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What Is College For?

Lately there has been a great deal of discussion about the importance of measuring a college's "return on investment." Is the point of a college education quantifiable results or personal and intellectual growth? In pursuit of answers, *The Chronicle* asked a selection of higher-education leaders.

Phyllis M. Wise

Chancellor of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and a vice president of the University of Illinois



L. BRIAN STAUFFER, U. OF ILLINOIS
URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

SHOULD we be preparing students for the work force, or should we be preparing them for lifelong learning? The answer is, "Yes."

We must provide students with the tools and skills necessary for gainful employment. However, data suggest that today's graduates will have three different professions during their lives. It is our responsibility, therefore, to teach students how to learn, how to find information, and how to work

collaboratively across disciplines and cultures. In a global economy where our interactions are no longer bound by geography, cross-cultural understanding and communication are essential.

In college, students establish the intellectual foundations for their careers, and it is when they have the freedom to explore paths their lives might take. It is the rare student who comes to us with a clear life map already in hand. We can put choices in front of students, but we must do so in an academically structured manner.

It is important to teach students a body of knowledge—the "facts" of a discipline. One cannot pursue any profession without understanding the principles of it. **Good universities find a balance where students are free to form their long view of the world while at the same time acquiring the knowledge and skills to pursue a rewarding profession.** We fail when we force students to choose a college experience where they must pick one or the other.

We prepare students for the jobs and the careers that will emerge and grow and change in the next 20 years—perhaps in industries not yet conceived. These aren't job skills—these are life lessons.

And these are the lessons college must teach.

Carolyn A. (Biddy) Martin

President of Amherst College



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COLLEGE is for the development of intelligence in its multiple forms. College is the opportunity for achievement, measured against high standards. College is preparation for the complexities of a world that needs rigorous analyses of its problems and synthetic approaches to solving them. College is for learning how to think clearly, write beautifully, and put quantitative skills to use in the work of discovery. College is for the cultivation of enjoyment, in forms that go beyond entertainment or distraction, stimulating our capacity to create joy for ourselves and others. College is for leave-taking, of home and of limiting assumptions, for becoming self-directed, while socially responsible.

In his 2005 commencement speech at Kenyon College, the brilliant writer and Amherst graduate David Foster Wallace ('85), defined the value of the liberal arts in the following terms: "The real, no bullshit value of your liberal-arts education is how to keep from going through your comfortable, prosperous, respectable lives dead, unconscious, a slave to your head and to your natural default settings."

For all the tragic irony of Wallace's point, given his own premature death, his admonition holds. A spate of recent books have enjoined us to distinguish between our natural default settings and our ability to reason on the basis of evidence—between what Daniel Kahneman calls, for example, our "fast" and "slow" thinking, or the automatism housed in one part of our brain and the ability to reflect in another.

College is for finding a calling, or many callings, including the calls of friendship and love. It is for the hard work of experimentation, failure, reflection, and growth. It is about the gains we make and the losses that come with them. In an age of sound bites and indignation, college is for those who are brave enough to put at risk what they think they know in recognition of the responsibility we have to one another and to those still to come.

Walter M. Kimbrough

President of Dillard University



STEPHEN THORNTON

RECENTLY I watched my students debate the legitimacy of the Student Government Association election. For hours that night, following days of talks, well-written position statements, and proposals, these students practiced citizenship. They applied concepts from the classroom to discuss an issue that affected leadership opportunities and students' rights.

Where else can emerging adults develop these skills in an environment that challenges and supports them? Their peers not in college can theoretically have these experiences by participating in school-board or city-council meetings, but generally they work low-paying jobs that require long hours, prohibiting participation. In addition, trying to get a word in edgewise among the elders (or even being acknowledged by them) essentially keeps them on the sidelines.

Several years ago David Hodge, president of Miami University, described the campus as a place where intellectual collisions can occur. That's our purpose! Colleges are places where students learn and grow through intellectual collisions in and out of class, with professors, staff, and peers, and where the community comes for similar experiences.

I understand costs. With almost 75 percent of my students Pell Grant recipients, we have a high population of low-income students. And yet my students need these collisions more than do students whose families can provide exposure. I value technology and the revolution of online degrees and MOOCs, but these forms of delivery cannot replicate this environment. As the columnist Bill Maxwell recently wrote, they do not nurture the whole student.

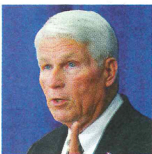
College, primarily providing an intellectual foundation for a chosen profession, is still a great place to make lifelong friends, meet a spouse, develop professional networks, and discover mentors. It facilitates intellectual, professional, and personal collisions, all of which have value.

Or to modify a popular commercial: "College collisions? Priceless."

"Colleges are places where students learn and grow through intellectual collisions."

John C. Hitt

President of the University of Central Florida



AP IMAGES

I WENT to college because it was one of my father's great ambitions for me. He passed away when I was 15, and my mother impressed upon me my father's desire that I attend college.

So I enrolled at **Austin College**, a private liberal-arts school in Sherman, Tex. That decision has made all of the difference in my life, giving me opportunities to grow intellectually and emotionally. **And that is the power and gift of higher**

education—it transforms lives.

I have often joked that when I arrived at **Austin College** I could not spell psychology, my eventual major. But outstanding faculty mentors helped me to develop my potential. College sharpened my love of history, and I continue to be an eager reader of historical fiction and nonfiction books. It also taught me the value of analysis and how to think critically.

College is also a place to learn about yourself. Student government and choir were means for some of my friends to mature. For me, it was football. As an offensive lineman, I learned the power of persistence, the rewards of hard work, and the hard lesson that one doesn't always win.

My experience as the first member of my family to attend college also has led me to value access as a goal for the University of Central Florida. At UCF, approximately one of every four students is the first in her or his family to attend college. Imagine how their lives, the lives of their families, and the quality of life in Central Florida will be transformed by their earning a college degree.

A generation ago, my college experience helped fulfill my father's dreams for me. Today, higher education remains the best way for parents to transform dreams into reality for their children.