

Why Colleges and Universities Are on a Path to Failure: Values and Principles

In this essay I will argue that colleges and universities are endangered not because they foster the transformation of students into adults with values and principles, seemingly anathema to our current leaders, but because they are not doing that task well enough. I will argue that most colleges and universities are not organized in a way that fosters a transformation from childhood to adulthood and that they are uncertain as to what their real purpose is. I will argue that colleges and universities have three purposes: 1) To give students a brand, 2) To give students worth, and 3) To foster the transformation of students from children with only wants and needs to adults with values and principles.

Is our purpose only to teach courses? We are well organized to do so. We talk vaguely about learning. We rarely talk about transformation.

Branding. Most students come to college, not to learn things of worth and certainly not to learn to behave with values and principles. They come to be branded: COLLEGE GRADUATE, or, better: PRINCETON GRADUATE! We have responded to that. How many institutions do *you* know that every two years come up with a new “branding campaign”? If you want a good brand, come to Nathan College.

I left the Harvard Business School with a tremendous brand. I could walk on water, except, of course, I couldn't. I didn't even know any accounting. I was smart. That's what the brand said. They had accepted me. I received a degree. Yay! Mr. Walk on Water! (Help! Help! I'm drowning!)

Worth. Colleges and universities try to teach students how to do things, to make their students more valuable, to give them worth. I graduated from Michigan State University with a degree from the engineering school in metallurgy. I was a metallurgist. I worked in foundries and steel mills. Yuck! Those were awful places, dirty, hot, polluting, dangerous. People died there. I had been badly hurt. Worse, they were all closing, moving operations to India and China. Not one of the factories where I worked is still open.

Still, I had taken a course in Fortran programming. That one course gave me more worth than the dozens of metallurgy courses I took (although X-ray crystallography was fun). Students are occasionally surprised when they find something they are very good at and love doing. Suddenly, they have a value that allows them to move up in life.

Sometimes it seems we in higher education have decided that we will give our students a good brand as undergraduates, but, when they come to our law school or graduate program in business, then we will give them worth. Besides, doing so means we get a lot more tuition.

I taught accounting to Vermonters and ski bums in northern Vermont (by staying two chapters ahead in three different texts). Some of my students were adults in dead-end jobs. I gave them worth. They got better jobs.

Transformation. When we look around, how many people do we see who behave according to a set of values and principles, like adults, and how many do we see behaving only according to a set of wants and needs, like children? Certainly, most of our politicians and most of those who many

admire (i.e., the ultra-rich) behave like children. They have never adopted a set of principles. They need money and power. They will get these without regard to principles.

I didn't agree with many of William F. Buckley's principles, but I admired him for having them. Of course, it was easy for him. He inherited enough to push "grasping for wealth" down a few notches.

At LaGuardia Community College I witnessed the effects of many transformations. Older students came off the streets for a good brand. They began to gain some worth. Then, suddenly, they found they couldn't understand their old street friends. They didn't want what their old friends wanted. They didn't even want what their families wanted of them. They wanted to help others. They wanted to be good citizens. They wanted to behave in ways that people would respect. As these students approached graduation, the college gave them a chance to talk about their transformations in front of groups of faculty and students. I learned much from them.

I must give credit to Jesuit institutions as well. They understand transformation and values. My nephew was not too fond of authority figures. He enrolled at Fordham. They said, "If you want to get into your dorm room early, here are some volunteer opportunities." He volunteered at a soup kitchen. He kept on volunteering. He went to Northeastern Law School. He is now a Bronx Defender. He is a very principled young man. Fordham created space for transformation.

For Sufi preceptors it is the effect of their teaching, and not the teaching itself, which is of the first importance. Not what is said or done, but what happens to the listener as a result of what is said or done, is the Teacher's primary concern. <https://idriessshahfoundation.org/sufism/>

I have done a bit of teaching, but I can only acknowledge one transformation. Still, it was magnificent. In a cross-cultural organizations class, I had an obnoxious American, always with an answer, raising and waving his hand, declaiming proudly, loudly. I assigned my students the task of learning another culture and behaving within its constraints in a group bargaining situation. He readily decided to study Korean culture. In the bargaining situation he kept repeating the mantra to himself, "What will be good for the group?" He was mostly silent. Later he came to me and said. "I saw myself for the first time. I will finish this MBA, but afterward, I have applied to medical schools. I want to be a doctor, not a businessman."

I grew up learning to behave according to rules: don't kill, don't covet your neighbor's wife, etc. They are good rules but, as my wife, Fleur Eshghi (Associate VP for Education Technology and Research Computing at Fordham) says, "These are digital. Real values are analogue." If you kill, or covet your neighbor's wife, you're a bad person. So, I'm a bad person. Okay. So what?

But the real world confronts us with choices that are not bad/good or yes/no—digital. The real world has all kinds of junk in between. Is thinking about the loveliness of your neighbor's wife the same as seducing her? Maybe yes, maybe no, but you must think about the question and decide. I say, accept your feelings, manage your behavior. Okay? Maybe.

I grew up lacking any ideas about principles. I had rules. I violated them. I was a bad person. In the mid-1980s I was renting the children's wing in the home of a pediatrician in Carmel, CA. The children were grown and scattered. The pediatrician was twice my age and still working because the Vietnamese community would only go to him. His age gave him their great respect.

I sometimes ate lunch with him, and one day he asked me, “Would you publish something that you were ashamed of?” I had done some writing, even won an award for it, but the question stunned me. He was asking if I had a principle. The answer was easy, but the application was troubling. I was just then, and this “just then” is critical, sending in a chapter to a book. I thought my work was good, but the other chapters were below the quality I thought appropriate.

I tussled with his question for weeks. Finally, I told the editor as politely as I could, “Please use my piece, but don’t put my name on it.” I have spent the rest of my life trying to find other principles by which I might live. My wife has been a great help.

In higher education we have taken the industrial revolution to heart. We have classes in classrooms or over Zoom. We have one faculty member for every 15 or 30 students. The faculty member’s job is to encourage learning, mostly “book learning.” It’s very efficient, except that we also have academic counselors, psychotherapists in the clinic, peer mentors, tutors, activity leaders, and student government. We brand. We add worth. We leave transformation to chance.

Could we change our organizational structure such that transformation was our first job? First, my nephew was transformed. Then he did his own learning. His brand is personal.

Higher education is under attack by our childish leaders because we appear to be giving students only liberal values. We would be under attack if we gave our students only conservative values. We would be under attack for having any values. Where are our defenders?

We have few defenders because we have failed to transform in sufficient numbers our students from children to adults with values and principles, of any sort. We have misunderstood our purpose. It may kill us.

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June 2025