

Wake Up! You're Not in School Anymore!

The Post-College Hangover

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I spent 20 years in school from preschool through college. It is a structure that has shaped most of my life so far and I was good at it. Maybe I was a good student because my parents were highly educated and thoroughly believed in school. Maybe they taught me how to succeed in school because they knew the formula. Maybe it was because I am intelligent in the "testable" kind of ways or because I learned to be interested in learning. I was good at taking tests and studying textbooks. Certainly I succeeded in school because I believed in it and had faith in its purpose. Toward the end, I became aware of arguments against school, against its passive learning and the alternative of un-schooling, but since I was good at being a student, nothing could pull me away from the course I was on. Spending the majority of my time learning things was enjoyable, especially after high school. Although I tried not to take it for granted, it helped that I wasn't paying for it anyway. I liked school, and when one's life has been constructed around goals of academic success, success in academia is very rewarding. It's almost intoxicating. You challenge yourself to do the work over and over again to get another A. It's a pure, simple experience of validation. It feels good. You accumulate As like points in a game. With all those points, it seems like you ought to win something in the end for all your efforts.

Until school is over. In the school environment, honors and scholarships and GPAs are given an ultimate importance. Up until that last day they matter, and then in a day their importance quickly flutters away. The familiar rules and rewards built up through so many years of school evaporate. The only way to redeem their value is to go back to school and get another degree or to stay in academia forever. The better you are at school,—the more interested in learning for its own sake, in thinking about scholarly topics—the harder it is to see this climax coming and realize what it means. I was certainly hypnotized by the narrative that school teaches—that academic success is the key to success in life. Part of me was suspicious of this story but it was always easier to believe it. No one seemed to really challenge it. The school system perpetuates it. Others were aware of the disconnection between the promises that school makes and the reality of its outcome but they didn't tell me about the problem or couldn't convince me of it. I was so determined to enjoy learning that I didn't want to believe that it had a catch.

Actually, our entire society quietly knows that most of what is done and learned in school is irrelevant to the demands of the economic system, but we all want to believe that there is a social reward for learning for its own sake. We perpetuate a myth of meritocracy in our society because we want it to exist, no matter what we actually experience. If we didn't want to believe this, school would be completely different. Most people who have bachelor's degrees work in jobs that simply require that they have them. Their jobs have little or nothing to do with what they studied. If it has little to do with what they learned, then the quality of the education is also somewhat irrelevant, and often what they do could be done with or without that degree. Graphs in magazines show us that more educated people earn more money, so we faithfully go

through the motions to get our degrees and certificates. But why then are most of my college-educated friends working in jobs that under-utilize their abilities and fail to inspire them? Why hasn't a perfectly suited job fallen in my lap, with my high grades and academic honors?

These days, as more people obtain bachelor's degrees and attend college, having a degree or even excellent grades means less than it once meant. And yet, a college education still acts as a dividing line of social class, though more symbolic than economic. Since a degree alone promises little, counselors tend to recommend a new course of action in the last year of college for the "job search". It sounds so alien to how we have functioned before that a lot of us ignore the advice. They quietly insinuate that the world outside doesn't operate like school. They rarely teach more than resume preparation. Professors simply tell their best students to come back. No one is bluntly honest about the limitations of a graduate's options. If a student's parents didn't prevent him or her from getting a liberal arts or science degree, the school certainly won't tell him or her what to realistically expect.

I was supposed to take my GPA and my grades and my honor societies to college recruiters from larger corporations that would hopefully invite me into their world I could start in an entry-level job and work upwards. The degree and the grades would be the key for me to get in the door. My GPA would give me a leg up on all those kids who spent college wallpapering their apartments with beer cartons. All the studying would pay off. My parents tell me about their friends' children who took that route. They have salaries and health insurance and a 401 (k) plan. I shrug and tell them that's not my way and not where I want to work.

If I didn't want to do that, the only other clear option was to head to graduate school where grades and test scores continue to matter for fellowships and teaching positions. If I stayed in school, I could continue to be interested in economically useless topics and become one of the select few who live to perpetuate the institution of school and make a living doing it. I keep this option on the back burner if nothing else works, but I have a rebellious streak that told me to try something else—to try living life outside of school, knowing that most people don't stay there forever. I wanted to live this life for myself.

Once I rejected those options, I found myself in a totally different world where I and most of my peers were confused and irritated that we had been duped. The better we had done in school, the more thoughtful we were, the more irritated and confused we were. And I never could relate until I was standing in that world myself. Sure, many of my friends had college degrees before me with no particular indicators of "success," working for low pay, but I must have always thought that I was going to be different because I had very good grades and honors, or because I had an intellectual job during school, or because I would try harder. I'm not sure what I was thinking but the goals and certificates of education weren't nearly enough to prepare me for the obstacles ahead. No one really warned me of the risks of finishing school and trying to work doing something outside of the two suggested options. No one stressed the absolute importance of personal connections. That was all extracurricular. Perhaps they figured

there was something about me that would guarantee success that they didn't have. We all feel like there's something wrong with what we're doing, rather than something lacking in the institutions we attended. Even if we know our society and its economy are convoluted, we still have a hard time questioning academia unless we were unsuccessful students in the first place. Many of the academics who run schools never really deal with the world outside of it and don't notice the problem so most schools do a half-assed job of preparing their students to do well out side of school.

Most liberal arts bachelor's degrees fail to teach people a trade or discipline but teach them a skill set of how to be a student. Then the students forget most of the information they read or memorized and maybe know how to do some math and read and write well when they are finished. Learning interesting information for fun may be fulfilling, but its cost keeps going up. Yet we seem to have to believe that success in school promises success in life because academic disciplines that don't make money on their own need something to sustain them. They need students to choose those majors so professors can continue to write histories, classify insects and dig in archaeological sites. We make a silent bargain to preserve "high culture" and scholarship when we—or our parents or the government—buy our diplomas.

All of this is obvious to everyone who left school behind them, regardless of how much they enjoyed or hated it. Good grades don't ensure much of anything by themselves and if we don't use what we learned soon, it eventually doesn't matter what we actually studied. When the simple goals of graduation and test scores are gone, it is finally clear that it's all on us to decide what our other goals are for the rest of our lives and the easiest options aren't usually as pure and idealistic as intellectual inquiry. The more complicated and thoughtful we are about setting our goals, the harder it is to decide what they are. I know there's a recipe for being an adult that includes educational degrees, a steady job, marriage, children and material stuff that most people follow because they accept the path, because they are supposed to, but if I decide to make all my goals things that I accomplish because I want to, it might be more challenging.

I realize that in our society, finishing school successfully is one of the generic things one is supposed to do, but because I enjoyed school and actually like learning, the realization that most people eventually treat the accomplishment as a token event is disheartening. All the things I learned will continue to mean a lot to me while they mean very little in the job market. School may be a quasi-meritocracy, but the rest of the world is not. By actually being interested in learning for its own sake, I was setting myself up for disappointment. If I was going school to learn things as an end in itself then I was doomed to be in a predicament from the beginning, but, for 20 years of my life, that is what I was told was valuable and would be rewarded in the end, and I decided to believe. I felt good that I was doing the right thing since I liked doing it anyway.

The sense of importance of going through school is strong enough that people go into debt for it, overwork themselves and put other things in their lives on hold. It doesn't seem to matter whether or not there's anything tangible or financial to gain from all the

expense and effort. For some people, the distinction of being educated alone must be worth the cost, but what differentiates one person's experience of going through college from another's? The quality and meaning and benefit of the experience are not testable. In the end, most people sum it all up in one line on their résumés.

And regardless of all the school in the world or none, there are some people who seem to always be successful. School has nothing to do with it. It's a part of their personalities, and that cannot be taught and tested. School doesn't have much to do with how well we will do our jobs or what kinds of accomplishments we will make later. Creativity, charisma, and determination aren't taught in school and really can't be. Luck and family or other social connections can't be taught and ensured through a classroom course. And in the end, the kids who partied their way through school often are more "successful" in meeting their goals and they make more money because they have less complicated expectations, fewer ethical dilemmas about work, and a network of social connections with people like themselves.

By idealistically expecting that I should be able to do interesting work and live an interesting life, am I expecting far more than what this society and economy is willing to hand to me? I don't get much of anything just for succeeding in school if I reject the conventional options and conventional occupations. If I don't stick around my parents and use their stockpile of connections, I don't benefit from their social positions or reputations. There aren't a lot of jobs outside of academia for doing things that are barely economically profitable. If I study liberal arts and then don't join a corporation, become a teacher or get a higher degree, the course is definitely not set for me. Even those options aren't guaranteed to work in an economic downturn. There are far more jobs that pay well that require technical schooling. Many jobs that now require or prefer college degrees are cleaner, though not more interesting or better paid, than learned trades. Didn't I already know that but ignore it until it actually came true?

While picking out a GRE test prep book at the library, unambitiously re-considering graduate school, I happened upon a book called *The Case Against College*, by Caroline Bird. It was published in 1975, two years before I was even born, and many of its arguments corroborated my current concerns. In over a generation, nothing has changed. I looked through it, eagerly seeking insights on why our society still believes that college is a requirement and guarantee of success. I was depressed to find its arguments so relevant to the present.

A lot of people like myself are struggling to understand the right path to take to do what they really want, what is ethically acceptable, and support themselves doing it. No one explains how much harder we have to work to get there than we ever thought. The economy doesn't have a lot of ethical, well-compensated, and glamorous jobs that college teaches us to want. Many of us see how much more complicated our definition of success is and don't have the energy to go for it. We are confused and frustrated by social definitions of class, achievement and success, and flounder when we try to redefine them. I have failed to follow an increasingly important rule of our modern economy by refusing to move geographically just to find a relevant job. I have failed to use my parents' connections. I have failed to follow the conventional rules to achieve

success in the job market, but it wasn't a requirement of my degrees. It annoys me that the day I left school, the rules for achievement changed. I wasn't as willing to follow the new rules. I consciously chose to avoid the easy path to success. By conventional definitions, I really didn't want to be successful. I think that's why, so far, I haven't won.

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