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College's Priceless Value

Higher Education, Liberal Arts and Shakespeare

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What's the most transformative educational experience you've had?

I was asked this question recently, and for a few seconds it stumped me, mainly because I've never viewed learning as a collection of eureka moments. It's a continuum, a lifelong awakening to the complexity of the world.

But then something did come to mind, not a discrete lesson but a moving image, complete with soundtrack. I saw a woman named Anne Hall swooning and swaying as she stood at the front of a classroom in Chapel Hill, N.C., and explained the rawness and majesty of emotion in "King Lear."

I heard three words: "Stay a little." They're Lear's plea to Cordelia, the truest of his three daughters, as she slips away. When Hall recited them aloud, it wasn't just her voice that trembled. It was all of her.

She taught a course on Shakespeare's tragedies: "Lear," "Macbeth," "Othello." It was by far my favorite class at the University of North Carolina, which I attended in the mid-1980s, though I couldn't and can't think of any bluntly practical application for it, not unless you're bound for a career on the stage or in academia.

I headed in neither direction. So I guess I was just wasting my time, at least according to a seemingly growing chorus of politicians and others whose metrics for higher education are skill acquisition and job placement.

Scott Walker, the governor of Wisconsin and a likely presidential candidate, signaled his membership in this crowd when he recently proposed a 13 percent cut in state support for the University of Wisconsin. According to several reports, he simultaneously toyed with changing the language of the university's mission statement so that references to the "search for truth" and the struggle to "improve

the human condition” would be replaced by an expressed concern for “the state’s work force needs.”

I’m not sure where “Lear” fits into work force needs.

The debate over the rightful role of college goes a long way back. Michael Roth, the president of Wesleyan University, documented as much in his 2014 book, “Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters.” He noted that Thomas Jefferson exalted learning for learning’s sake, while Ben Franklin registered disdain for people who spent too much time in lecture halls.

Ronald Reagan did, too. In 1967, just after he became the governor of California, he moved to slash spending for the University of California system and its eclectic menu of instruction, announcing that taxpayers shouldn’t be “subsidizing intellectual curiosity” and that “there are certain intellectual luxuries that perhaps we could do without.”

That was a pivotal moment in the discussion of higher education’s ideal benefits, after which “the balance started to tip toward utility,” according to a recent essay by Dan Berrett in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Titled “The Day the Purpose of College Changed,” it looked back at Reagan’s remarks. It also recalled President Obama’s, in particular a seemingly dismissive comment last year about art history degrees. Obama has called for a rating system that would take into account how reliably colleges place their graduates into high-paying jobs.

Neither he nor Walker is wrong to raise that issue, given the high cost of higher education and the fierce competition in the world. Students shouldn’t be blind to the employment landscape.

But it’s impossible to put a dollar value on a nimble, adaptable intellect, which isn’t the fruit of any specific course of study and may be the best tool for an economy and a job market that change unpredictably.

And it’s dangerous to forget that in a democracy, college isn’t just about making better engineers but about making better citizens, ones whose eyes have been opened to the sweep of history and the spectrum of civilizations.

It’s also foolish to belittle what those of us in Hall’s class got from Shakespeare and from her illumination of his work.

“Stay a little.” She showed how that simple request harbored such grand anguish, capturing a fallen king’s hunger for connection and his tenuous hold on sanity and contentment. And thus she taught us how much weight a few syllables can carry, how powerful the muscle of language can be.

She demonstrated the rewards of close attention. And the way she did this — her eyes wild with fervor, her body aquiver with delight — was an encouragement of passion and a validation of the pleasure to be wrung from art. It informed all my reading from then on. It colored the way I listened to people and even watched TV.

It transformed me.

Was this a luxury? Sure. But it was also the steppingstone to a more aware, thoughtful existence. College was the quarry where I found it.

I invite you to visit my blog, follow me on Twitter at twitter.com/frankbruni and join me on Facebook.

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