

## Colleges

Having observed undergraduate education as an undergraduate, as a professor, and most recently as a parent visiting schools, I have some thoughts on the subject.

### Why Colleges Are Expensive

College tuition has increased faster in recent decades than most other prices. After spending eight days visiting schools that my daughter was interested in some years ago,<sup>1</sup> I thought I had pieces of an answer as to why.

1. Such schools practice extensive price discrimination, I think more than in the past, so tuition substantially overstates the real price. Judging by figures I got at one school, the average student receives scholarship support equal to about a quarter of tuition.
2. The quality of what students get has gone up. I do not know whether the students are getting better educated, but the environment in which they are educated is more luxurious, and more costly, than it was. A few examples:

All of the schools, so far as I could tell, provide the equivalent of free taxi service in and near campus, usually from the security department, to any student who calls in and says that he is worried about his safety, and in some cases to any student for any reason.

The food service ranges from better than I remember to luxurious.

Freshman year may start with a several day expedition to some carefully chosen vacation spot — sailing off Santa Catalina island, for instance, where "sailing" did not mean actually controlling a sailboat but being a passenger on a tall ship.

At one college, practically every floor had not only a resident assistant (student) but a "Wellness advisor" (also student — these are jobs with which students help pay tuition). The same college had both an "Office of the Consultant for Sexual Misconduct Services" and a "Gender and Sexuality Center," in different buildings.

At another college, when I asked about help for students finding summer jobs in their field, I was told that students could volunteer as unpaid interns and receive a stipend from the college.

The college athletic facilities were more like a high end athletic club/fitness center than what I remember — and I went to Harvard, the richest school in the country then and now.

Expenditure on services arguably related to education has increased too. There are writing centers, where students doing papers can go to get help from (paid) upper classmen. There is the equivalent for math. Class sizes are very small. How much good this does in terms of outcomes I do not know but I expect it makes the learning experience pleasanter.

All of these were high end schools: six top liberal arts colleges, one top university. The general impression was of a gold plated education: cost no object. It is not surprising that it is expensive.

Why the change since my day? Part of it may, as commenters on my blog suggested, be a result of more money being available for college due to student loans. As one person put it:

---

<sup>1</sup> 2007, to be precise.

So a possible explanation is that a college with a gym offers you a way to pay for your gym with cheap credit while a college with no gym doesn't.

Part may simply be that people have gotten richer over the forty some years since I was a student, so that what looks to me like luxury is what they are accustomed to. The sort of students who go to such schools tend to be the children of well off parents. While college purports to be about education, a large part of its role in our society is as a place where people can spend four years enjoying themselves, searching for friends and mates, developing useful social contacts. If the children of well off parents are going to spend their time that way, they might as well do it in comfort. And for very smart students whose parents are not well off, the schools have an extensive system of discriminatory pricing in the form of financial aid.

These are only parts of the answer. One of the things that also seems to have changed is a sharp increase in the ratio of administrators to teachers. That could be expected to raise costs, and I do not know the reason for it.

### **Schools for Cheapskates?**

Most of what these schools are spending money on seems to have a rather tenuous connection to the quality of education. That left me wondering whether there are any schools that specialize in smart cheapskates, provide a good education in the company of smart people at the lowest practical cost, which I would expect to be under half the cost of the elite schools we've been looking at.

In the case of law schools, I know one answer. Brigham Young University is #37 on the US News and World Report ranking and tuition is \$13,450 for an LDS member, \$26,900 for a non-member, which makes it a very good deal if you happen to be a Mormon. There are a few state schools above it on the list that cost less for in-state students than BYU does for non-members of the church, so might be a better deal if you are not a Mormon and are resident in the right state.<sup>2</sup> For colleges, looking at current data, UCLA and UC Berkeley, both top schools, seem to be a pretty good deal for in-state students at \$13,240 and \$14,253, and several state universities in other states are almost as highly rated and only a little more expensive.

That raises the question, for those who do not currently live in the right state, of what determines residence — can one simply move to the state, apply, and get in-state tuition? The answer, at least for the University of California, is no. The requirement is more than a year of residency, for a student who is over 24 or has been financially independent for at least two years, otherwise for the student's parents.

One way of getting a college education for substantially less is to attend a community college — the average cost is about \$3000 and many are tuition free. That does not, however, give you the advantages, social and intellectual, of associating with a population of bright and academically interested students. The solution, for a student who was sufficiently enterprising and socially adept, might be to take classes in a community college near a top university and hang out with its students. He might even be able, depending on the school, to quietly audit university classes.

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.usnews.com/best-graduate-schools/top-law-schools/law-rankings>. Arizona State University and University of Florida are tied at #24 on the list and charge \$28,058 and \$21,803 to in-state students. Iowa, North Carolina, Alabama, and Georgia are also pretty high and relatively inexpensive, with University of Georgia the cheapskate winner at \$19,894. All of this is based on the U.S. News and World Report Rankings; in Chapter XXX I discuss problems with them, but I don't have the data for anything better.

A community college gives you only an associates degree, but it also gives you the possibility of transferring after two years to a four year college, having gotten the first two years on the cheap. If you want an education and do not require a degree, you could do it for free, time cost aside, by living near a good school that made no serious attempt to monitor attendance, socializing with its students, getting educated by some combination of books, online material and auditing.

At most universities, auditors are supposed to be people with some connection with the school such as students, alumni, faculty, or faculty spouses. In practice, that may or may not be enforced, depending in part on the preferences of the professor.

Asked whether he requires his auditors to have some connection to the University, Philosophy professor Sean D. Kelly said, “No, but often people will volunteer that, and sometimes we have people visiting from other colleges.”

Indeed, Kelly’s criteria for auditing is of his own making.

“My personal view is that I’m happy to have people who want to learn things in the class,” Kelly explained, “as long as it doesn’t affect the experience of the students who are enrolled.”<sup>3</sup>

I agree.<sup>4</sup>

### ***In Loco Parentis***

I was a college student in the early sixties, when *in loco parentis* mostly meant the college trying, with limited success, to restrict student sexual activity on behalf of the presumed wishes of the parents; one rule I still remember required that, if a male Harvard student had a female visitor, three of their feet must be on the floor at all times. That form vanished shortly after I graduated, to be replaced by an unconditional surrender to the sexual revolution: mixed gender dorms, contraceptive services, and the like. On a visit to a California campus, I noticed flyers advertising a talk on the subject of the G-spot.

### ***In Loco Parentis: Mark II***

Parents, even *in loco* ones, abandon one attempt to run their children's lives only to replace it with another. When I went to college there were mixers, but for the most part the matter of finding friends, romantic or otherwise, was left to the students themselves. No longer. On the same campus I got a description of the elaborate procedures by which the college makes sure that none of their students is at risk of a solitary existence. Dorms are divided up into carefully constructed groups of freshmen: football fans in this one, movie fans in that, each group with a couple of sophomores

---

<sup>3</sup> Kelly is a Harvard philosophy professor. <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2016/12/9/despite-inconsistencies-auditors-come-back/>. I suspect there are a fair number of other schools which have, de facto if not de jure, the same policy.

When I was a graduate student in physics at the University of Chicago, I audited a couple of classes on poetry — one on 18<sup>th</sup> century poetry, and one on modern poetry by Elder Olson, who had the rare talent of making sense of poems by Dylan Thomas.

<sup>4</sup> My high school age daughter audited several of my law school courses. The rule was that she was not permitted to talk in class, for fear that would divert my time from the students who were paying for it, was permitted to take notes and discuss things with me after class.

to provide wise advice. Each group is allocated its chunk of the dorm. The year starts with a several day expedition to some carefully chosen vacation spot.

Most of the students who described the system to me seemed happy with it, but I did wonder about what sort of wimps the present system is producing. No practice at all in evading parietal rules — most of them have probably never heard of parietal rules. And being taught that the job of finding their own friends is too hard for them, so must be done by someone older and wiser.

I gather, however, that relationships, romantic or otherwise, outside of the preselected groups, are not entirely unknown.

### ***In Loco Parentis: Mark III***

The preceding passage was lifted from a blog post I made in 2007. Over the intervening years a new attempt to control student sexual behavior has emerged, his time under the influence of feminism and related ideologies. Responding to exaggerated statistics on sexual assault on campus<sup>5</sup> and pressure from the Federal Department of Education, schools have adopted policies that make it easy for one partner to a sexual relationship, usually the woman, to impose serious costs on the other by accusing him, without evidence, of some sort of sexual offense against her. That makes it risky for a student to engage in sex unless he is either very confident that he can trust the future behavior of his partner or has prudently arranged for a signed, or at least recorded, advance statement of consent.

Ideology may be a sufficient explanation, but it occurs to me that this in a sense brings us back to where we started, as of the early sixties when I was a college student — university policies that discourage student sexual activity. It replaces rules that amount to “students are not allowed to have sex” with rules that say “students are free to have sex with each other, but if something goes wrong with the relationship one partner has the power to inflict costs on the other ranging up to expulsion on a charge that will make admission to another school difficult.

The advantage of the new approach over the old is that it lets a university suppress behavior which many parents disapprove of without having to proclaim socially conservative views now out of fashion.

### **Virtual Off Campus**

When I graduated from high school, going to college meant an almost complete break with one’s previous life. There might be a few people from your high school going to the same college. One or two of them might be friends or at least acquaintances. But for the most part you were being dropped into an entirely new world.

It was an opportunity to abandon, at least until your next visit home, the nickname you had been given in second grade. It was an opportunity, with luck, to change your image, the picture of who and what you were held by those around you. But there was also the frightening prospect of a world where you had no friends, where nobody knew you, where you would have to rebuild in months the social networks that you built, or had built around you, over the past many years.

---

<sup>5</sup><https://www.forbes.com/sites/evangerstmann/2019/01/27/the-stat-that-1-in-5-college-women-are-sexually-assaulted-doesnt-mean-what-you-think-it-means/?sh=15706f182217>

That was before the Internet. For college freshmen as for the rest of us, the online world provides portable friendships. I can fly to Paris or London, connect to my hotel's Wi-fi, and continue a conversation started a day or two earlier from San Jose. A new student arrives at college complete with a network of online friends.

Here too there are advantages and disadvantages. The first day is less frightening if you know that, back at your dorm room, lots of friends are waiting for you via email, facebook, or your evening WoW raid. On the other hand, that reduces the need to go out of your dorm room looking for new friends. As one colleague I discussed the matter with suggested, the situation of a student in the world of the Internet is rather like that of a student in the old days who lived off campus. His classroom life was shared with fellow students; his social life might not be.

### **Doing VR Wrong**

Some years ago, I attended a presentation on what universities are doing with [Second Life](#), a freeform virtual reality environment. A lot of it seemed to involve requiring a class of students to spend an hour or so learning to get around in the virtual world in order to then hold a class there instead of in an ordinary classroom. Since a class in a virtual world has lower fidelity video, lower fidelity audio and less bandwidth in the form of facial expressions and the like than a class in realspace, it seemed a bit pointless.

It reminded me of my experiences about twenty years earlier with educational software. I had written a [price theory text](#) and some [computer programs](#) to go with it, and gave demonstrations of the programs at economics meetings where my publisher was trying to sell the book. One of the standard questions I got was "how many chapters of the book are on the disk?" My response was that the chapters of the book were in the book where they belonged. What was on the disk were not chapters of the book but computer programs designed to teach ideas in ways that could be done by a program better than they could be done with text and pictures.

My conclusion at the time was that most "educational software" was bogus, doing things on the computer that could be done just about as well in a book. The motivation was that computers back then were supposed to be exciting, sexy, exotic, so the same student who would be bored reading an explanation of supply and demand in a book would be riveted to the same explanation on a computer screen. I have the feeling that the same thing is happening now with university involvement in Second Life.

One other thing that struck me was a comment by one of the presenters that someone in physics wanted to set up physics experiments in the virtual world. It struck me as an oddly perverted idea. What is exciting about doing a physics experiment is discovering that the real world, physical reality, actually obeys the equations physicists use to describe it. Doing the experiment in virtual reality, where the physics professor has programmed the pendulum, billiard balls, or whatever, only demonstrates that the equations obey the equations.

### **Thoughts on Substance Free Dorms**

A number of the colleges I visited with my daughter had substance free dorms. I am not an expert on Aristotelian philosophy but, as I understand it, the form of something defines its shape, the substance is the stuff it is made of. That at first left me puzzled about how one could have a dorm with no substance at all.

But I think I have now solved the puzzle. Obviously, substance free dorms exist in virtual reality — possibly *World of Warcraft*, more plausibly *Second Life*. There only can you have a building that is all form and no substance.

Which, now that I think of it, also explains how it is possible to have food with no chemicals in it.

One commenter offered an alternative explanation:

I've known some students who had no substance. I think a school concentrating them in one easily-avoidable dorm is a good thing.