

SUNDAY REVIEW

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# Demanding More From College



By Frank Bruni

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I'M beginning to think that college exists mainly so we can debate and deconstruct it.

What's its rightful mission? How has it changed? Is it sufficiently accessible? Invariably worthwhile?

As the fall semester commenced, the questions resumed. Robert Reich, the country's labor secretary during the Clinton administration, issued such a pointed, provocative critique of the expense and usefulness of a traditional liberal arts degree that Salon slapped this headline on it: "College is a ludicrous waste of money."

Meanwhile, the sociologists Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa were out with a new book, "Aspiring Adults Adrift," in which they assessed how a diverse group of nearly 1,000 recent graduates were faring two years after they finished their undergraduate studies. About one-quarter of them were still living at home. And nearly three-quarters were still getting at least some money from parents. These were the nuggets that the media understandably grabbed hold of, drawing the lesson that college isn't the springboard that young men and women want and perhaps need it to be.

I have a problem with all of this. But my concern isn't about the arguments themselves or some of the conclusions drawn. It's about the narrowness of the discussion, which so heavily emphasizes how a career is successfully forged and how financial security is quickly achieved.

While those goals are important and that focus is understandable, there's another dimension to college, and it's one in which students aren't being served, or serving themselves, especially well. I'm referring to the potential — and need — for college to confront and change political and social aspects of American life that are as troubling as the economy.

We live in a country of sharpening divisions, pronounced tribalism, corrosive polarization. And I wish we would nudge kids — no, I wish we would push them — to use college as an exception and a retort to that, as a pre-emptive strike against it, as a staging ground for behaving and living in a different, broader, healthier way.

As we pepper students with contradictory information and competing philosophies about college's role as an on ramp to professional glory, we should talk as much about the way college can establish patterns of reading, thinking and interacting that buck the current tendency among Americans to tuck themselves into enclaves of confederates with the same politics, the same cultural tastes, the same incomes. That tendency fuels the little and big misunderstandings that are driving us apart. It's at the very root of our sclerotic, dysfunctional political process.

And college is the perfect chapter for diversifying friends and influences, rummaging around in fresh perspectives, bridging divides. For many students, it's an environment more populous than high school was, with more directions in which to turn. It gives them more agency over their calendars and their allegiances. They can better construct their world from scratch.

And the clay hasn't dried on who they are. They're not yet set in their ways.

But too many kids get to college and try instantly to collapse it, to make it as comfortable and recognizable as possible. They replicate the friends and friendships they've previously enjoyed. They join groups that perpetuate their high-school experiences.

Concerned with establishing a "network," they seek out peers with aspirations identical to their own. In doing so, they frequently default to a clannishness that too easily becomes a lifelong habit.

If you spend any time on college campuses, you'll notice this, and maybe something else as well: Many students have a much more significant depth than breadth of knowledge. They know tons about what they're interested in, because they've burrowed, with the Internet's help, into their passions. But burrows are small and often suffocating, and there are wide spaces between them. You're in yours; I'm in mine. Where's the common ground?

The Internet has proved to be one of the great ironies of modern life. It opens up an infinite universe for exploration, but people use it to stand still, in a favorite spot, bookmarking the websites that cater to their existing hobbies (and established hobbyhorses) and customizing their social media feeds so that their judgments are constantly reinforced, their opinions forever affirmed.

A REPORT published late last month by the Pew Research Center documented this. Summarizing it in *The Times*, Claire Cain Miller wrote, "The Internet, it seems, is contributing to the polarization of America, as people surround themselves with people who think like them and hesitate to say anything different."

College is precisely the time *not* to succumb to that. Every student orientation should include the following instructions: Open your laptops. Delete at least one of every four bookmarks. Replace it with something entirely different, maybe even

antithetical. Go to Twitter, Facebook and such, and start following or connecting with publications, blogs and people whose views diverge from your own. Mix it up.

That's also how students should approach classes and navigate their social lives, because they're attending college in the context not only of a country with profound financial anxieties, but of a country with homogeneous neighborhoods, a scary preoccupation with status and microclimates of privilege. Just as they should be girding themselves for a tough job market, they should be challenging the so-called sorting that's also holding America back.

Arum and Roksa, in "Aspiring Adults Adrift," do take note of upsetting patterns outside the classroom and independent of career preparation; they cite survey data that showed that more than 30 percent of college graduates read online or print newspapers only "monthly or never" and nearly 40 percent discuss public affairs only "monthly or never."

Arum said that that's "a much greater challenge to our society" than college graduates' problems in the labor market. "If college graduates are no longer reading the newspaper, keeping up with the news, talking about politics and public affairs — how do you have a democratic society moving forward?" he asked me.

Now more than ever, college needs to be an expansive adventure, yanking students toward unfamiliar horizons and untested identities rather than indulging and flattering who and where they already are. And students need to insist on that, taking control of all facets of their college experience and making it as eclectic as possible.

It could mean a better future — for all of us. And there's no debate that college should be a path to that.

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