

Why College Can Wait

Section: OBSERVER

Most of our efforts to improve higher education depend on the assumption that students really want to learn and simply need new and improved techniques to help them do so. But many students are disillusioned by and uninterested in academics. They are on our campuses because they think they need a degree to get a good job, because their parents expect them to go to college, or because they just don't know what else to do. Asking professors to find more effective ways to educate those students is like asking chefs to find ways to entice customers who aren't hungry to eat. Wouldn't it be better for those students to do something else with their lives after high school until they are actually interested in exploring higher education?

When I was a shy and naive -- but headstrong -- 18-year-old, in 1984, I left home, but not for college. I still vividly remember my first morning on the road, waking at dawn to the gurgly call of red-winged blackbirds. I sat up in my sleeping bag and peered out from under my blue Kmart plastic tarp. The air was warm, flowers were blooming and buzzing with insects, and the land itself seemed to be alive and singing. Suddenly I got it -- I was in the South, and it was spring! I had left my home in western Massachusetts early the previous morning on a cold, slushy, late-winter day with no plan other than to hitchhike someplace warmer.

I crammed my stuff into my pack and stumbled out of the thicket where I had spent the night. The rising sun flooded this strange new world with gold, and it felt so good to be alive and well that I resolved to walk all day. But when a few hours later a beat-up cement truck rumbled to a halt 50 yards in front of me, and a white-haired man leaned out and waved for me to come aboard, I found myself running to meet him.

My last ride the day before had been with Jim, a burly, middle-aged antique dealer heading south to look for bargains. We grew close over the hours and miles, telling each other our life stories and laughing at the foolishness of the world and ourselves. Outside, the sky flashed with lightning and boomed with thunder, but I felt safe and cozy inside Jim's van and thrilled to finally be on my way. I was having such a good time that it never even occurred to me to think about where I was going to sleep that night -- until Jim announced he was getting too tired to drive and with a big smile offered to share a hotel room with me.

After an agonizing few seconds, I declined his offer and asked him to let me off at the next exit instead. "In this storm?" he asked incredulously. "You're crazy -- no way!"

I assured him I'd be fine, trying my best to convince at least one of us. We drove on in awkward silence for what seemed like hours. Finally he just shrugged and pulled over, and suddenly I found myself standing on the side of the interstate in pitch blackness, soaked to the bone and shaking with fear and cold. As if from a great distance, I watched cars and trucks roar obliviously along the road and hoped pathetically that someone would stop and rescue me. Finally an especially close bolt of lightning and deafening explosion of thunder jolted me out of my paralysis, and I grasped the fact that my fate was now entirely my responsibility.

I grabbed my pack and plunged into the bushes bordering the highway. Illuminated by the intermittent lightning flashes, I unrolled my tarp and crawled into my soaked sleeping bag. I lay there with my heart pounding and mind racing: Was Jim just being kind -- had I been a fool to decline his offer?

That first day and night set the stage for a year of the highest highs and lowest lows of my life. Within a single day, I might feel happy and free, lost and confused, full of gratitude for the kindness of strangers and the beauty of the planet, and enraged at humanity's meanness and desecration of nature. But like a dog finally let off a leash, through it all I felt the deep joy of pure freedom. Every small choice or fork in the road seemed of paramount importance in my literal and figurative journey: Should I jump out here and find a patch of forest to sleep in, or keep riding with these people for a few more miles? Should I head to the ocean, or look for a few days' work in this town?

Many of the people who picked me up that year were recent college graduates who told more or less the same story of partying their way through their first few years of school, then sobering up and buckling down just in time to graduate. Looking back, many wished they had done something more adventurous, but now they all

seemed saddled with inflexible jobs, student loans, spouses, and kids. Hearing their stories only deepened my resolve to never get suckered into going to college.

I thumbed my way down to North Carolina's Outer Banks, where I worked at a fish-processing plant and slept on the beach. In Florida, I dug ditches with construction crews. I traveled west with a bunch of hippies in an old school bus with "The Spiral Dance of the Untamed Angels" painted along the side in large, psychedelic letters. I picked apples and cut flowers with migrant farm workers in Washington State.

Much to my surprise, I ended up in college less than two years later. I had landed a summer job on an organic farm run by a private college that allowed only its students to work there during the academic year. I told myself I was enrolling simply to keep my job, but the truth was that I was tired of life on the road, and college seemed like a new adventure.

Even though the college was a relatively cheap, alternative institution (all the students worked on the farm or the campus in exchange for room and board), it felt like a country club to me. (Three hot meals served every day? Hot showers? A swimming pool? All I have to do is go to class and do the assignments?) I found it easy to do relatively well academically; many of the other students were unmotivated and seemed to find the academic side of college life a minor if irritating intrusion into their brave new world away from home.

Yet although I enjoyed the camaraderie and the occasional inspiring professors and stimulating classes, by the end of the year I knew I was still not mature enough for college. Moreover, my wanderlust was rising again -- I wanted to spend more time outside, see new things, and be with and learn from a more diverse group of people. So the following semester, I lived in a mud hut in a remote Sri Lankan village.

Over the next few years, I sampled several different colleges, disciplines, and occupations. It was not until I was a college senior, in 1990, that I discovered that I was passionate about the academic study of biology and the environment. I was able to go straight to graduate school after college and stay there until I earned a Ph.D. My previous experiences helped me keep things in perspective and maintain my sanity. During particularly depressing periods, I would contemplate the life of the working people I saw on my daily commute to school. I'd ask myself, "Would you rather spend today working on that construction crew? Pumping gas at that filling station? Washing dishes at that restaurant?" Sure, some days the idea of cleaning toilets with a toothbrush seemed more enticing than writing my dissertation, but most of the time those questions made me appreciate my good fortune and redouble my academic efforts.

I once heard the eminent biologist E.O. Wilson say in an interview that he chose to teach Harvard's introductory biology course for nonmajors year after year because he knew it was likely to be the only science course those students would ever take in college, and thus it was the only opportunity to expose them to the beauty, relevance, and endangerment of the natural world. I often draw inspiration from those words now that I teach "Introduction to Biology for Nonmajors."

My goal is to educate students about what is happening to our planet, why that is relevant to their lives, and what we can do about it. I continually strive to find ways to engage and inspire them. But I find that the majority of my students -- like me at their age -- are unmotivated about academic learning and resent being forced to take a science course.

Increasingly, I find myself wanting to shake those students and tell them: "Drop out before it's too late! You are squandering your (or, more likely, your parents') hard-earned money as well as your time, my time, and the time of your peers who actually want to learn something. Go bicycle across New Zealand, can salmon in Alaska, or pick pecans in Georgia. Come back to college only if and when you are able to view being here as a privilege rather than a form of purgatory!"

I know that in most cases it is the students' well-intentioned, self-sacrificing parents who insist that they go straight to college from high school, and who forbid them to try something else for a year or even a semester. I know that in today's job market, one needs a college degree to do virtually anything. But forcing young people to go to college when they are not ready is not doing anyone any good. We all deserve at least one chance to be wild and free, and the best -- perhaps the only -- time for that may be right after high school.

Higher education will still be there later for those who decide they want it, but the energy, idealism, courage, freedom, integrity, and stubbornness necessary to listen to and follow one's heart may not.

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