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What's 'Higher' about Higher Ed?

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By Michael Keller

Given the dire economy of recent years, we can well sympathize with those university students who speed through the curriculum and seek employment ASAP. But is this response to tough times wise? When students anxiously ask, "How will I earn a living? Make my way in the world? I tell them, "Relax. This will prove less difficult than you suppose. Take it from me, an English major with a job."

But seriously, I tell them, if you enroll in challenging classes, if you wholly devote yourself to the work, if you engage with your professors, and if you seek help when you need it, you will succeed. But along the way, you might fret less about your career and more about your education.

Education has two kinds of value — extrinsic and intrinsic. The former is the more widely recognized and celebrated. It delivers the goods: You get the training, and you get the job. From corporate boardrooms to state legislatures to the White House, business leaders and public officials, the president himself, trumpet the need for a skilled work force. At first glance, this seems like common sense. Yet buried in these pronouncements is a suspect assumption: that in education, careerist concerns should override all others; that the university should produce workers first and foremost, rather than informed citizens. In an effort to stoke employment, leaders and officials sometimes sell students and the educational mission short.

For education also has intrinsic value; that is, value for its own sake — not because it gains us entry into a career or earns us more money or does the world's work, but because the world is an interesting place, and learning about it and seeking to improve it is its own reward. In those moments when students read a book and lose track of time, when they lose themselves in the architecture of an idea or an equation or in the story of a life well lived or in a line of astonishing poetry or prose, the most memorable and potentially transformative moments of their education will occur — moments they will remember years hence. But these moments do not merely come. Students have to prepare for them. They have to read and study hard — as if their lives depend upon it. Because they do. Because a life accustomed to study, to the cultivation of mind, is enriched beyond the rewards of one's profession.

A university is not primarily a collection of buildings, but a conversation — a great, varied, ongoing and impassioned conversation. In those moments I describe, students enter that conversation; join teachers, scholars and students pursuing important questions, identifying problems, seeking solutions. Faculty will do what they can to prepare students for, and to invite them into, these conversations, but students must do the important work themselves. There is no other way. And the good news is that the means are available: students can procure books to read, they can secure time to study, and they can avail themselves of the help they need.

It is not easy to hold or to espouse the view that education is a value unto itself. It may well put students out of step with their peers. And it certainly will put them out of step with the spirit of our age — one that values the practical and the profitable above all else. So dominant are these values that most media entertainments and news reports shout down any other. They incessantly lampoon brains and those who act as though they have them. But why ridicule those who would pursue an idea not for its commercial potential but for its own sake — those driven not by material comfort but by intellectual adventure? Because that pursuit is pure of purpose and, thus, unassailable — which gives it power. Because those who so distinguish themselves unsettle those who travel a more trafficked road.

To students who ask how best they can prepare themselves for a career, I say: Nurture your intellect for its own sake, without apology. Do so, and your career aspirations will take care of themselves.