

Place ... The Final Frontier

by Chad Hanson

On most campuses, mine included, sociology departments teach courses that serve as part of a liberal arts curriculum. Therefore, in sociology, we take a service-oriented approach. Students from all over campus enroll in our classes. On one level, I find it rewarding to know that we include my discipline in a wide assortment of degrees, but the focus on service also puts me in the position of fielding questions from colleagues, with respect to how and when to deliver classes. In particular, as the chair of a department, I receive requests to teach more sections and a wider range of courses on the Internet.

During the past five years, when asked whether to offer more classes online I have answered, “No,” but when I say that, my colleagues ask: “Why not?” I find the second question harder to answer. Those who favor face-to-face courses often do so for intuitive reasons. In spite of the technological changes taking place in our culture, some of us appreciate campuses and live people in real classrooms, but we rarely communicate the rationale for such a preference. In *The Great Good Place*, Ray Oldenburg suggests that we do not currently value physical spaces. He points out, with regard to locations where people gather, “We are inadequately equipped to defend even the *idea* of them.”¹

In this era, where we scrutinize the outcomes of postsecondary schools, we pay scant attention to the value of spending time within the walls and on the grounds of our institutions. We actually reached a point where we mock the enterprise.

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We now refer to the traditional classroom experience as “seat time,” and when you reduce education to something that takes place on your backside, it begins to sound absurd. Thus, most of us find it difficult to give thought to, let alone study, what it means to spend time on a campus in the company of others.

Through the growth of online courses and degree programs, we have shrunk the proportion of students who participate in schooling as a real, as opposed to a virtual undertaking.² This situation could be a tragedy or it could be acceptable. At the moment we do not know. Because we rarely conduct research on the meaning of the campus experience, we have been left to simply watch it disappear, without

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the ability to comprehend the consequence of its absence. In what follows, I examine how we came to where we stand today. I also suggest that we shift our efforts in outcomes assessment toward the question of what it means to spend real time with classmates, and a teacher, in the name of education.

THE PURPOSE OF PLACE

Over the course of human history, nations worked to provide open spaces where members of the public could exchange their views, find common goals, and learn from each other. The construction of significant places—grand coliseums and amphitheatres—were seen as a key to the promotion of civic-mindedness. Likewise, in our own past, Americans paid attention to the role that a campus serves as a “third place” between home and vocation. The pillars and arches of historic campus design reflect the degree to which we valued forums where diverse bodies of students and faculty came together.

Historically, we sought to create a public institution when we built a college or university, but today we see schools in a different light. As states decrease spending on our institutions, we are more likely to see education as a private investment.³ At the same time, we are also likely to view the outcomes of schooling from a personal and psychological standpoint, as opposed to seeing them in social or cultural terms. We concentrate our assessment of students on cognitive and statistical outcomes. We often reduce studies of education to psychometrics or cost-benefit calculations. That is in part because we prefer the sciences to the arts, which tend toward moral and aesthetic matters.⁴ Education is a human enterprise, so an outside observer might wonder why we do not turn to the humanities for an understanding of our work in schools, but we prefer the instrumental and the quantifiable.

The assessment movement beginning in the late 20th century did a good deal to draw attention to students and their development, at a time when institutions focused, perhaps too much, on externally funded research. Since then, however, the movement appears to have replaced one single-minded focus with another. In the case of assessment, we established a consensus around the thought that cognitive learning outcomes were the sole determiner of our success. The focus on cognition suited faculty and staff in the early stage of the movement. We found learning easy to measure. We administer tests. The results are convenient. Our numbers stack up well in charts and graphs. Simple. Like the businesses that often

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serve as our model, we were marching on well-trodden intellectual terrain. The assessment movement gave us a purpose and a product—learning outcomes.

The impact of this approach has been profound. With our thoughts narrowly focused on our product, we lost interest in the process through which students become educated.⁵ We began to see the complex social and cultural nature of the college experience from the one-dimensional standpoint of manufacturing. With the production of learning outcomes stated as our goal, we began to disregard the process that students move through on the way to acquiring skills or a body of new knowledge.

For example, if the stated learning outcomes of an online course are the same as those of a face-to-face offering, then we deem the classes equivalent. Although, to construe such disparate experiences as equal, we are forced to concede that cognitive outcomes are the only outcomes that matter. Learning objectives are important, but colleges and universities are also charged with turning college freshman into college graduates. By all rights, freshman and graduates ought to be different people. When someone chooses a college and a major, they are choosing narratives with which to understand themselves and their role in society. For the remainder of their days, students will face the questions, “Where did you go to school?” and “What did you study?” We describe who we are and what we are like in the stories that we tell in response. Therefore, values, behavior, dispositions, and identity are also necessary to consider when answering the question of how college affects students.

Our classes and programs foster skills and impart knowledge, but knowledge and skill are not the most crucial or lasting components of becoming educated. Current research suggests that students forget the facts that they memorize, and they also lose the abilities that they learn to succeed on exams and projects.⁶ The

traits and values developed in college persist throughout much of adulthood, however.⁷ One's identity and one's status as a graduate remain in place for life. Higher education is largely a social, as opposed to a cognitive endeavor. If the effort to assess the outcomes of our work is to serve us in the future, we will need to press out beyond psychometrics, into fields like sociology, philosophy, and anthropology. These disciplines contain methods that we can use to study the meaning that students give to and take from their experience on a campus. Such fields also offer frameworks that can help us to conceive of going to college as a life-changing ritual in our culture.⁸

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THE CULTURAL ROLE OF THE CAMPUS

In social environments, we develop habits of association. We hone the traits suited to life in a democracy. We learn to listen, speak with clarity, and build bridges between divergent points of view. In the past, democratic nations developed forums and spaces for people to hold conversations, create relationships, and forge identities as citizens. In the words of National Medal of Arts recipient, Ray Bradbury, "The idea is as old as Athens at high noon, Rome soon after supper, Paris at dawn, Alexandria at dusk."⁹ Between the 1838 publication of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* and the 2000 release of Putnam's *Bowling Alone* we reduced the number of public places where people gather to share ideas.¹⁰ In the 21st century, the college campus stands as one of the last bastions of physical space devoted to meaningful exchange.

The process of engaging others is formative. It may not reflect learning with regard to "content," but in the process of taking part in the life of an institution, students learn how to function as members of communities. Time spent on campus and in classrooms is a key component of education. In the article, "Foundations of Place," David Gruenwald explains that our environment is pedagogical. In his words, "Places teach us about how the world works and how our lives fit into the spaces that we occupy."¹¹ He goes on to suggest, "Places make us: as occupants of particular places with particular attributes, our identities and our possibilities are shaped."¹² The experiences that we have, in place, become the memories that make us who we are. The process of attending a school holds the promise of becoming an important chapter in our life stories.

In his philosophy of education, John Dewey stressed the importance of giving attention to the process that students move through on the way to graduation.¹³ He suggested the question of how we teach is, possibly, more important than what

we teach. He urged educators to begin their practice by giving thought to their ideal image of society. For instance, if we wish to live in a nation where people sit quietly and listen, he suggested that schools requiring stillness and silence would help to reach that end. On a similar note, if we wish to live in a country where people stay home and surf the Internet, schools that use the Internet as a vehicle for instruction would create an avenue to that future. But if we wish to live in a culture where people come together in public places to hold honest conversations about the most compelling issues of the day, then schools must allow students to practice those habits.

If we wish to live in a culture where people come together in public to hold honest conversations, then schools must allow students to practice.

In the 1964 classic, *Understanding Media*, Marshall McLuhan gave us the well-known principle: “The medium is the message.”¹⁴ With regard to television, we retain bits of content after watching a program, but the important thing to note and study, with respect to TV, is the notion that we became a nation of screen-watchers through the advent of the medium. Similarly, in education, we focus our attention on the short-term gains in skill and knowledge that we can document, but we neglect to study the broad impact of the campus as a physical and cultural environment.

McLuhan’s onetime student, Hugh Kenner, once suggested, “What you’re taking for granted is always more important than whatever you have your mind fixed on.”¹⁵ We fix our assessment of students on cognitive outcomes, but education is actually a socializing institution. The environments that we create impact people. In *The Great Good Place*, Oldenburg describes a scenario where a colleague asked the environmental psychologist, Roger Barker, “How would you explain human behavior?” In response, Barker said he merely needed to know “where the individual in question was located—if the person is in church, he ‘acts church.’ If a person is in a post office, they ‘act post office.’”¹⁶ Apart from a handful of studies, scholars have done little to research what it means to “act college” or university.¹⁷

Without good research on the behavioral impact of spending time on campuses and in classrooms, it is difficult to tell if our courses and programs contribute to achieving our broad goals. Of course, we pursue diverse objectives. One of our aims involves students acquiring workforce-related skills. In *A Larger Sense of Purpose*, Harold Shapiro acknowledges that our institutions “must serve society by providing educational programs in high demand,” but he points out that faculty and students are also expected to, “raise questions that society does not want to ask.”¹⁸ In other words, a graduate is more than just a set of abilities. We expect students to become certain kinds of people during the course of their education. In

particular, we expect them to become the sorts of citizens that are willing to take a critical stance in relation to inequity or injustice. It is not by chance that social movements often take root on campuses: civil rights, anti-war protests, battles for equality, and environmentalism.

Will students who earn their credentials online participate in the movements of the future? The Internet has proven useful as a tool for organizing, but what of online courses, built around lists of cognitive outcomes? Do online classes offer students a means to challenge and change the way they see themselves? Or will the documenting of competence online encourage compliance? Conformity?

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Will the process of meeting course objectives on a website provide students with compelling chapters to add to their life stories? As the testing of memory and skill overshadow our efforts at character development, will graduates still take on the traits that we associate with educated people: dignity, idealism, thoughtfulness? As an institution, will higher education continue to serve as a platform from which to address pertinent cultural issues? Will pressing problems, such as our present level of polarization, become more severe as we downplay the importance of students and teachers engaging one another in reality, as opposed to the virtual? I do not know the answers to such questions. My concern is that these questions are currently without answers, but we press ahead anyhow, changing the nature of the college and university experience.

AN ALMA MATER IS A COLLECTION OF
MEMORIES

Over the past 20 years, the movement to assess learning became institutionalized. We committed ourselves to approaching cognitive outcomes as a product, our end goal, the one that we assess. Here in the late stages of the assessment movement, we would do well to turn at least a portion of our efforts toward evaluating the actual process that students move through on the journey to becoming graduates. We have grown astute when it comes to measuring what students know. We also document what they can do, but we lack the means to answer the important question: who do students become during the course of the time that they spend on a campus? Future research should focus on the question of how the process of becoming educated changes a person. If we fail to study and communicate the broad impact of schools as places and education as a cultural experience, it is likely that students will miss opportunities for growth, and society could also

lose its capacity for well-reasoned critique.

Not long ago, I stood in front of a chalkboard after class. Three students came up to talk through some of the finer points of the discussion that we were ending. As the conversation lingered, new students began to file into the room. They were coming in early, for a course about to start. Eventually, we had to stop talking to make room for the class scheduled to begin. As I gathered my things, one of the students who came into the room to wait for the next course said something from her chair. She said, "So, this is what I missed."

I said, "Excuse me?"

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She repeated, "This is what I missed."

I said, "I don't know what you mean."

She said, "Talking and thinking, together."

The student told me her name, which I recognized. She explained that she had taken my course—the one that I was wrapping up—online. I remembered some of the papers that she had written, but I did not recognize her face. Of course, she was right. She missed a lot. I think I probably did, too. In some ways, I suspect that we all suffer from the diminishment of education as a place for people to meet and hold conversations. I suspect that many of us feel this way. Unfortunately, the issue resides in the realm of feelings and suspicions. In *The Great Good Place*, Oldenburg suggests, "In a world increasingly rationalized and managed, there must be an effective vocabulary and a set of rationales to promote anything that is to survive."¹⁹ For higher education to survive as a vital, physical and social institution, staff and faculty will need to make a case. We need to conduct new research, but that research must bear in mind that a college graduate is a collection of memories and stories, told and retold to confirm oneself and one's place in the world.²⁰

In an essay on her pending graduation, Marina Keegan suggested that her education succeeded in terms that she could only describe as *The Opposite of Loneliness*. With regard to her schooling, she wrote:

It's not quite love and it's not quite community; it's just this feeling that there are people, an abundance of people, who are in this together. Who are on your team. When the check is paid and you stay at the table. When it's four a.m. and no one goes to bed. That night with the guitar. That night we can't remember. That time we did, we went, we saw, we laughed, we felt.²¹

We should all have such memories. At this stage in the history of higher education, given the turn toward digital methods of “content delivery,” we face the need to study and ensure that students leave us with a library of memorable and formative experiences. 

ENDNOTES

1. Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place*, from the Foreword, p. x.
2. For an analysis of growth rates in online education, see Allen and Seaman’s *Grade Level: Tracking Online Education in the United States*, a publication of the Online Learning Consortium.
3. For data showing the decrease of state funds to higher education, see Mitchell and Leachman’s “Years of Cuts Threaten to Put College out of Reach for More Students,” a report from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.
4. For a discussion of the changing curricular values in the state of Florida, for example, see Anderson’s “Rick Scott Wants to Shift Funding Away from Some Degrees.”
5. In contrast to our current efforts in learning outcomes assessment, see Chickering’s *Education and Identity*, for a thorough description of the change-in-self that occurs during the course of an education.
6. See Arum and Roksa, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*.
7. For a theoretical description of the role of education in identity development see, Chickering’s *Education and Identity*. For a review of historic studies, see Feldman and Newcomb’s, *The Impact of College on Students, Volume One*. Jones et al. *Identity Development of College Students*, and Hanson (Ed.) *In Search of Self: Exploring Student Identity Development* offer a contemporary view.
8. See Blumenkrantz and Goldstein, “Seeing College as a Rite of Passage: What Might be Possible,” and Kaufman, “The Sociology of College Students Identity Formation.”
9. Bradbury, “Beyond 1984: The People Machines,” p. 267.
10. See Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, and Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*.
11. Gruenwald, “Foundations of Place: A Multi-Disciplinary Framework for Place-Conscious Education,” p. 621.
12. Gruenwald, *Ibid*.
13. See Dewey, *Democracy and Education*.
14. See McLuhan, *Understanding Media*.
15. For a discussion of McLuhan’s thesis, its implications, and Kenner’s elaboration, see Parker, “The Last Rock-Star Poet.”
16. Oldenburg, *op cit*. p. 295.
17. See Moffett, *Coming of Age in New Jersey: College and American Culture*, and Nathan, *My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student*.
18. Shapiro, *A Larger Sense of Purpose: Higher Education and Society*, p. 4.
19. Oldenburg, *op cit*. from the Foreword, p. x.
20. For a more complete discussion of the relationships between life stories, identities, and behaviors see Gottschall’s *The Story Telling Animal: How Stories Make us Human*, and McAdams’ *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By*.
21. Kegan, *The Opposite of Loneliness*, p. 1.

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