

What is the Value of My Education?

GOOD QUESTION

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You may have heard the old joke about the work culture of the Soviet Union: “They pretend to pay us, and we pretend to do work”. Well, replace the word “pay” with “teach” and you have the educational culture of this school. There are, of course, some highly-regarded opportunities at UA—majors like accounting, public relations, and nursing and organizations like the Culverhouse Investment Management Group (CIMG), the Blackburn Institute, Witt Fellows, and the Shelby Institute all come to mind. However, I’ve often felt like I was sold an experience instead of an education; given this school’s strength at branding, it’s fitting that the PR program is one of our best.

Why am I here? The simple answer is that I scored well on an exam I didn’t study for in the fall of my junior year, and this university thought that was enough to invest some amount greater \$200k on an 18-year-old. It was an offer I couldn’t refuse, as I wasn’t going to receive anything better: I had no exceptional story to tell for scholarship essays, and my parents weren’t going to pay out of pocket for an experience I could get anywhere. And as someone who grew up in the only triple-landlocked state with harsh weather patterns and an awful football team, Alabama’s proximity to the beach, mild winters (everything on campus was green when I visited in February!), and Nick Saban all seemed attractive.

I really miss the ambition and drive that I first had when arrived in Tuscaloosa. Well, sort of. During Camp 1831 (a three-day program for first-year students before the fall semester), campers were asked to answer the prompt “When I cross the stage at graduation, ...”; they were then encouraged by the A-Team leaders to share their responses in front of the entire camp, one at a time, during a session called “Take a Step”. At the time, I didn’t have much respect for the answers I heard, though each was going to receive zealous applause no matter what. While my response was about something about grades and achievements, the others were about growing as a person and having fun. Listening to them, I couldn’t help cynically thinking their parents might not want to hear what their money was funding.

My view of college as a challenge to complete instead of a journey led me to be very active my freshman year. I signed up for a bunch of different clubs at Get On Board Day and actually went to the meetings. Despite finding the Camp 1831 experience to have been overly focused on emotional affirmation, I applied for the A-Team to boost my resume. I joined Beat Auburn Beat Hunger for volunteer experience, signed up for Freshman Forum to boost my leadership skills, and was accepted into an honor society (dues were only \$45, so it had to be real!). I faced setbacks for some of the most important organizations—my application to First Year Council was so bad I didn’t get an interview, while I was unable to surpass the final round of interviews for CIMG and the Blackburn Institute—but with good grades, my resume looked fine, and I looked set up for success.

If you couldn’t tell from the opening to this piece, I’ve since become somewhat disillusioned with college over the past few years. Though I still work to keep my grades high, I stopped caring about the achievements and the titles and the meaningless campus politics and the marginally useful (if that) research. Where I at one point was invested in all

the Machine lore, voted in the SGA elections, and viewed joining Greek Life as the act of paying for friends, I started voting for the Machine candidates because they’re generally the safer choices and joined a business fraternity. I gave up on the idea of club leadership or applying for honor societies to boost my resume and decided to study abroad over multiple semesters in Budapest and Buenos Aires. I should, of course, be focused on securing a 9-5 for after graduation, though I can’t say I’m excited for another rat race.

Thinking back on the “Take a Step” exercise, I think we were all right and wrong at the same time. College is certainly a time of personal development; it’s a life-changing social experience, for better or for worse. The view that it is a gateway to success in life is also true, with all the opportunities to build credentials for the future. However, both views are utility-focused and superficial, missing the deeper purpose and value of education itself.

My issue here isn’t with UA specifically—given the nature of our commercialized, data-driven society, valuing measurable, aggregate outcomes in our education system over effects on individuals is inevitable. But the consequences of this approach are easy to see. General education classes are a joke shared by both professors and students. Class grades have become inflated to the point that they tell us nothing about subject-matter understanding; overall GPA is useless as students can optimize professors and classes. Professors are reluctant to reproach or fail students for fear of poor Rate My Professor ratings and potential departmental complaints; this of course assumes they care about teaching at all when most incentives are for publishing papers and securing grants. There’s no incentive to struggle with class material – I know hardly anyone that does assigned readings, as it’s much easier to regurgitate the professor’s thoughts on papers and exams. We all seem to assume that education is happening simply because we are in an educational institution.

So, what is the value of education? Good question: Some thinkers say it’s the pursuit of truth and free-thinking, while others view it as the development of character or of good citizens. I personally love the analogy of education as entrance to a Great Conversation that started way before me and will last much longer; perhaps my disillusionment was actually a gift that will jumpstart my contribution to this conversation. ●