

Lessons: Teaching of character is missing metric in college rankings game

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I have grown weary with all the calls for educational success to be defined by how much graduates make.

There are college rankings that claim to be about the value of degrees from various institutions. What this really means is that it lists colleges by how much their graduates make on average. Now, I suppose some would expect me to like this measurement of colleges since my alma mater does quite well. But I am appalled at the equation of a good education and a high salary.

This measurement degrades students who choose careers that do not pay a lot — teachers, social workers, ministers, etc. But clearly people who do some of the most important jobs in America are being left behind in an economy that is continuing down the road of greater economic inequality.

A student of mine who graduated about three years ago is now making a six-figure salary, and the first of those six numbers may not be 1. He is a fine person and was a good student. One of his classmates, teaching African American children in the south side of Chicago is probably making \$40,000. Should we praise the hedge fund guy and wonder why the teacher didn't "succeed"?

Of course not.

But there is a more fundamental problem with ranking educational institutions by the bank accounts of alumni. Education's purpose is to give people the tools to understand who they are and how to create the good life for themselves and others. It is about preparing citizens for active lives in our democracy. It is to provide tools for young people to develop a view of life and a sense of their role in the moral universe. It is to show us something greater than ourselves and to define happiness beyond having the fastest car or a Louis Vuitton bag and endless sexual conquests.

Of course there is an important role for vocational education. Our community colleges have such education as a prime mission. Of course, we need people to hold jobs requiring lots of specialized and technical training. We all want good engineers building our bridges as well as well-trained surgeons fixing our hearts. We want good plumbers and mechanics and electricians and folks who repair our furnaces.

But it is equally important that we are preparing young people to be excellent parents and spouses and friends and co-workers. We need people who are not only competent but compassionate and generous with both time and treasure. We learn many of these things in places other than school — from our parents and grandparents, at our churches and synagogues and mosques and temples. But we must also learn them in our schools because so



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many children do not have all the resources available to them that they need.

If we think that good reading and mathematical skills are enough to live well, we are kidding ourselves. Of course they are invaluable for everyone, but so is education for character.

I cannot help recalling a Tom Lehrer song from the mid-1960s about Werner von Braun, a brilliant scientist in Nazi Germany who later was invaluable to the American space program. Lehrer is tough on von Braun, putting these words into his mouth: "Once the rockets are up who cares where they come down. That's not my department."

I do not know if ultimately this is a fair assessment of von Braun, but it is a memorable statement about the fact that brilliance without moral values endangers us.

Teaching character in schools is of course controversial.

Shouldn't teaching character be reserved for parents and clergy? The correct answer is yes, but schools have a role too. Much character education, although by no means all, falls to teachers of English and the humanities.

Obviously science teachers need to show students the consequences to people and the environment of various things they study. What does it mean if people burn huge amounts of fossil fuel? How are we responsible for the care of our planet? Should the Amazon be fair game to all kinds of enterprises?

Coaches and physical education teachers are important. They not only teach driving to the basket with the left hand and good technique for hurdling but also about fair play and good sportsmanship.

At some point, most of us no longer drive to the basket with either hand or hurdle over anything other than occasionally Fido, but we still are fair to and respectful of everyone, including those on "the other side," whatever that means.

We need our English teachers not to teach only reading and writing skills but also poetry and novels and short stories. Why did Odysseus make the choices he followed in his voyage home from Troy to Ithaca, and what do we think about the rightness of his choices? I think that there is little controversy about the value of courage.

But what exactly is courage? Is flinging oneself into a fire to rescue a nice hat an act of courage or is that being wrecklessly aggressive? Is it courageous to take things from others by force (individuals or nations) or is that bullying and unjust? Is friendship about glomming on to people who can help us, or is it a bond of trust and affection?

Schools should do much better at teaching character.

However, if schools are not doing that, turn off the television, put down the cell phones and create discussion and actions that show your children what it means to be compassionate and generous.

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