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COMMENTARY

What Is College Good For? (Hint: More Than Just a Job)

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Carole Henaff for The Chronicle

Neither of my parents went to college. My father dropped out of high school in 1944 to join the Navy, and my mother took a job as a riveter following her graduation in 1949. They married, built a home, and raised two children. When my father passed away last December, he was mourned as a dedicated father, a caring husband, a talented machinist, and a decorated World War II veteran. At 87, my mother continues to live independently, volunteering 20-hours a week at a local medical center where she outpaces even the candy-stripers.

They have lived rich lives, and they did it without the benefit of higher education. Which puts me, a college administrator and education scholar, in a difficult position when I am confronted by the question: "What, exactly, is college good for?"

Colleges like the one where I work are fine with students being uncertain about their plans.

My mother had a very precise answer: "You need to go to college so that you can work with your head instead of your hands." And, for the most part, she had it right. Although it bothers me that I don’t know how to use half of the tools in my parents’ toolboxes, my professional life is intellectually satisfying and financially

rewarding. My parents may have known little about the way college worked, but they certainly understood higher education's occupational advantages.

Even today, however, I am surprised by the assuredness of my mother's response. College was, for my parents, a mostly utilitarian enterprise. Never once did they suggest that enrolling would make me a better person or more conscientious or a harder worker. Why would they? They were all of these things, in abundance. Almost as an afterthought, my mother would tell my brother and me that college was where we would learn to be independent and live away from home, but even I knew you didn't need college for that.

Admiring my father's military service and heeding my mother's advice, I enrolled at a college that promised a job following graduation: the United States Air Force Academy. I had no business being there. I was academically unprepared, too young (I didn't turn 18 until well after basic training), and neither mature nor determined enough to remain. Still, the education was free (another reason I applied) and I wanted to serve my country. I stuck it out for two years.

When I withdrew, my parents were supportive but anxious. I had thrown away a no-cost higher education along with guaranteed employment. "What are you going to do?" they asked. At the time, I assumed they wanted to know where I intended to finish college. Only later did I understand that they were asking where I was planning to work.

I returned to college by transferring to George Washington University, where I enrolled in the secondary-school teacher-education program. The reason was pragmatic: to obtain my teaching credential — and have job prospects — following graduation. I remained a high-school teacher for a decade before pursuing a doctoral degree.

These experiences prompted me, several years ago, to begin writing a history of American higher education. The questions driving the project were deeply personal. If colleges exist primarily for occupational purposes, as my mother asserted, why do so many institutions claim otherwise? Was my parents' understanding of college simply wrong? Is higher education's professional orientation a relatively recent phenomenon? If, over time, occupational advancement wasn't the primary objective, what was?

At least part of the answer to these questions is that higher education's vocational

purposes are longstanding. Bowdoin College (my home institution), for instance, currently prides itself on being a liberal-arts college that keeps professionalism at a distance. Consider, however, this claim made by the college's first president over 200 years ago: "That the inhabitants of this district may have of their own sons to fill the liberal professions among them, and particularly to instruct them in the principles and practice of our holy religion, is doubtless the object of this institution." According to the Rev. Joseph McKeen, Bowdoin College was established largely to prepare students for the ministry and the other "liberal professions," including law, medicine, and teaching.

Students, too, have long had occupational advancement in mind when going to college. Even in the early 19th century, when one of higher education's primary objectives was to prepare students for ministerial training, most knew that the ministry did not promise significant financial gain. Still, ministers enjoyed relatively high social status, permitting students of limited means to escape their potential future as landless hired hands, city laborers, or clerks. College was a vehicle for financial stability and social betterment.

In short, students have always used college to get ahead. Yet, my research also confirmed something that I first learned through personal experience. Although my mother was right, her understanding of higher education was incomplete. In addition to providing opportunities for enhancing career prospects, colleges and universities have historically encouraged students to expand their aspirations in the direction of serving the public good.

Not all institutions did so, of course, and not all students responded. Nevertheless, the archival record is replete with examples of students expressing concerns — some apprehensively, some confidently, but almost always intentionally — that they pursue self-improvement to become useful citizens.

Now that my son has completed his junior year of high school, I find myself agonizing over his future and what occupational advantages college will provide. I've become my parents as well as all of the other parents questioning the uses and value of college. Still, when my mother calls and conversation turns to her grandson, I am able to take some solace in the past.

"Does he know what he wants to do?" she inevitably asks. "No," I say, and tell her that in addition to not knowing what he wants to do, he isn't sure what he wants to study. I explain that he'll figure both out once he arrives at college and learns more about the choices available to him. I also remind her that colleges like the one where I work are fine with students being uncertain about their plans.

Then, I take a further step and describe how I hope he'll choose a college that encourages him to think seriously about more than his future occupation. I tell her that I hope he'll be admitted to one that expands his understanding of the world as well as his personal ambitions, one that equips him to live well while fostering an awareness of his responsibility to others.

The first time I spoke words like those to my mother over the phone, I was pretty sure I could sense her forehead crinkle. This was not the language that we use in my family to discuss, well, anything, never mind an increasingly costly higher education. Instead, I was startled by her response. "That would be good," she said. "I wish I had had that."

Charles Dorn is a professor of education and associate dean for academic affairs at Bowdoin College. His most recent book is For the Common Good: A New History of Higher Education in America (Cornell University Press, 2017).

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