seeing and thinking. Ezra Pound said, "Literature is news that stays news," and the same is true for all great humanistic and scientific achievements.

Gary Gutting is a professor of philosophy at the University of Notre Dame. This essay is adapted from What Philosophy Can Do, just

out from W.W. Norton & Company.

Correction (09/11/15, 10:55 a.m.): A production error resulted in the duplication of several passages in the original posting of this essay. The error has been fixed.

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22198178 · 5 days ago

What is unsaid in this essay is that there is a spiritual dimension to learning. We cannot use this word, however, without inviting every extreme on the religious/political dimension from using it as a vehicle for their beliefs.

I mean this term apart from that spectrum and in a completely non-religious, faith-based, denominational context. But I do mean that if learning is not infused with something transcendent it will not achieve what is otherwise well communicated and important in this essay.

To which I will add: it is in the poverty of spirituality -- again, in its broadest sense -- that higher education suffers the most, perhaps all of American education. And it is a folly to have Constitutional doctrine on the First Amendment be an impediment to realizing that potential. At the very least, it is also a mis -- or over -- interpretation of that jurisprudence.

Thank you for a very beautiful piece on learning, teaching and one of the truest gifts of higher education's missions.

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silverquille37 → 22198178 · 5 days ago

Amen! When it comes to the practice of teaching, there is a great difference between teachers with intellectual 'talent,' and teachers with a 'gift' for teaching, in the spiritual sense. There are probably more than just a few licensed teachers out there who earned straight A's in college but who floundered in the classroom when the roles of teacher and student were switched. Although the spiritual gifts of scholarship and teaching often go hand-in-hand, that's not always the case.

Evidence of the operation of the spiritual gift of teaching is found when the teacher's message is received, understood and communicated by students while they are inspired and empowered by that process.

For those interested in learning more about the spiritual gift of teaching, there are two excellent resources:

Dr. C. Peter Wagner's "Discover Your Spiritual Gifts: The Easy to Use Guide That Helps You Identify and Understand Your Unique God-Given Spiritual Gifts" (that includes the Wagner Modified Houts Inventory) and a denominational resource based on Dr. Wanger's work -- Sherry Waddell's "Catholic Spiritual Gifts Inventory," that includes a few more recognized 'charisms' (such as the gifts of scholarship, craftsmanship and music) that do not appear in the Wagner Modified Houts Inventory).

Worth mentioning is that it is not enough to merely be aware of one's own spiritual gifts, but it is essential that we spend time cultivating them.

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rebek13 → 22198178 · 5 days ago

Yes. With this spiritual side of learning comes a sense of purpose to education, comes a sense of potential transformation.

Education is purposeless because of the refusal to see its effects as partially intangible. Not everything needs to be measured and visible. Not everything can be.

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