What Is the Point of College?

By KWAME ANTHONY APPIAHSEPT. 8, 2015

CreditKenji Aoki for The New York Times

I gave my first university lecture in philosophy at the University of Ghana, Legon, when I was a freshly credentialed 21-year-old. My audience was a couple of hundred students gathered in a vast hall, with ceiling fans to move the hot and humid air. Above the murmur of the fans and the muttering of students, I tried to explain why Descartes thought the mere possibility that there was an Evil Demon deceiving their senses meant they couldn't know for sure that I was really there. Ah, Cartesian skepticism! I remember diagraming the structure of the argument in huge chalk letters on an enormous blackboard.

After the class, a group of students, many of them older than I, followed me home across campus. Was I really worried, they wanted to know, that there might be such a powerful Evil Demon? What they didn't ask was why they had to listen to this bizarre argument made by a Frenchman three and a half centuries earlier. Yes, the material would be on the exam every student had to pass at the end of the first year. But why?

The answer used to be easy: College is a place where you come to learn such things. But as higher education expands its reach, it's increasingly hard to say what college is like and what college is for. In the United States, where I now teach, more than 17 million undergraduates will be enrolling in classes this fall. They will be passing through institutions small and large, public and private, two-year and four-year, online and on campus. Some of them will be doing vocational courses — in accounting or nursing or web design — at for-profit institutions like DeVry University and the University of

Phoenix. Many will be entering community colleges hoping to gain a useful qualification or to prepare themselves for a transfer to a four-year college. Others will be entering liberal-arts colleges without plans for a major, let alone a profession. On whatever track, quite a few will encounter Descartes as part of their undergraduate requirements. Why should that be? You'll be hard-pressed to find a consensus on such things. That's because two distinct visions of higher education contend throughout our classrooms and campuses.

One vision focuses on how college can be useful — to its graduates, to employers and to a globally competitive America. When presidential candidates talk about making college more affordable, they often mention those benefits, and they measure them largely in dollars and cents. How is it helping postgraduate earnings, or increasing G.D.P.? As college grows more expensive, plenty of people want to know whether they're getting a good return on their investment. They believe in Utility U.

Another vision of college centers on what John Stuart Mill called "experiments in living," aimed at getting students ready for life as free men and women. (This was not an entirely new thought: the "liberal" in "liberal education" comes from the Latin *liberalis*, which means "befitting a free person.") Here, college is about building your soul as much as your skills. Students want to think critically about the values that guide them, and they will inevitably want to test out their ideas and ideals in the campus community. (Though more and more students are taking degrees online, most undergraduates will be on campus a lot of the time.) College, in this view, is where you hone the tools for the foundational American project, the pursuit of happiness. Welcome to Utopia U.

Together, these visions — Utility and Utopia — explain a great deal about modern colleges and universities. But taken singly, they lead to very different metrics for success.

Consider the declining proportion of faculty with tenure. Tenured faculty are defined by more than the fact that they are hard to fire. Tenure allows professors to pursue intellectual projects without regard for what the trustees or the governor or the

community care about. It gives them the kind of intellectual freedom that has helped make our universities the research powerhouses of the world. Adjunct faculty, on the other hand, are a lot less expensive — they're paid less and typically lack health and other benefits — and you can easily expand or contract their ranks as demand fluctuates. In the Utility vision, students are consumers; they have needs and desires to be met, at a price they'll pay. If pleasing the customer is the goal, a tenured faculty member who wants to teach what he or she considers worth teaching can be an inconvenience. Plus, at Utility U., one obvious way to better your "value proposition" is to cut costs. These days, three-quarters of the teaching faculty at America's nonprofit colleges and universities are hired as adjuncts with no tenure and no research support. A few decades ago, only a quarter were.

At Utility U., the search for efficiency requires tools for evaluating teachers. Management, as the old saw has it, is measurement. Years ago, I was on a committee at a great university that looked into the system by which students evaluated courses. The most reliable predictor of whether students liked a course, it turned out, was their answer to the question "Did the professor respect you?" Customers like to be loved; attentive service makes for good Yelp reviews. But that's a very different question from, say: How, if at all, did you change through the class? What good, if any, did those changes do you? Did you learn to uncover the ideological or conceptual demons that may be flummoxing your good sense? Mr. Chips's encouraging smile has pedagogical value, but so, perhaps, does Professor Kingsfield's basilisk stare.

If Utility U. is concerned with value, Utopia U. is concerned with values. The values agenda can involve the content of classes, the nature of campus communities or both. When I teach a seminar that deals with theories of identity and social justice, my aim is to provide tools of analysis so that students — men and women of various ethnic, religious and sexual descriptions — can sort through such issues by themselves. But class discussions aren't always abstract and impersonal: Everyone has identity allegiances and intuitions about justice. And the same is true for discussions elsewhere on campus. At Utopia U., the aim is to create a safe space, to check your privilege and

suspend the prejudices of the larger world, to promote human development and advance moral progress.

And so "civility" is on the agenda, "safe" spaces are spreading and microaggressions — possibly unintentional slights that stem from racial, ethnic or sexual difference — are to be scrutinized, sometimes through a jeweler's loupe. It's easy to roll your eyes at "social justice warriors," but there's a perfectly good idea here: People don't think well when they feel personally insulted or aggrieved. And in classes, thinking well is the main objective. Buzzwords aside, a lot of this is just courtesy — Emily Post by way of Foucault. Still, the Utopians can be reluctant to admit that there may be conflicts between expanding civility and deepening understanding, between the safe-space ideal and the free-speech ideal. (Not a few campus quarrels come down to: Who's silencing whom?) A culture of civility sometimes does make evasion easier. Students arrive from Cincinnati and Singapore and — finally! — discover a cohort of like-minded souls. That can be a thrill. Confine yourself to their company, though, and you've invented a new parochialism.

Neither Utility U. nor Utopia U. has the full run of any one campus. In the familiar caricature, there's the performance-studies major who is putting up fliers for the Naomi Klein talk, collecting signatures for the fossil-free petition and wondering whether the student alliance for gender equity is as racially inclusive as it claims. Then there's the engineering major, first in the family to go to college, traipsing across the quad with a discounted, two-editions-out-of-date version of the material-science textbook. All that identity stuff is a dimly perceived distraction in this student's light cone, readily tuned out. One student thinks "bi-curious" is a word; the other doesn't see why you would use molecular-orbital theory when valence bonding provides answers faster. The two students cross paths only physically. It's almost as if they're attending two different colleges.

One reason this is a caricature is that people aren't always found on the expected side of the disciplinary (and class) divides. At liberal-arts campuses, certainly, almost everyone drinks from the fountain of human betterment, albeit some from a Dixie cup and others from a Big Gulp. And very few are completely unmindful of the getting-a-job thing that's

rumored to follow graduation. But when you superimpose the two visions of college — as a forcing house of virtue and as means for building human capital — you inevitably get interference patterns, ripples and ridges of indignation and disquiet. That's what you're seeing when the safe-space ethic runs amok, as with students who claim offense when their ideas are challenged or who want to see "trigger warnings" on even canonical literature, like those cardboard lids on hotel-room glasses. Here, the student is at once the sensitive servant of high causes and a demanding customer.

Nor are these tensions likely to resolve themselves, because higher education has to play so many roles. The truth is that colleges and universities do a tremendous amount that neither of these pictures captures — that just can't be reduced to the well-being of their graduates. For one thing, the old ideal of knowledge for its own sake hasn't been extinguished. For another, universities are the homes of all kinds of public goods. They are, for example, the source of much of today's best research. Without them we would know much less than we do about the nature of the cosmos or the workings of the human brain or the ways of reading a novel. A flourishing literary culture is made possible not because institutions of higher learning create writers but because they prepare readers (and yes, it helps that they provide jobs for plenty of poets and novelists too). There's even something to be said, especially in a democracy, for an educated citizenry, able to question the creeds of the moment.

Which brings us back to demons and doubt. Was there any point to studying such things? My first class of freshmen, all those years ago, certainly had reservations about Monsieur Descartes's method of systematic doubt. Once they were reassured about their instructor's sanity, though, they got into the spirit of things, and some, at least, came to see why epistemology — the study of knowledge — might be worthwhile. Maybe not practical … unless you were looking for a job as a professor. But interesting. Mind-expanding, even. Possibly, there was something to be said for the intellectual discipline of second-guessing what you thought was true. And that wasn't just good for them. Who would want to live in a nation of people without doubts?

Like most of the students I've had since, they learned that what you can do and who you can be — the qualities of your skills and of your soul — are two separate questions that

aren't quite separable. And that college was a pretty good place to work out some answers to both.

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