

It's time for a recollection or two. Today's topic: higher education.

Back in the day (i.e. when I was in high school in Canada), going to university wasn't a given. In high school, you were "tracked" into a university program or a college program. What, you say? Aren't they the same? No, actually, in Canada they aren't the same. University programs are oriented towards the attainment of a degree ... in the intellectual pursuit of "higher learning and education". Professional programs - doctors, lawyers, physiotherapists, dentists - those are all university programs. But so is the Bachelors in Arts focusing on Canadian history (a bit of a misnomer since we all know that Canada doesn't have much history - at least much that we are prepared to acknowledge!). The university setting is all about attaining a higher level of knowledge in something - and, frankly, it's not for everyone. It's for the best students, those with the highest grades, those who have the greatest potential to expand and add to the knowledge base, the research base, the development and enhancement of what we as a species know.

The college system, on the other hand, is vocationally-driven. You don't get a degree from a college program - but you are trained in a vocation. It could be underwater welding (the money is good), or it could be auto mechanics ... but nonetheless, you have functional training in the vocation of your choice. You still pay to be educated, but you are certainly in a different (and perhaps just as important) role in society when you graduate. You are truly "fast-tracked" to having a paying job in the real world. It's very on-the-job-oriented, very practical for all intents and purposes. Want to do research in microbiology? This isn't the track for you.

When I moved to the US, I was asked what college I had gone to ... which initially stirred up some resentment until I understood the paradigm underlying the question. The response was "I didn't go to college, I went to university", which was typically answered with "oh, well they are the same here". There wasn't a distinction. So ... my highly-coveted and internationally-regarded degree from the best university in Canada (McGill be damned!) was just like all the rest - college, university, or any other degree-or-certificate-issuing-center-for-higher-learning.

Damn.

But here's the interesting insight that goes along with all of this. When did it become mandatory to have a Bachelor's degree? We're a land of degrees. Nowadays, you have to have a degree

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to pick up the garbage ... or to do just about everything in life. Or at least that's the perception. "Higher education" isn't reserved for those few who can truly contribute to the knowledge base of the species. It's just a given that you would pursue a degree program ... or it seems to be that way anymore.

This has it's positives ... and negatives. First of all - I don't want to sound elitist, because it's really not my belief system. Second, I am not saying that education isn't something that everyone should seek. I am a prime supporter of an individual pursuing education. But - I do think there is a value to there being some degree of selectivity. We shouldn't be in a society in which the average person has to have a Bachelor's degree just to be able to flip a burger at the local hamburger joint.

If everyone has a degree, then what happens to all the other jobs and tasks that are necessities in our world? What happens to the plumbers, contractors, lawn care workers, and all the rest? These are important roles - and no, this isn't said tongue in cheek (I leave that for my political diatribes of course).

This becomes more readily apparent in Austin - perhaps one of the more over-educated cities in North America. It seems like no matter where you turn, there is someone with a Bachelor's or Master's degree (or more!) ... who probably isn't working in the field of their educational expertise.

Now that's not to say that there isn't a very highly selective process for schools such as Harvard ... and it's not to say that there isn't a higher level to be attained with a PhD (though every time I even mutter that acronym, I am constantly reminded of the non-traditional meaning - "Piled Higher and Deeper"). The question is - should there be an unwritten code for every high school student to simply "go to college and get a degree" just to flip a hamburger?

This would lead me down the track of what the physical therapy profession aspires to do with advanced degrees ... but I think that before I get into that one, I will go back to cooking dinner ... one hamburger at a time.