

## The Process Is the Product

by Joe Sarnowski

For many years now an epidemic has been sweeping across college campuses all over the United States. No, I'm not talking about AIDS or bird flu or even senioritis. In fact, I'm not even talking about something that affects physical health--but it is something that can devastate individuals and institutions alike. So what is this epidemic? It is simply a misunderstanding about just what a college education is designed to accomplish. True, this tidbit of information seems like something every college student should know, but from what I have seen I suspect that most students do not understand what a college education is meant to accomplish. In fact, I often wonder how many college instructors and administrators labor under the same lack of understanding. And what this lack of understanding can produce is a college experience that is disappointing, frustrating, and--in extreme cases--useless. What is a college education meant to accomplish? Simply this: to allow students to engage with a process in which they are prompted to develop intellectually and to function productively. Most people believe a diploma is the product of all the money and time expended on a college education. But in fact it is the *process* of obtaining a college education that is the product.

As soon as American children are old enough to understand, they are bombarded by the idea that *education is important*. We have all been told this repeatedly by parents, relatives, teachers, politicians--virtually everyone who holds a position of authority or influence. But when asked why education is important, the vast majority of these authorities and influencers are likely to respond: *to get a good job*--which is a less cynically sounding way to say, *to make a lot of money*. Of course, there is an undeniable correlation between one's education and one's income potential. Unfortunately, this correlation fools students--especially college students--into believing that if they enter the education system then that system will eventually hand over the keys of gainful employment to them--just like a car dealer hands over the keys of a car to anyone who can lay down enough money. I have heard it countless times: *I am paying for this education*. Yet every year untold numbers of students grow disenchanted with the education system because they are not receiving the product (they believe) they are paying for. They pay for the keys of gainful employment, but that is not what they receive. So if education isn't about making a lot of money, why do the most lucrative occupations require college degrees and just what are these students paying for?

To understand the answer to these questions, one must understand something about the history of the university. Our current system of higher education is descended from the universities of the Middle Ages. These universities grew out of the cathedral schools which offered some theological training. Because of this circumstance, many people (especially Christians) think that the early universities were designed to provide training for the ministry--for a particular vocation. Yet it would be some time before university study was required for those entering church ministry. Instead, universities were collections of people who loved learning and who wanted to share knowledge. And even though universities have undergone many changes since the Middle Ages, they still function largely as centers of learning--not career training. It is often said, and I believe it, that on-the-job training accounts for 80% of the required knowledge and skill for most professional positions. Even college programs specifically designed to prepare their graduates for specific professions--accounting, education, nursing--can never fully prepare their graduates for those careers. (I know someone who earned

his engineering degree and entered the engineering field, but his job required very little engineering and a lot of client relations. Today he is a teacher.) Moreover, many of today's students will have careers in fields that don't even exist yet--there is no way a college can offer specialized training for those fields. So with all these circumstances taken together, higher education sounds like the wrong launching pad for success in life.

Nevertheless, as stated above, the best employers continue to seek out college graduates, and the most interesting and lucrative occupations require a college degree (or more than one). How can this be the case? The answer is simple, and yet the significance of it eludes many. While colleges cannot provide much of what their graduates will need on the job, they can provide their graduates with the means to acquire knowledge and skill once they start their careers. Or even more accurately, college provides students with the *opportunity* to grow intellectually, to learn how to learn, to discover how to work under deadlines and to solve problems. It is crucial to understand why employers want college graduates because, otherwise, one can pursue the wrong goals during one's college years. So many students set their sights on graduating and earning that diploma. But merely graduating and holding a college diploma does not make one a desirable employee. What employers are looking for are people who have engaged with a rigorous, demanding process and have completed their work conscientiously. The diploma is not the product that students purchase with tuition: the process is the product.

Look at it this way. Every serious football player not only studies the playbook and practices with the team but also undergoes weight training. Now I've seen a lot of football games, but I've never seen any football players run onto the field and lift weights. So why do they expend so much time and energy on something that has no part in the playing of the game? The answer, of course, is obvious. Weight training allows the players to execute in the game, and players who do not weight train will be trampled by those who do. A college education works in the same way. In my classes, for example, I require students to write academic essays and construct interpretations of literary texts. The vast majority of my students will never be required to conduct these activities after they graduate and enter their various professions. Yet by conducting these activities, my students strengthen skills--effective use of language, analysis of ideas and arguments, anticipation of audience reactions--that will come in handy no matter what their professions may be. By working through the process, these graduates will develop the intellectual muscles that will allow them to execute on the job. But just like the football player who doesn't bother to weight train, the graduates who did not engage with the process will be trampled in an increasingly competitive job market.

So far so good. But now comes the hard part. Since the process is the product, every time a student fails to engage with the process, that student loses some of the product. Every time a student cuts class, skips a reading assignment, writes a half-baked paper the night before it is due, hurriedly crams an hour before an exam, or zones out during a class, he or she misses out on a portion of the intellectual development that will make him or her a competitive job candidate. I'm not trying to say that missing one class will doom a student to low-wage employment. But after a student slacks off once, it is more likely he or she will slack off more. And once slacking off becomes habitual, it translates into a significant depletion of one's intellectual growth.

Of course, many students who fail to engage fully with the process don't do so on account of laziness. On the contrary, many of these students suffer from overcommitment--of being too busy. Understandably, many students want college to be more than an educational experience; they want to engage in extracurricular activities and to have active social lives--and to pay for

everything, they want jobs on the side. Students who followed this plan in high school believe they can do the same thing in college. But college is not merely a step up from high school in the way senior year is a step up from junior year. Instead, college is a completely different sphere than high school; the demands it places upon students are tremendous. One may coast through high school and survive, but anyone who tries to coast through college will be quickly run over by the pace.

Other students take a work-a-day approach to college. They think that if they are at school all day then they should be able to relax and have fun in the evening. True, everyone needs downtime once in a while. But all college students need to understand that a full time college class load is comparative to a full time professional position. The main reason people attend college is to pursue professional careers--not forty-hour per week jobs. Professional positions require more than a forty-hour per week commitment (ask professors how many hours they work each week). College is where future professionals learn how to make the kinds of commitments necessary in professional positions. This circumstance is yet another reason why employers are interested in college graduates and why it is important for students to engage with the process.

The purpose of this essay is not to say students shouldn't work or take time to relax or be involved in extracurricular activities. But like every other aspect of life, college requires students to set priorities. And many students who struggle in college do so because they set their priorities without fully understanding the level of commitment necessary for academic success. Every semester I have at least one student who asks me something like, "Is it okay if I miss the next class to take my grandmother to her bowling tournament?" My response is always the same: I can't say. When singled out, each class and each assignment seems relatively unimportant. But when viewed as parts of a highly significant process, each class and each assignment appears vital. I'm in no position to say when a student's non-academic responsibilities outweigh her or his academic responsibilities. However, I can say that students who do not give their academic responsibilities the highest possible priorities will not in all probability receive their monies' worth out of college--and college costs too much to allow that to happen.

If I have made it sound like one's college experience has long lasting effects, good. If I have made it sound like it is necessary to give one's studies one's best effort, then I have hit my target. If I have discouraged or frightened anyone--that's not something I want to do. Engaging with this process is an enormous investment in money, time, and energy. But the returns on this investment are great--even greater than the ability to make a lot of money. For one thing, engaging with the process is terrific. There is nothing like learning. I'm not talking about jumping through hoops. I'm talking about *real* learning--the kind of learning in which one grows intellectually, the kind of learning that affects the sort of person one is. This kind of learning is joyful; this kind of learning is exhilarating; this kind of learning is fulfilling in ways nothing else is. Moreover, the experience of engaging with the process helps students to become more intelligent, thoughtful, and productive people. And this sort of development helps one to make positive contributions in many areas: in one's community, one's church, one's home. In other words, the more one's intellect develops the more one has to offer.

The bottom line is this: what matters in the working world is not how smart people are (because intellectual development is about more than knowing things), how attractive they are, or how popular they are; what does matter is how much work they can do. People who can accomplish tasks make differences not only in their workplaces but also in their churches and in

their communities. Doing work, however, means making sacrifices: working nights, weekends, holidays. It means working when one's friends are out having fun; it means working when working is the last thing one wants to do. Nevertheless, the most rewarding aspects of life occur by making sacrifices. The rewards students reap from their college educations will be determined directly by the sacrifices they make as they engage in the process--not by paying tuition and then dragging themselves to class.

Let the buyer beware.