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Education: A matter more important than a degree

By Ann Rosen Spector, Ph.D.

A college degree usually leads to greater lifetime economic and career success but there is a vast difference between a diploma and an education. For-profit universities advertise heavily about recognizing the talent of each student and the convenience of online learning.

This marketing appeals to adults who have jobs and families to support and there are certainly advantages to this flexible system. All too often, these colleges, vocational, and technical schools leave students in tremendous debt, often with little to show for it. Employers know the difference between, for example, the University of Arizona and the University of Phoenix.

Nationally, more than half of students leave college with debt but it is higher for those who attend for-profit institutions. In part, this is sometimes due to the cost per credit differential; it is also a function of no endowment and therefore less institutional financial help.

If you go on some of the websites, they emphasize their company's philosophy for their customers. They are businesses to offer profits to their investors; they are selling a product. Without leafy green lawns, ivy-covered buildings, sports teams, extracurricular activities, student services, dorms, and libraries, these schools have virtually no non-profit zones. From a business model, it makes perfect sense.

Traditional universities have as their mission to conduct new research, educate students, and provide community services. There is an acknowledgement that the canon of information will be ever changing. Because what actual universities provide is the interaction of actual students and instructors. It is a dynamic aspect of learning that cannot be replicated in online experiences.

Will you learn things online? Absolutely. Can you ask questions? In some formats, yes. Sometimes it's by chat, sometimes by voice. But you are not challenged in real time the

same way in a real community of learners as you are by a virtual community.

Good learning comes in many forms, and the best takes place as much outside the classroom as within. Imagine reading a novel or even an exciting chapter in a text (it could happen). You think about the ideas and come to class with other students similarly charged up (it could happen). When class begins, the professor often begins the discussion by drawing on the years he or she has been researching and thinking about these ideas. The air crackles with the excitement of discovering all the threads and nuances of the content. One student makes a point and it causes another to realize something anew. In the best case scenarios, it is a chain reaction and the discussion in that class with that group of students and that professor will never be exactly replicated. And the discussion can continue after class, as students congregate informally.

Some of that knowledge, to get a grade, will have to be assessed in a paper or test, but that will never fully measure what the experience of learning has meant. Sometimes, it takes years to realize how much you've learned.

About five years ago, a man came up to me in Center City and told me he had been one of my students a decade ago; I admitted I didn't recognize him. "I wouldn't expect you to," he said. "I sat in the back with the other guys on my team and, to be honest, we didn't do much work. But we never missed a class."

Then, I remembered that group of guys and wondered why they all came every time. "We liked the discussion," he said, "and we were actually listening. I'm getting married in a month and I often think back on things you said in Psychology of Couples and Families and realize many aspects of marriage that I wouldn't have thought about if I hadn't had that class."

Besides his own individual learning, he'd encouraged his fiancée to take the class in a subsequent semester. She had been a much better student and received an "A." Together, they had created for themselves an environment to learn not only for a class, but also for their lives together.

In many online programs, the material is already in the can. Download it, watch it, answer questions, done. Does that sound like the same thing? Does a virtual community produce a virtual education?

Most of the for-profits list their accreditation; some of them are by regional accrediting commissions recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as "meeting acceptable standards." I wonder what the heck that means.

We have seen how local Boards of Education have very disparate standards for educational quality; if you can print a textbook and excise some of the Founding Fathers for political incorrectness, is that still history? What are the criteria for accreditation? Would one of these national, storefront universities simply apply to the regional board that is most likely to accredit them?


Education is much more than mere content; a good education is not only the acquisition of facts to be regurgitated back on a test, to get a grade and a degree. It is the idea of

opening your mind, not just to the subject at hand but to the process of lifelong learning.

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