



SOUTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

Moving the Frontiers of Higher Education Forward

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Today, we hear much talk about the economics of formal education, especially within higher education. In particular, there is a lot of discussion about the ever-mounting costs of education in relation to dwindling *demand*.

Absent in the din of these debates is the basic issue of *supply*. No one is talking about what formal education offers and whether that offering is truly worth the investment of both time and money. Before we can determine that, however, we need to define what we mean by the phrase *formal education*.

Formal education has become a paradigm in which the goal is a diploma with elegant words embossed on an encased rectangular parchment. That diploma and the degree it implies—be it a high school degree, an associate degree, a bachelor's degree, or any other type of degree—then lead to a starting job with a starting salary. That parchment is necessary in order to cash that first paycheck and thus has devolved into the practical currency for formal education. Students demand that return on investment, and faculty, administrators, parents, and the curriculum oblige. Even the language students speak reveals this basic axiom: *I have to get this requirement out of the way. I need to get through this course.* This language

reveals a sadder truth: Formal education has become an obstacle course of mostly mindless hurdles and barriers we must traverse to land that first job.

This reality has led many individuals, from out-of-the-box entrepreneurs to legislators to students themselves, to dream of shortening the lengthy ordeal required to check off all the boxes and receive that diploma. If that credential is the ultimate goal, then I offer an efficient solution: Print out a diploma at birth, and award it to the newborn right then and there. Mission accomplished.

A high-impact formal education, however, should be a truly transformational experience and thus cannot be hurried. Such a mindful educational journey requires time and reflection, especially in today's age of impatience, in which information and disinformation are constantly distracting us through our personal devices. In my mind, a diploma and starting job are not the goals of one's formal education. Instead, the intellectual journey toward personal growth is the genuine goal of education. With impactful formal education, that first job is not *the thing*; the journey itself is *the thing*. Thus, that starting job becomes just one important outgrowth of that larger, life-enhancing experience. Moreover, the richer and more meaningful the journey, the better that starting job will be and the greater the opportunities for future success.

We are living in an age of obsolescence in which any fixed body of skills today will become dated and perhaps useless tomorrow. The best way to flourish in your professional life is to allow yourself to flourish as your authentic self—and that requires you to explore a diverse landscape of human thought, see that panorama holistically, and then discover your genuine intellectual passions and beliefs.

One's formal education, with the correct focus and commitment, can offer this meaningful exploration into the world of knowledge and ideas. That focus cannot involve just *thinking about* a subject (which stops at the topic's edge) but



also needs to include a focus on *thinking through* the subject, or learning and absorbing the pathways of thinking that grew out of that study and then intentionally practicing and applying those mindsets to other areas of life to bridge ideas through a truly interconnected course of study.

But it is not enough for us to be merely presented with these opportunities; we must actively pursue them ourselves. This is neither straightforward nor comfortable. High-impact learning is often uncomfortable learning. We cannot pave over the rocky road to deeper understanding so that the journey becomes smoother or shorter. A robust and meaningful journey cannot be a mindless checklist of things to do, cross off, and move on, nor can it be a segregated and siloed collection of subjects, facts, figures, theories, algorithms, and methodologies that will, for the most part, be quickly forgotten.

The goal of a truly impactful education is to mess things up: to challenge the basic assumptions of how one views the world and one's self, and to emerge from that journey with deeper insights into both. We might arrive at our undergraduate education knowing with certainty that we want to become a lawyer. But we need to let the journey move us and discover

where it inevitably leads. Yes, our initial plans may be abandoned, and we might become a mathematician, university president, or something else entirely. In fact, our brains are not fully physically developed as seventeen-year-old human beings, so it is problematic to be making long-term decisions for our future selves before we are even fully ourselves.

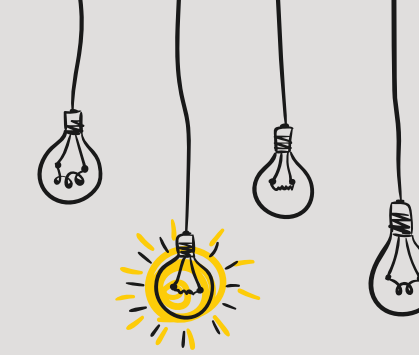
I've witnessed this many times at Southwestern University, sometimes within the same student. One student arrived on our campus thinking he'd be a doctor. He realized the medical field wasn't for him after all and thought about majoring in psychology before settling on communication studies. He considered minoring in computer science, but a study abroad trip to London inspired him to minor in English and theatre instead. He began his career in nonprofit development, where he rediscovered his love for computer and data science. Today, he's a freelance web developer and designer living in New York City. The road to his current career may have been circuitous, but he allowed the journey to guide his way.

Throughout our lives, we must remain open to intellectual journeys carrying us in new and unexpected directions. The point of an impactful and meaningful education is to enable individuals to flourish, to encourage them to grow and

thereby change. This personal change is not the disruptive type that reprograms one's DNA and makes one into someone else. Rather, it is incremental and results in subtle improvements that might even be difficult to measure in the short term. Southwestern is artfully bucking the tide of conventional and lowered expectations in higher education and has embraced this vision of impactful and meaningful formal education. With an unprecedented commitment to inquiry-based, active discovery learning and experiential education, we continue to craft distinctive programming that focuses on the life of the mind.

In February 2017, the Southwestern faculty unanimously passed a new curriculum that includes a commitment to offer, in every course, intentional opportunities for students to not only think *about* the material but also think *through* the material. By thinking through a subject, students discover the utility and power of that thinking beyond the subject itself. These different templates of thought offer different lenses through which to see the world in a richer, sharper, and more interconnected way.

Now, in every class, faculty challenge students to make connections between seemingly disparate areas by applying the thinking from one area to amplify their



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thinking in another. Perhaps the mindset honed to truly see works of art in an art history course will allow a student to see details otherwise missed within the plasma membrane of a cell viewed through a microscope in a biology class. Perhaps the search for a pattern as practiced in a mathematics course will enable a student to find the structure and nuance hidden within a poem studied in a literature class. Our students also are trained to see, read, and experience material in terms of different theoretical contexts related to race, sex, economic, political, and often intersectional perspectives.

Creating connections requires practice, and the initial attempts are often modest and somewhat superficial. But first attempts should not be final attempts. Intellectual growth arises from practice and patience and thus cannot be hurried.

At Southwestern, we call this unique commitment to thinking beyond the course material and making intentional connections *Paideia*. The ancient Greek word *Paideia* (παιδεία) originally meant the education of the ideal member of society through what we refer to today as the *liberal arts and sciences*. Southwestern has embraced this term to represent the unprecedented commitment to think through the material within every course of study and connect that thinking with

ideas and knowledge beyond the course itself. Our students are introduced to this interdisciplinary approach during a first-year seminar that is part of their general education. Then, throughout their college experience, they are asked to make connections between courses within their major and across the entire curriculum. This allows them to think in broader, more collaborative ways that lead to innovation and original thinking, ultimately preparing them to be true 21st century thinkers.

When Southwestern students independently discover an otherwise unforeseen connection, they often exclaim, “I’ve just had a *Paideia* moment!”—an exciting moment of meaning and deeper understanding. They reveal for themselves that which would otherwise remain hidden. They make the invisible visible, which is at the heart of original thought and creativity. After actively engaging with these ways of thinking, creating, and connecting through every course of undergraduate study, students emerge from their interconnected intellectual Southwestern experience prepared to make meaning and make a difference—both within their world as well as within themselves.

Our students aren't just making connections in their classes. They're making connections between their academic coursework, their campus experiences, and their life experiences. These connections often transform their lives, as witnessed by our alumni, who are finding innovations and new ideas at the crossroads of an interconnected life and career.

At Southwestern, we are moving the frontiers of higher education forward. We are encouraging our students to think in new ways and to identify connections between the ideas that shape our world. This practice of the mind offers lessons that last a lifetime. It is also one that can be adopted widely and applied at all levels of learning. I invite you to engineer your own *Paideia* moments of discovery and remember that with education and lifelong learning, *the journey* is the thing. ■

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