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The Academy

Making Meaning through Impactful Education

Today we hear much talk about the economics of formal education (especially within higher education), in particular, the ever-mounting costs together with existential questions of dwindling *demand*. However, absent in the din of these debates is the basic issue of *supply*. What does formal education offer, and is that offering truly worth the investment of both time and money? In fact, it is interesting to observe that the phrase “formal education” is not even well defined.

Formal education has become a paradigm in which the goal is a diploma with (*idealis*) Latin words embossed into an elegantly encased rectangular parchment. That certificate and the degree it implies—high school, associate, baccalaureate, and other degrees—then lead to a starting job with a starting salary. That parchment is necessary in order to cash in on that initial income and thus has devolved into today’s practical

currency for formal education. Students demand that return on investment, and faculty, administrators, parents, and the curriculum oblige. Even the language that students and instructors speak reveals this basic axiom: *I have to get this requirement out of the way. I need to get through this course.* This language reveals a sadder truth: Formal education has become an obstacle course of mostly mindless hurdles and barriers we must traverse just to land that first job.

This reality has led many individuals, from out-of-the-box entrepreneurs to legislators to students themselves, to dream of shortening the lengthy ordeal required to check off all the boxes necessary to receive that diploma. If that credential is the ultimate goal, then I offer here an efficient solution: Print out a diploma at birth and award it to the newborn right there and then—mission accomplished.

A high-impact formal education, however, should be a truly transformational experience and thus cannot be hurried. Such a mindful educational journey requires time and reflection, especially in today's age of impatience, in which information and disinformation are constantly distracting us through our personal devices. In my mind, a diploma and starting job are not the goals of one's formal education. Instead, the intellectual journey toward personal growth is the genuine goal of education. With impactful formal education, that first job is not *the thing*; the journey itself is *the thing*.

Thus, that starting job becomes just one important outgrowth of that larger, life-enhancing experience.

Moreover, the richer and more meaningful that intellectual journey, the better that initial job and the greater the opportunities for future success. We are living in an age of obsolescence in which any fixed body of skills today will become dated and perhaps useless tomorrow. The best way to flourish in your professional life is to allow yourself to flourish as your authentic self—and that requires you to explore a diverse landscape of human thought, see that panorama holistically, and then discover your genuine intellectual passions and beliefs.

One's formal education, with the correct focus and commitment, can offer this meaningful exploration into the world of knowledge and ideas. That focus cannot only involve *thinking about* a subject (which stops at the topic's edge) but needs also to include a focus on *thinking through* that subject, that is, first learning and absorbing the pathways of thinking that grew out of that study and then intentionally practicing and applying those mindsets to other areas of life to bridge ideas through a truly interconnected course of study.

But it is not enough for us to be merely presented with these opportunities; we must actively pursue them ourselves—which is neither straightforward nor comfortable. High-impact learning is often uncomfortable learning. We cannot pave over the rocky road to deeper

understanding so that the journey becomes smoother or shorter. A robust and meaningful journey cannot be a mindless checklist of things to do, cross off, and move on. Nor can that journey be a segregated and siloed collection of subjects, facts, figures, theories, algorithms, and methodologies that will, for the most part, be quickly forgotten.

The goal of a truly impactful education is to mess things up: to challenge the basic assumptions of how one views the world and one's self, and to emerge from that journey with deeper insights into both. We might arrive at our undergraduate education knowing with certainty that we want to become a lawyer. But we need to let the journey move us and discover where it leads—yes, our initial plans may be messed up, and we might become a mathematician, university president, or something else entirely. In fact, our brains are not fully physically developed as seventeen-year-old human beings, so it is problematic to be making long-term decisions for our future selves before we are even fully ourselves.

Throughout our lives, we must remain open to intellectual journeys carrying us in new and unexpected directions. The point of an impactful and meaningful education is to allow individuals to flourish, to continue to grow and thereby change. This personal change is not the disruptive type that reprograms one's DNA and makes one into someone else. Rather, it is incremental

and subtle improvements that might even be difficult to measure in the short term.

Southwestern University is artfully bucking the tide of conventional and lowered expectations in higher education and has embraced this novel commitment to the vision of impactful and meaningful formal education. With an unprecedented commitment to inquiry-based, active discovery-learning, and experiential education, we continue to craft distinctive programming that focuses on the life of the mind.

In February 2017, the Southwestern University faculty unanimously passed a new curriculum that includes a commitment to offer, in every course, intentional opportunities for students not just to think *about* the material but also to think *through* the material. By thinking through a subject, students discover the utility and power of that thinking beyond the subject itself. These different templates of thought offer different lenses through which to see the world in a richer, sharper, and more interconnected way.

Now, in every class, students are challenged to make connections between seemingly disparate areas by applying the thinking from one area to amplify their thinking in another. Perhaps the mindset honed to truly see works of art in an art history course will allow a student to see details otherwise missed within the plasma membrane of a cell viewed through a micro-

scope in a biology class. Perhaps the search for a pattern as practiced in a mathematics course will enable a student to see structure and nuance hidden within a poem studied in a literature class.

Creating connections requires practice, and the initial attempts are often modest and somewhat superficial. But first attempts should not be final attempts. Intellectual growth arises from practice and patience, and thus cannot be hurried. At Southwestern, we call this unique commitment to thinking beyond the course material and making intentional connections *Paideia*. The ancient Greek word *Paideia* (παίδεια) originally meant the education of the ideal member of society through what today we refer to as the *liberal arts and sciences*. At Southwestern University it is the name of the unprecedented commitment to think through the material within every course of study and connect that thinking with ideas and knowledge beyond the course itself. This practice of the mind offers lessons that last a lifetime. It is also one that can be adopted widely and applied at all levels of learning.

Today, on my campus, when students independently discover an otherwise unforeseen connection, they often exclaim, “I’ve just had a *Paideia moment!*”—an exciting moment of meaning and deeper understanding. They reveal for themselves that which would otherwise have been hidden. They make the invisible visible—which is at the heart of original thought and creativity.

After actively engaging with these ways of thinking, creating, and connecting through every course of undergraduate study, students emerge from their interconnected intellectual Southwestern experience prepared to make meaning and make a difference—both within their world as well as within themselves.

I invite you to engineer your own *Paideia moments* of discovery and always remember that with education and lifelong learning: *The journey is the thing.*