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Degrees of Anxiety

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Over the past seven years, I've helped create two curricular projects at the University of Virginia, one a new general education curriculum for undergraduates in the College of Arts and Sciences and the other a liberal arts curriculum for working adults. For most of this time, my family and I have also lived alongside three hundred undergraduate students at the center of campus, where I served as principal of UVA's oldest residential college. During this period, I have tried to make sense of an institution that had become not just my job but also my family's home by writing books and essays about the history of knowledge and universities. But it wasn't until this past year that I grasped not only the degree to which the idea of college differs from that of the university but, more significantly, how the idea of college is experienced so differently.

My own ideas about what college is, what it does and for whom have also changed. Today, as a professor of German studies and history, college is where I live and eat dinner, play Humans vs. Zombies with Nerf blasters and read science-fiction classics with my three kids and dozens of eighteen- to 22-year-olds. It's also an expected experience that compelled hundreds of UVA first-year students to live on a campus and commit themselves to stringent protocols in the middle of a global pandemic; it's an intellectual and moral ideal that shapes how parents parent and organize their financial lives; it's a social filter that divides U.S. society into B.A.-holding and non-B.A.-holding adults; it's a social ideal that induces anxiety in American teenagers.

For well over a century now, the educated elite in the U.S. has regularly written elegies and paeans for college, calling for its recovery or celebrating its resilience. But from Mary McCarthy in 1952 to Andrew Delbanco today, this genre of cultural critique—*college* as microcosm and diagnostic instrument of an entire culture—has tended to turn American colleges, universities and myriad other secondary institutions into a monolith. If college is both an individual experience and all the things we collectively assert, believe and hope for in its name, the discourse about college too often reinforces the normative force of a college ideal by lumping together myriad institutions and experiences.

What follows is an attempt to disentangle some of those experiences, and how they relate to different ideas of what college is, through an account of three different groups with whom I have worked: UVA undergraduates; working adults enrolled in UVA Edge (the new liberal arts curriculum for adults with some college credit but no B.A., or no prior college experience at all); and graduate students, job candidates and postdocs. Despite their differing conceptions of college, the similarities among these groups' experiences of college may be as important as the differences. Most notably, each understands their agency to be obstructed by feelings of anxiety, alienation and anger. This raises an important question for those of us concerned with higher learning: Why is college, which is supposed to be empowering and a gateway to an open future, experienced by so many as a source of shame and powerlessness?

The Other University: The Management of Moral Lives

Four years ago, I thought I knew what a university was. I was leading a sweeping reform of the undergraduate general education program and it had not yet collapsed into acrimony. I was on the Arts and Science Budget and Planning

Committee and Faculty Steering Committee, and I had read and written a lot about universities from Paris to Baltimore. But none of this prepared me for the other half of the university: college as lived by the three hundred undergraduate students in the residential institution I assumed leadership of in August 2017.

I spent my days teaching and arguing (and politicking) across the College of Arts and Sciences over how best to educate undergraduates and organize knowledge; I spent my evenings and weekends with undergraduate students. In all that time, I met just one undergraduate who had *decided* to go to college. For most UVA students, going to college is not a distinct act with a definitive beginning and defined end. It's a propensity, an acquired aspiration that pushes them (and their families) down a well-groomed path that began in kindergarten and culminated when they accepted UVA's offer of admission. College names the inevitable movement toward their rightful place in the upper-middle class—the path to, or in many cases back to, Fairfax County.[1]

But because this path envelops students, college is also the name of the inescapable, low thrum of anxiety, punctuated by periods of acute stress and, for some, breakdown. Students try to manage it as they always have, slotting experiences into the ready-made narratives of achievements, successes and expectations. But their lives don't always fit those stories, so a poor performance on a chemistry midterm is experienced as a sudden, gaping chasm across their path to medical school. The train of expected achievements from AP exams and college applications to LSAT and MCAT summer prep, then law- and medical-school applications, becomes fragile and, on occasion, the path dead-ends in mid-semester course withdrawals, leaves of absence or campus police carrying a handcuffed student to the emergency room for psychological evaluation.

As one of the people who built it, I know that UVA's new general education curriculum is based on a belief that ethical reasoning, aesthetic judgment, empirical evidence and observation, and engaging difference are central to human flourishing—and also, I would argue, to mental health. But in my time at the residential college, I learned that the curriculum only forms a small part of the experience students have at college. Like other wealthy colleges and universities around the country, UVA has established an infrastructure designed not only to address the mental-health needs of its students but also to manage their personal development throughout college. This extracurricular governing apparatus—identifiable on university org charts as Student Affairs, Student Life, Dean of Students—is central to the daily life of college at institutions like UVA. I like to think of it as the Other University.

The Other University does not have a faculty; it has a staff with professional degrees and doctorates in higher-ed administration. The Other University does not have a curriculum; it has programming: health and wellness, multicultural awareness, community outreach, personal enrichment and career counseling. Within the managerial ethos of the Other University, these aren't topics for discussion and discovery, they are messages to be internalized and abided.

But what distinguishes the programs of the Other University from the College's education curriculum is not simply the existence of rules and governing structures —any big public university will require a healthy bureaucracy—but rather the rigidity of the Other University's rules and the fixedness of its goals. If the faculty aspire to guide students in open, searching inquiry, the Other University fits students to the ready-made norms and values of a complex institutional structure and a professional world students will soon inherit. If faculty teach students, the Other University trains them. Consequently, instead of helping students gain

clarity about their own values, the Other University reinforces the credentialing game undergraduates are already primed to play, turning questions about how to live into marketable skills and qualifications, the challenges of shaping a day into a calculus of work-life balance, aspirations for future ways of living into competition for internships and future jobs, and psychological challenges into a therapeutic concern best treated individually and cordoned off from collective and curricular life.

The result is a contradiction that is reflected in the distrust and skepticism with which many undergraduates come to view their universities. The real education we attempt to give them in the classroom requires trust and trustworthiness, a feeling that is not just a mechanical dependability but an openness and vulnerability to the judgment of another. Meanwhile, even as it claims to "advocate for students and support their development as citizen leaders"—as our Division of Student Affairs website puts it—the Other University often undermines their development into citizens with duties to each other and the capacity to argue about how to live together on campus. The Other University therefore further narrows the path that pushed students into college and reinforces the conditions in which feelings of anxiety and powerlessness float over them like morning mist.

"Adult Learners"

If UVA undergraduates never decided to go to college, the students whom I met as part of the UVA Edge program for "adult learners" certainly did. Going to college was something most of them had decided on several times, but had never fully succeeded in doing. Explaining and narrating these aspirations, decisions and events (miscarriages, pregnancies, deaths, military deployments, prison, a good-paying job, drugs) became a focal point of our class discussions. We even developed our own jargon for describing the work of going to college: "Life happened," "life got in the way," or just "life."

Between February and August of this year, I've taught about sixty "adult learners," a term used to distinguish these college students from UVA's branded constituency. Ranging in age from twentysomething to almost seventy, they all belonged to that big set of U.S. adults (roughly 36 million) who have associate degrees, training certificates and varying numbers of college credits but no B.A. They all lacked the one credential that marks perhaps the most definitive social fault line in the United States.

Although the Edge students differed greatly in age, experience and knowledge from one another, this deprivation bound them together. The young man in his early twenties who had completed a UVA apprenticeship program and now worked on campus as a pipe fitter; the widowed woman in her late sixties who worked in the athletics ticket office and was nearing retirement; a man in his late twenties who now runs his own mentoring program after having served a long prison sentence; the woman in her late fifties who has been stuck in the same clerical position for years. Their lack of a B.A. was a source of mutual recognition. So too was their desire to change themselves in ways and for reasons they could not yet fully describe. They wanted not only the extrinsic rewards that they believed a B.A. afforded, like a higher salary, a promotion or status, but also to become the *kind of person* who had gone to college.

Our course centered on a weekly discussion conducted online over the three days preceding our Wednesday-night Zoom meeting. Every Thursday morning, I posted the week's readings and a sprawling question meant to encourage students to find something (a word, an idea, a paragraph) that made them stop either out of appreciation or frustration. By Monday at midnight each student posted an initial response to which their classmates would then respond.

Over the course of the semester, they developed their own habits and protocols for reading, writing and thinking individually and together: M's punctuated, bullet-pointed précis of the week's readings accompanied by his own bolded commentary; L's lyrical marginalia that ran not along the edge of a page but immediately beneath italicized quotations; C's sentences that accumulated terms and phrases, stacking them one upon another until they stopped with a hard paragraph break or were interrupted by an unexplained and unattributed verse from Keats.

What is college for these students? Near the beginning and end of the course, I asked each of them to respond to the same series of questions:

> **How do you and your coworkers create, receive, share and put knowledge to work every day? Where does this knowledge come from? What is the relationship between this knowledge and college, a college degree, and higher education?**

In their responses, there were two distinct threads. First, they wrote clearly and confidently about their own skills, crafts and trades, but initially hesitated to describe these as knowledge. They were reluctant to claim that honorific for themselves or their work. But once I introduced the term, with the help of texts from Plato, Descartes and Tressie McMillan Cottom, they began to recognize themselves. They also began to identify their place in the systems and hierarchies that structured not only their own lives but also the workplaces and institutions in which they found themselves: knowledge versus technique, task versus craft, profession versus job, educated versus uneducated. Second, when they addressed

college, the language and tone of their responses shifted sharply. The excited crescendo of long, ebullient sentences broke, collapsing into simple declaratives such as "I don't have a B.A." and "I can't get a promotion because I don't have a degree." Instead of recognizing what they did possess, they described what they lacked. College, for them, was neither an institution nor a social filter; it was an individual failure and the source of personal shame.

When we talked about knowledge, these students expressed pride and a sense of dignity in what they could do; they reveled in the possibility of seeing things differently. When we talked about college, they expressed alienation and shame. It wasn't just that college and knowledge weren't the same thing; it was that they were active antagonists. College was a threat to the joy in reading texts they'd never encountered, the testing of arguments, the sharing of discoveries and the pleasures and satisfactions of thinking and talking collectively and rigorously.

Graduate Students, Job Candidates and Postdocs

The students in my Edge course called UVA "the plant." For them, UVA was an employer. But it was also a social border, where they knowingly walked alongside undergraduates striving to claim the rewards of college and worked with other staff and faculty who already had grasped those rewards.

The graduate students whom I've known, worked with and encountered in the thousands of applications I've read find themselves in a similarly contradictory position. They routinely, often movingly, testify to a belief in college and its liberatory power, but they also describe college as a job whose current conditions have eroded and whose future is bleak.

I got my Ph.D. in 2006 and began my tenure-track position in 2007, a year before the collapse of Lehman Brothers and the academic job market that soon followed. Soon thereafter, my own department was forced to "pause" graduate admissions (a pause yet to be unpaused), and I watched my colleagues and new graduate-student friends struggle to decide if there was any future for them in academia.

A new genre of literature, initially referred to as "quit lit," emerged to document the personal consequences and feelings of powerlessness unleashed by this sudden collapse. Over the past decade, quit lit has developed into a much more expansive form of criticism, taking the form of editorials, essays and sometimes even books by Ph.D.s, ABDs and the otherwise hypereducated underemployed who persist in our new intellectual gig economy on a series of adjunct contracts and penurious wages. Having begun as confession, however, quit lit later developed into hortatory analysis, emphasizing the connection between feelings of powerlessness and such phenomena as the decline in state funding of higher education, the adjunctification of teaching and the collapse of the university. Whereas quit-lit trailblazers like Rebecca Schuman sketched their feelings of anxiety, alienation and anger, many of those now writing insist that similar feelings serve a political purpose. Whereas quit lit exhausted itself in personal goodbyes, today's "adjunct lit" resolves in direct moral injunctions: to focus on the material conditions of academic labor, to join your union, to organize, to become a practitioner of "critical university studies."

Given the decisions over the past five decades by state legislatures to defund higher education and of higher-ed leaders to abandon tenure-track positions and shift to contingent labor, I think this increased attention to structural conditions and

institutional norms and the exhortation to collective action is a necessary response. But I welcome this rhetorical shift for reasons that, I think, are different than those I take to be motivating many of its proponents.

Deflection

The undergraduates, graduate students and adult learners with whom I've worked at UVA have distinct and, in some ways, conflicting experiences and ideals of college. But their feelings of anxiety, alienation and anger share a common source: the ideological, economic and social power of college to shape lives well beyond the idealized four-year branded experience. However distinct their encounters with college may be, these three groups all struggle with what college actually is and what is its most widely experienced effect: a process of deflection.

Deflection, according to the philosopher Cora Diamond, from whom I adapt the concept, names the diffusion and diversion of goals and purposes into different forms. Over time the reasons why we do something or our understanding of an activity's goods can change. We often undertake an activity with only a vague sense of who we might become at the end or why we were undertaking it at all. As I use the term, deflection names not such a developmental process (or simply change over time) but rather a diminishment or distortion of those reasons. Deflection diminishes, then, not simply by transforming our desires and reasons for continuing to practice or to do what we do, but also by substituting seemingly clear, communicable and manageable values and goods for ones that seem much less so.

Recently, I was prompted to reflect back on my own reasons for going to college when I found a cheap paperback behind the *Dichter und Denker* editions on my bookshelves. The book was T. Z. Lavine's *From Socrates to Sartre: The Philosophic Quest*, a mass-market paperback based on a television series that ran on Maryland's Public Broadcasting Station in 1979. A philosophy professor who taught at George Mason University and had studied under American pragmatists like Ralph Barton Perry and C. I. Lewis at Harvard, Lavine wanted to reclaim literature, philosophy and knowledge from college professors who hoarded it for themselves and return it to everyone. She told a *Boston Globe* reporter that ten years after the series had first aired, people still wrote her to say thank you or to describe how reading Plato had changed their life. "There seems to be a hunger for this kind of programming," Lavine said. The *Globe* article continued:

> **She says if Socrates were around today he'd probably be on television. No cloistered ivory-tower type, he. The man was out there, talking, ticking people off, and ultimately dying for his ideas.**
>
> **They're not drinking the hemlock in America, but some are definitely sticking their necks out, raising the blood pressure of traditionalists who feel a philosopher's place is in the university, period. The move out of the academy has come in the past ten years, partly because of liberal-arts budget cutting and partly because this wacky world could use a few good thinkers.**

When I read *From Socrates to Sartre*, I was a freshman in high school. I knew neither who Socrates, Sartre or Lavine were nor the difference between a university-press monograph and a mass-market paperback. I read it the way I played baseball and

soccer at the time—desperately and unencumbered. Beyond the bolded section headings (Plato, Descartes, Hume, etc.) and the "indestructible questions" that organized their subsections, I don't remember much else about the book, but I used *From Socrates to Sartre* as my paperback purchasing list: Plato's *Apology*; Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*; Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*; Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. I mined those books for ideas, phrases and images, nuggets that I collected and claimed as my own. Context, history or secondary literature didn't slow me down; I didn't know enough to care about them or be embarrassed by my ignorance.

It wasn't in college that I first learned to read carefully or to consider other interpretations. I learned that from watching my dad, who had no B.A., prepare for his Bible studies using concordances, Greek and Hebrew lexica and commentaries. But English professors did teach me to read repeatedly and slowly; a German professor taught me to read with a pencil; a political theory professor taught me to read skeptically, suspiciously, between the lines; together they taught me the difference between "literature" and "philosophy."

On the one hand, going to college transformed me into a different, more disciplined, informed reader. It initiated a process, one that was accelerated in graduate school, in which I came to relate to and understand reading (and so thinking and writing) differently as my capacities and resources (time and money) for doing these things changed. On the other hand, college also redirected my attention away from my earlier, sometimes desperate efforts to solve my own problems through reading, inculcating in its place a capacity to turn any intellectual or moral problem into an issue to be abstracted and then examined, studied and written about. It also encouraged me to think that my old habits needed to be not just improved and exercised but transcended; in order to become

the kind of reader I aspired to be, I had to condescend to the "bad" reader I once was. To conceive of this process as one of deflection is to acknowledge that my undisciplined, inexpert way of reading was not simply an immature version of my more mature, professional way of reading. It was just different.

The ways in which social scientists since at least the late 1960s have studied college exemplify a more social, amplified process of deflection, but one with similar consequences. Sociologists of higher education, for example, have managed to study college largely by disconnecting it from discussions of intellectual desire, the intrinsic goods of knowing and learning, or intellectual community, choosing instead to focus on effects and values that are more readily observed, quantified and transformed into proposals for social reform. When social scientists discuss the effects of college, they rarely mean a change or transformation directly (or even indirectly) caused by what people learn while attending college. They mean, rather, the observable social and economic effects of having or not having a B.A. in a given sample of a population.

In their most recent study of the disparities in life expectancy between those with and without a B.A., the Princeton economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton put their own disinterest in higher learning plainly:

> We are also not primarily concerned with the (contested) question of whether education directly causes better health and whether obtaining additional schooling … causes individuals to live longer. … Our fundamental moving forces are the changing techniques of production and how they use human skills, not in education in and of itself.

But it's not only economists and sociologists who evaluate college in terms that emphasize its most visible signifiers and most easily communicated values. Consider one consequence of the transformation of quit lit from personal confession into structural analysis and exhortation. The imperative to focus immediately and above all else on the material conditions of criticism and scholarship can perhaps motivate some readers to pay attention to the hierarchies and power relations that structure institutions of higher education. But that same force and urgency can also encourage the transposition of scholarly debates and intellectual conflicts onto anxieties about anticipated institutional collapse and, inversely, anxieties about institutional collapse onto debates about scholarly method or intellectual practices. In literary studies, for instance, arguments about a recent mode of interpretation known as "postcritique" have turned into proxies for moral and political judgments about right action. These too-quick transpositions turn a virtue—careful attention to the infrastructures and material conditions of knowledge—into a practical maxim. Both theory and practice suffer.

The anxieties and alienation evident in quit or adjunct lit are, in part at least, a manifestation of truncated professional dreams and promised careers—the expectation of an autonomous, liberating, meaningful professional life—and the deprivation of the cultural status and capital those lower down on the professional hierarchy were entitled to expect. With little prospect of inheriting the privileges of professionalism, these most recent forms of quit lit refuse to quit; instead, they challenge and increasingly reject the norms of professional academic knowledge and the system that sustains it, a system in which they can no longer recognize themselves.

Personal experiences of anxiety, alienation and anger are, in one sense, absolute. These feelings register a subjective reality. Yet these feelings can also be understood relatively. In order to understand the social effects of college, for example, it's important to understand the feelings expressed by those working for colleges on contingent or adjunct contracts not only on their own terms but also in relation to the feelings of anxiety and alienation experienced by other constituencies of college, such as undergraduates and "adult learners." Unless these feelings are recognized as part of a bigger social whole, the insistence to resist and organize on behalf of an imperiled institution can be all too parochial. Instead of fighting for the utopian promise of higher learning for everyone, we end up defending a relatively recent and particular form of professionalism.

The irony of the various discourses about college is how consistently they deflect attention away from the joys of learning, the satisfactions of scholarship or the importance of truth-seeking. College chatter tranquilizes intellectual desire. The alienation, anxiety and anger of the undergraduates, adult learners and graduate students with whom I've worked point, I think, to a widely felt gap between what we imagine college to be and what college actually does. Even more than "the university," "college" names a desire for intellectual community, excellence in thinking and the intrinsic goods of learning, knowing and thinking. But it also names the particular experience of anxiety, alienation and anger of those whose capacity to attain social status, credentials, professional success and financial security is often felt to be obstructed by college. When credentials, money, prestige, professional success or social reform are made direct goals of college, mediate ends are made immediate ones. But this process of deflection is so widespread that it now affects not only the discourse about college but also, for most of us, the experience of it.

Aspiration

Ideals such as academic professionalism and scholarly vocation do persist today but, for most, in a zombielike state. They are now largely detached from the purposes they are purported to serve. A college teacher might not produce material objects, as Karl Marx once wrote about a schoolteacher, but she is a productive laborer when, in addition to educating students, she also "works like a horse to enrich the school proprietor." Although the forms of capital may be more cultural (more status and prestige than money), the relationship between the college teacher and those whose interests are most directly served by college are similar. The only reasonable response to the current labor conditions of the vast majority of the higher-ed workforce (now estimated to be just over four million people) is to organize.

Many of the imperatives to do just that draw their rhetorical force from the assumption of a shared premise: namely, that the goods of an intellectual life, what Christine Smallwood calls, in her recent novel about an adjunct professor, *The Life of the Mind*, are primarily to be had within or as part of college. If college collapses, the assumption goes, so too will "the life of the mind." (That this collapse has already taken place is part of the intended irony of Smallwood's title, I believe.) I think it is important, however, to distinguish concerns about college from concerns about the conditions of intellectual life more generally. We know that the joys and fulfillments of knowledge should not exist. And yet they do.

I don't think the undergraduate students or "adult learners" whom I've met would join faculty, graduate students and postdocs to fight for college, much less the university. But I like to think they might well join us to fight for new forms of intellectual community. The "adult learners" I met recently renewed my hope.

Having opted out of the credentialing game, they live in the shadow of a failed deflection and have decided to care about something new. Like deflection, the process of "aspiration," as Agnes Callard explains in her book of that title, refers not just to something we do but also to the way our ideas about an activity shape our experience of it. But unlike deflection, aspiration generates new desires and new loves; instead of making our lives more manageable, it fills them with possibilities we have only begun to grasp. As those of us who work for colleges and universities organize, my bigger, utopian hope is that we fight not simply on behalf of a profession and in defense of monopolies of status, but rather alongside everyone who aspires to know and understand our dappled world.

Art credit: Dmitri Obergfell (https://dmitriobergfell.com/), Infinite Ladder, *ladders, mirrors, 144 x 72 x 72 in. Courtesy of the artist.*