College: What is it Good For?

Today, a college education has become increasingly important. Those who further their education after high school are more likely to be successful, for example, make a higher salary and attain greater career advancement. A college education has become the minimum requirement for a great deal of jobs. This emphasis on higher education in order to be at all competitive in the job market creates an environment in which work-related skills and knowledge becomes the main objective. College has become a factory of future tax-payers, fostering attitudes that see higher education a necessary evil in order to join the work force. It is a place to become trained, a place to take required courses in order to advance in life, both socially and financially.

The increasingly competitive job market of today, emerging from one of the most downturned economies in United States history has shifted the main purpose of a college education. Rather that a place for students to grow personally and intellectually, it’s main purpose is to train students for the work-force. In my opinion, this is unfortunate. When asked what my field of study is, the first reaction is always: “what are you going to do with that!?!?” Philosophy does not scream job opportunities. Personally, I believe college is an exceptionally unique and irreplaceable experience in which I have learned not only about the person I am but about the world I live in, enlightening my perspective and introducing me to a complexity of ideas. For me, college should be a place to grow personally and intellectually, yet, in reality, this ideal is in constant conflict with the pressure to attain a good job and secure a comfortable position in society.

When asked whether or not an institution fulfills the purpose of providing students with work-related skill or with the opportunity to grow personally and intellectually, I believe it does both. Based on my experiences and observations at the number of institutions I have attended, college is what you make of it. Many factors can influence the type of experience one can have, for example, your field of study. As a philosophy major, my courses have a much different emphasis than those of a business major who’s goal is to go into human resources. In a class about post-modern theory, we learn about the philosophies of Nietzsche and the crisis of language, lending itself to bigger issues of epistemology and ontology. This is greatly contrasted with the more practical and job oriented application of a class on quantitative business principles. This is not to infer that one is better than the other, rather it illustrates the ways in which one’s area of study will create different learning environments and objectives.

Attending college for the purpose of intellectual and academic endeavors has become a luxury. A survey of public attitudes about higher education shows that a majority of people find college as a place to acquire work related skills and knowledge. This finding is unsurprising in an age that is increasingly focused on finding a job. People do not have the luxury to pursue knowledge for knowledge’s sake, not when Americans have bills to pay and families to take care of. No longer are decent jobs available to those with only a high school diploma. A well-rounded education, one that balances the practical with the intellectual, would be ideal but harder to obtain with rising tuition costs and a competitive job market.