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A Higher Education: Value and Practice

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In the English language a strange thing happens occasionally in which a word acquires a set of definitions that are direct opposites of each other, or are somehow in conflict with to each other. These words are official known as contronyms. For example the word sanction—it can mean both an official penalty *and* an official permission. “I was sanctioned after breaking the rules” or “I didn’t get in trouble because my actions were sanctioned by the governor.” Or consider the word bound – it can indicate both immobility and mobility. I wonder if we might consider adding another such word to the list: college.

We use the word college to represent a variety of different, perhaps only loosely related experiences—from the most selective private universities to large flagship public schools to community colleges and even online institutions. But how can all of these distinctive places be called “college?” Surely someone must be lying, tricking students into paying for something that is college in name only. Or at the very least, some institutions must be deeply delusional about what they are and what they do. Through Engaged Learning I have been able to engage this question in person, spending a semester in a night class at Richland College, a community college in Dallas, Texas. College does take many forms, and works to reach many different ends. But ultimately, as with contronyms, context is key to understanding. This project allowed me to find my way into the context underpinning the claims of college made by both SMU and Richland. The institutions are most similar in their most basic shared activity: bringing together teachers and students.

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As a student at a private university I had a sneaking suspicion that the magic between the pages of our great books had nothing to do with the cost of tuition, but had much to do with the generous heart of the instructor -- no matter the setting. I think I was right.

I spent the fall of 2013 enrolled at a community college in Texas trying to discover what you really get when you pay the most in the world of higher education -- and what you get when you pay the least.

By day, I was a junior English major at Southern Methodist University, one of the nation’s most expensive private universities. By night, I was a commuter student in an American literature class at Richland College, a nearby community college. An English class at my university cost over \$5,100, while at Richland it was only \$153. While at SMU, after a few false starts, the liberal arts had come alive through accessible professors and vibrant class discussions, something near the fantasy of "Dead Poets Society" but with textbooks too expensive to be able to justify tearing out any pages. As the semesters passed, I began to wonder about the extent to which this experience was tied to the amount I paid for it -- what do the liberal arts look like on a budget? What does a literature class feel like at our most accessible institutions? I went to find out.

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The most important thing I had done at SMU was to go to my English 2312 professor's office on a Friday afternoon and tell the truth. The truth was not that I was unprepared for college, but that I simply didn't like college. It's a different world up there, my mother had warned. I must have misplaced the map. And I didn't know if I wanted to stay at SMU. I wondered how I would I ever begin to come to terms with this whole college thing -- what it was for and how it could ever be worth the cost. These are hard questions to ask during the best years of your life, which is what they called college in the movies I had watched. But I couldn't recall a scene where the freshman pulled doubts like rabbits from a hat and turned them into answers for his soul.

The teacher was there, door open and waiting, just as the syllabus had promised under the heading of "Office Hours." My purpose was to discuss my second paper -- a postmortem. Tim Cassedy, a young assistant professor recently arrived from New York, observed that it seemed my high school had prepared me well for college writing -- an innocuous compliment to most students. But for me it was an invitation. The proper response is to say "thank you" and indicate how happy you are to be at college now instead of that dreadfully confining high school that taught you how to form simple paragraphs. I hesitated for a second, half-inclined just to agree, give the correct answer, and continue with the conversation. But another part of me, the honest part, wanted badly to tell the truth. I began to unpack my situation, my confusion, my questions, my longing for something more from my college experience than just velvet green lawns and affluent classmates. And Professor Cassedy listened. He didn't dismiss or diagnose. He didn't tell me that everything would be O.K. I was surprised to find that he seemed just as interested as I was in finding the answers to my questions and wishful thinkings. He understood. I got better. And I became an English major. That moment saved college for me. If I had decided not to tell the truth that afternoon, I could have continued to accrue credits and eventually a degree, but I wouldn't have been to college. Something significant would have been missed and valuable time wasted. I went back to his office another time and again I was reassured and challenged. I went back again and again and the door was always open. All of my big and important realizations were tested there; made sharper through discussion, questioning and that ancient practice most simply known as "teaching."

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Three semesters later I was at Richland, looking again for a way to understand college. My search led me to a green armchair. You nearly trip over it when you walk into Crockett Hall 292, but its importance there has more to do with symbolism than functionality. Near the halfway point of the semester, I decided to go to the office of my English 2326 professor, Mary Northcut, and try to tell her the truth about why I was taking her class and the answers I was seeking. I say "try to" because I didn't know whether it was even possible to experience this part of the professor-student relationship in the way I had at SMU. There were office hours listed on the syllabus, but how could my professor, who was teaching six classes that

semester, possibly have the time or energy to engage meaningfully with her students one-on-one? I was mistaken in questioning her availability and commitment to her students, and along the way I found that I was wrong about many other things as well. Important, life-changing conversations are happening at community colleges too, and I was lucky to have found myself in the middle of one that afternoon.

Professor Northcut has been teaching at Richland College for nearly 40 years. After completing a doctorate at Texas Christian University, she immediately devoted herself to teaching outside the spotlight but inside a social mission. She first taught at Bishop College, a historically black college that later closed its doors in 1988, and then at El Centro College before transferring across the Dallas County Community College District to Richland. At some point during her decades-long stay she must have acquired this green padded chair, the arm of which served as my seat during our hour-long talk. She was a fascinating conversation partner, possessing the tendency toward eccentricity that marks college professors everywhere. Between exchanges on the nature and purpose of higher education we discussed her love for horses, East Asian cinema and collecting Ancient Grecian coins. (In fact, it seemed I had walked into her office at a crucial moment in an eBay bidding war over a coin bearing the image of Phillip II of Macedon.)

But what deeply moved me, largely because I had foolishly believed that it couldn't possibly be true, was this important truth: Professor Northcut wants to be at Richland and she is there on purpose. She is convinced that community colleges serve a vital purpose in aiding the best and brightest students who lack the resources to attend four-year schools right out of high school, or perhaps got sidetracked along the way. By her description, Richland exists explicitly to help those students find their way to universities and brighter futures. She is not at Richland because she never found a better job, or to collect a few extra paychecks before retirement. And she certainly does not see her students as the caricatures they often become in our higher-education debates -- representatives of broken systems; too unprepared to make it at a "real college."

She knows them to be just as capable of academic success as any other students. And she has an astounding track record of helping her students take the next step. Professor Northcut is full of stories of her students, many of whom she describes as being like her own children, going on to schools like TCU, SMU and even Columbia University. To her, Richland College is a serious place with serious goals, and despite decades of changes and challenges, she is no less committed to its mission now than she was as a newly minted Ph.D. joining the ranks of socially conscious community college faculties in the 1970s. She told me she plans to keep teaching full-time for the foreseeable future and to retire later, reducing her teaching load to only "one or two classes" per semester. Two classes per semester is the ordinary teaching load for professors at SMU and most other elite colleges.

As I sat listening to all this on the arm of the green chair, worn threadbare by the pants of many students before me, I was overwhelmed with an awareness that the ancient art of teaching had found a home in this small office also. And the stakes in this office were much higher, the problems more pressing and the margin for error more perilously thin than perhaps in most of the offices at SMU. Futures were

forged here not from an abundance of advantages but out of a struggle for a fighting chance. I don't consider it an exaggeration to say that lives were saved in that office, in addition to the moments of intellectual growth we expect from any college experience. And most important for me, I left with that same feeling I had found my freshman year in Professor Cassedy's office -- that the world is full of complexity and college is here to help you recognize and make sense of it. The best professors show you how. The best professors are everywhere.

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I can no longer assume that office hours and compelling professors are the exclusive property of private universities. But of course, I cannot guarantee that they exist at every single college either. I can only claim this: I am a product of office hours and great teachers and truth-telling, and I would not pay for a class, be the cost \$150 or \$5,000, that doesn't include the chance to find an open door and welcoming ear whenever the questions become too large to face alone. This is the difference between a degree and an education.