

What Is College For?

By [GARY GUTTING](#)



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The Stone is featuring occasional posts by Gary Gutting, a professor of philosophy at the University of Notre Dame, that apply critical thinking to information and events that have appeared in the news.

Most American college students are wrapping up yet another semester this week. For many of them, and their families, the past months or years in school have likely involved considerable time, commitment, effort and expense. Was it worth it?

When practical skills outweigh theoretical understanding, we move beyond the intellectual culture that defines higher education.

Some evidence suggests that it was. [A Pew Research survey](#) this year found that 74 percent of graduates from four-year colleges say that their education was “very useful in helping them grow intellectually.” Sixty-nine percent said that “it was very useful in helping them grow and mature as a person” and 55 percent claimed that “it was very useful in helping prepare them for a job or career.” Moreover, 86 percent of these graduates think “college has been a good investment for them personally.”

Nonetheless, there is incessant talk about the “failure” of higher education. ([Anthony Grafton](#) at The New York Review of Books provides an excellent survey of recent discussions.) Much of this has to do with access: it’s too expensive, admissions policies are unfair, the drop-out rate is too high. There is also dismay at the exploitation of graduate students and part-time faculty members, the over-emphasis on frills such as semi-professional athletics or fancy dorms and student centers, and the proliferation of expensive and unneeded administrators. As important as they are, these criticisms don’t contradict the Pew Survey’s favorable picture of the fundamental value of students’ core educational experience.

But, as Grafton’s discussion also makes clear, there are serious concerns about the quality of this experience. In particular, the university curriculum leaves students disengaged from the material they are supposed to be learning. They see most of their courses as intrinsically “boring,” of value only if they provide training relevant to future employment or if the teacher has a pleasing (amusing, exciting, “relevant”) way of presenting the material. As a result, students spend only as much time as they need to get what they see as acceptable grades (on average, [about 12 to 14 hour a week](#) for all courses combined). Professors have ceased to expect genuine engagement from students and often give good grades (B or better) to work that is at best minimally adequate.

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This lack of academic engagement is real, even among schools with the best students and the best teachers, and it increases dramatically as the quality of the school decreases. But it results from a basic misunderstanding — by both students and teachers — of what colleges are for.

First of all, they are not simply for the education of students. This is an essential function, but the *raison d'être* of a college is to nourish a world of intellectual culture; that is, a world of ideas, dedicated to what we can know scientifically, understand humanistically, or express artistically. In our society, this world is mainly populated by members of college faculties: scientists, humanists, social scientists (who straddle the humanities and the sciences properly speaking), and those who study the fine arts. Law, medicine and engineering are included to the extent that they are still understood as “learned professions,” deploying practical skills that are nonetheless deeply rooted in scientific knowledge or humanistic understanding. When, as is often the case in business education and teacher training, practical skills far outweigh theoretical understanding, we are moving beyond the intellectual culture that defines higher education.

Our support for higher education makes sense only if we regard this intellectual culture as essential to our society. Otherwise, we could provide job-training and basic social and moral formation for young adults far more efficiently and cheaply, through, say, a combination of professional and trade schools, and public service programs. There would be no need to support, at great expense, the highly specialized interests of, for example, physicists, philosophers, anthropologists and art historians. Colleges and universities have no point if we do not value the knowledge and understanding to which their faculties are dedicated.

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This has important consequences for how we regard what goes on in college classrooms. Teachers need to see themselves as, first of all, intellectuals, dedicated to understanding poetry, history, human psychology, physics, biology — or whatever is the focus of their discipline. But they also need to realize that this dedication expresses not just their idiosyncratic interest in certain questions but a conviction that those questions have general human significance, even apart from immediately practical applications. This is why a discipline requires not just research but also teaching. Non-experts need access to what experts have learned, and experts need to make sure that their research remains in contact with general human concerns. The classroom is the primary locus of such contact.

Students, in turn, need to recognize that their college education is above all a matter of opening themselves up to new dimensions of knowledge and understanding. Teaching is not a matter of (as we too often say) “*making* a subject (poetry, physics, philosophy) interesting” to students but of students coming to see how such subjects are *intrinsically* interesting. It is more a matter of students moving beyond their interests than of teachers fitting their subjects to interests that students already have. Good teaching does not make a course’s subject more interesting; it gives the students more interests — and so makes them more interesting.

Students readily accept the alleged wisdom that their most important learning at college takes place outside the

classroom. Many faculty members — thinking of their labs, libraries or studies — would agree. But the truth is that, for both students and faculty members, the classroom is precisely where the most important learning occurs.

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