

College is Not Just a Place; It Is a Culture

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Not everyone has clear sights on their future. Many high school seniors and numerous adults experiencing career changes are unsure whether college is the answer for them. There is no one cure for this dilemma; however, understanding college culture may help some to decide whether or not college is a viable option for them.

A culture is a package consisting of expectations, hopes, procedures, roles, rules, traditions, rituals, relationships, assumptions, and communicative strategies employed by fellow culture members. A culture is organic; it is constantly, and often subtly, changing and being updated. Cultures involve activity, identity, and pride. College cultural membership is active, not passive; membership is voluntary and transitory, although the byproducts of college culture are forever enduring.

The author has studied and worked in the university culture for over 30 years; he has also worked for 5 years in vocations where the college culture is neither valued nor well understood. It is the intent of this essay to explain the dynamics of the college culture.

People who never attended college have varied vocations available to them: the trades, skilled and unskilled labor, entrepreneurship, clerical jobs, and some lower level management positions. These positions range in pay from low to substantial; and they range in esteem from minimal to highly respected. One typical characteristic of most of these vocations is that they

assume life-long careers in the same general fields. Recent vocational research suggests that most high school graduates can expect to change careers more than three times in their adult lifetimes. Training for plumbers, computer technicians, shop clerks, taxi drivers, or bookkeepers is rather narrow, though useful, respected, thorough and technical. If one's vocational interests, physical condition, or lifestyle suddenly or radically changes, many people holding such positions will find themselves in need of complete retraining in a new field. Sometimes, people facing change can transfer some previous experience to a related job, but such is not the typical case for those who have been too narrowly trained. A college education gives one the basic underpinning for entering new fields or beginning new training at a position other than the lowest rung on the ladder.

The college culture values versatility, adaptability, and breadth. College students are assumed to seek vocations and professions that inherently involve change, innovation, and upward mobility. Such jobs require people who are able and willing to undertake lifelong learning. If your goal is to learn a task, get employed in an area not requiring or expecting a college education, and to remain at that or a closely related task for your entire life, college may not be for you.

Some of the major skills college teaches are information management, reporting, and retrieval. College students prepare classroom reports, write course papers, and read articles and books which hone information seeking, organization, and selection

skills. Class papers and reports sharpen information management, application, and reporting skills. Many jobs for which college students apply require such skills. Medicine, teaching, business management, law, engineering, politics, economics, and science require fine tuned information management and use skills; and are thus typically held by college graduates.

Local, regional, and national political, business, and social leaders traditionally come from college educated citizens. Only 17 out of 435 congressional leaders do not have college degrees;¹ all lawyers and judges are college educated; 487 of the Fortune 500 CEOs have college degrees;² and most scientists, engineers, teachers, and theologians are college educated. Such leadership is not everyone's goal. Leadership is not synonymous with being better than others; it is a different type of job. Leadership requires teamwork, negotiation, communication skills, and a breadth of current, updated, and refined understanding of diverse areas. These are the basic components of a college education. Leaders would be useless without others whom to lead.

One of the traditions and rules in most colleges is that students take courses not directly related to their major study area. Sometimes such requirements confuse and irritate students. The non-college populace expects college graduates to be literate and articulate, be able to think clearly, be aware of factors needed to make quality and informed decisions, and be able to

¹ This is based on the 1998 Congressional directory.

² This data is based on 1997 data.

change with the future. Breadth of knowledge and understanding are essential to these ends. Corporate CEOs invest on behalf of their corporations in local community civic groups, in local artistic endeavors, and in local political interests. To do so, they must be aware of public relations; artistic standards; civic responsibilities; and in political and economic realities, history, and future predictions. No matter what their college major was, they needed the breadth required of them in school. A lawyer cannot adequately defend an artist's copyright rights, a widow's investment portfolio, a miner's environmental infraction, or a plumber's workman's compensation claim without knowledge of and/or access to information about art, copyright, investment finance, environmental science, and work related injury. An architect needs to know about physics, materials design and cost, sales, payroll, aesthetics, environmental concerns, building regulations, and how to get along with builders, contractors, and building inspectors. Diversity and versatility are cornerstones for many jobs. Adaptability and versatility are embedded in most college majors and are components of college courses providing college graduates with the tools required in most jobs.

College graduates are expected to be able to speak and write clearly, directly, and effectively. This does not mean that they can or would speak over the heads of their audience. It does mean that when they speak or write, their meanings are clear, unambiguous, truthful, specific, and direct. Good communication skills not only include technique, they also are hinged upon

having knowledge of what is being spoken or written about. College teaches, through varied experiences, how to think, speak and write clearly on varied topics. People without college educations can also learn to think, speak and write clearly; however, many such individuals have experiences in narrow fields, typically within their job. That is OK for most jobs and job holders, but is inadequate for other jobs and professionals requiring communication skills and topic awareness across job boundaries.

College is a hedge against change, progress, evolution, and obsolescence. Our national culture has changed greatly from the Pilgrims, to Colonialists, to predominantly farmer citizens, to the industrial revolution, to the scientific and technological changes of the twentieth century, to the next century of unknown change. The most successful individuals have been those who could adapt, who could foresee future innovations, and who were prepared to take advantage of varied opportunities.

College is an investment, not just of time and money, but of opportunity. College may not guarantee a better job in terms of money; but it will open doors to vocations with superior working conditions, wider promotion and learning opportunities, and better adaptability chances than many non-college required jobs offer. College is hard work. College graduates inherently buy into what the public expects of them. The college experience lasts a lifetime even when the classes stop.