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| **An excerpt from the article “Why We Have College” by Louis Menand**My first job as a professor was at an Ivy League university. The students were happy to be taught, and we, their teachers, were happy to be teaching them. Whatever portion of their time and energy was being eaten up by social commitments—which may have been huge, but about which I was ignorant—they seemed earnestly and unproblematically engaged with the academic experience. If I was naïve about this, they were gracious enough not to disabuse me. None of us ever questioned the importance of what we were doing.At a certain appointed hour, the university decided to make its way in the world without me, and we parted company. I was assured that there were no hard feelings. I was fortunate to get a position in a public university system, at a college with an overworked faculty, an army of part-time instructors, and sixteen thousand students. Many of these students were the first in their families to attend college, and any distractions they had were not social. Many of them worked, and some had complicated family responsibilities. I didn’t regard this as my business any more than I had the social lives of my Ivy League students. I assigned my new students the same readings I had assigned the old ones. I understood that the new students would not be as well prepared, but, out of faith or ego, I thought that I could tell them what they needed to know, and open up the texts for them. Soon after I started teaching there, someone raised his hand and asked, about a text I had assigned, “Why did we have to buy this book?” I got the question in that form only once, but I heard it a number of times in the unmonetized form of “Why did we have to read this book?” I could see that this was not only a perfectly legitimate question; it was a very interesting question. The students were asking me to justify the return on investment in a college education. I just had never been called upon to think about this before. It wasn’t part of my training. We took the value of the business we were in for granted. I could have said, “You are reading these books because you’re in college, and these are the kinds of books that people in college read.” If you hold a certain theory of education, that answer is not as circular as it sounds. The theory goes like this: In any group of people, it’s easy to determine who is the fastest or the strongest or even the best-looking. But picking out the most intelligent person is difficult, because intelligence involves many attributes that can’t be captured in a one-time assessment, like an I.Q. test. There is no intellectual equivalent of the hundred-yard dash. An intelligent person is open-minded, an outside-the-box thinker, an effective communicator, is prudent, self-critical, consistent, and so on. These are not qualities readily subject to measurement. Society needs a mechanism for sorting out its more intelligent members from its less intelligent ones, just as a track team needs a mechanism (such as a stopwatch) for sorting out the faster athletes from the slower ones. Society wants to identify intelligent people early on so that it can funnel them into careers that maximize their talents. It wants to get the most out of its human resources. College is a process that is sufficiently multifaceted and fine-grained to do this. College is, essentially, a four-year intelligence test. Students have to demonstrate intellectual ability over time and across a range of subjects. If they’re sloppy or inflexible or obnoxious—no matter how smart they might be in the I.Q. sense—those negatives will get picked up in their grades. As an added service, college also sorts people according to aptitude. It separates the math types from the poetry types. At the end of the process, graduates get a score, the G.P.A., that professional schools and employers can trust as a measure of intellectual capacity and productive potential. It’s important, therefore, that everyone is taking more or less the same test.I could have answered the question in a different way. I could have said, “You’re reading these books because they teach you things about the world and yourself that, if you do not learn them in college, you are unlikely to learn anywhere else.” This reflects a different theory of college, a theory that runs like this: In a society that encourages its members to pursue the career paths that promise the greatest personal or financial rewards, people will, given a choice, learn only what they need to know for success. They will have no incentive to acquire the knowledge and skills important for life as an informed citizen, or as a reflective and culturally literate human being. College exposes future citizens to material that enlightens and empowers them, whatever careers they end up choosing. In performing this function, college also socializes. It takes people with disparate backgrounds and beliefs and brings them into line with mainstream norms of reason and taste. Independence of mind is tolerated in college, and even honored, but students have to master the accepted ways of doing things before they are permitted to deviate. Ideally, we want everyone to go to college, because college gets everyone on the same page. It’s a way of producing a society of like-minded grownups.If you like the first theory, then it doesn’t matter which courses students take, or even what is taught in them, as long as they’re rigorous enough for the sorting mechanism to do its work. All that matters is the grades. If you prefer the second theory, then you might consider grades a useful instrument of positive or negative reinforcement, but the only thing that matters is what students actually learn. There is stuff that every adult ought to know, and college is the best delivery system for getting that stuff into people’s heads. Menand, Louis. “Why We Have College.” *The New Yorker*. 6 June 2011.https://angelccs.spokane.edu/Images/Misc/NOTE.GIF |