

Symposium

The Aims of Education

John J. Mearsheimer

Welcome to the University of Chicago. It is an honor to address the Class of 2001, the first class of the new millennium. We are very pleased to have you here, and we look forward to educating you and returning to this same chapel some four years from now to watch you graduate and join the long line of distinguished Chicago alumni.

Not only are we fortunate to have you as students, but I believe that you are fortunate to be students at this university. It is widely recognized in the land that Chicago is one of the finest universities in the world. I would argue that it is the finest, but that is surely a debatable issue, and I am surely open to the charge of bias. However, regardless of just how good it is, there is no doubt you will get a superb education here.

I assume that Chicago is the school of first choice for many of you, but that for some, Chicago was not the school you wanted most to attend. However, you ended up here because you were not accepted at the college or university of your dreams. Although it might have seemed like a great misfortune when you were turned down by your dream school, I believe that it will prove to have been a stroke of good fortune, because Chicago will provide you with a first-rate college education that will serve you well over the course of your lifetime.

The Aims of Education address, which I have been asked to give you today, is a unique and venerable institution. The first such address was given thirty-five years ago in the fall of 1962, and it has been given every year since. Over that period, presidents, provosts, deans, and professors from every corner of the University have given this talk. So I am in distinguished company. To my knowledge, Chicago is the only college or university that provides its entering freshman class with a serious lecture about the goals of an undergraduate education. To my mind, this is evidence that this university is deadly serious about providing you with a terrific education. After I am done speaking, you will return to your residence halls and discuss the matter further. This is an excellent opportunity for you to think about what is going to happen to you here over the next four years, and also what that experience, in turn, means for your life after Chicago.

As you listen to my talk, you should keep two points in mind. First, I could either talk about what are the aims of a Chicago education, or I could talk about what I think those aims should be. In preparing this talk, I have gone to some lengths to concentrate on simply describing what I think the University's educational goals are with respect to you, while steering clear of my own views on what they should be. Nevertheless, I should add that I do not have significant disagreements with what goes on here. Second, you should understand that you are about to hear one professor's views on the aims of education, and that it is likely that other professors would disagree with at least some of what I have to say. As you will soon discover, the University of Chicago is a contentious place, where professors and students like to argue about every subject under the sun. If you have any doubts on that score, you might ask Dean Boyer about his experiences trying to get his colleagues on the faculty to reach agreement on important issues. Of course, the willingness of faculty members to argue with each other is what makes Chicago such an interesting and vibrant place, and nobody in their right mind would want to change that

basic combativeness. At the risk of getting ahead of myself, one of our basic aims is to make you over in our own image, which is another way of saying we intend to make you as contentious as we are by teaching you to disagree and argue just like we do. But back to the point at hand. Please remember that I am not giving you the official University position on the aims of a Chicago education; I am merely giving you my own views on this important subject.

The remainder of my talk is broken up into five parts. First, I elaborate on why the subject we are discussing today is important, and why you should care about what I have to say. Second, I lay out what I believe are the principal aims of a Chicago education. Third, I discuss some of the important non-aims of a Chicago education. To understand fully what we are attempting to accomplish in your education, I believe you also need to know what we are *not* trying to do with you. Fourth, I consider the benefits of a Chicago education. I discuss what I think you will gain from our combined efforts over the next few years. Finally, I offer some concluding remarks about the opportunity facing you at Chicago.

Why This Subject Is Important

I did not say much about why you should be pleased that you are sitting here on a beautiful Sunday afternoon--the last day of summer--listening to a speech on such a lofty topic as "the aims of education." I believe that there are three compelling reasons why you should care deeply about how the University of Chicago thinks about educating you.

First, you are going to invest a tremendous amount of time and energy into getting your undergraduate degree. Over the next four years, the typical student among you will spend roughly nine out of every twelve months at this university. That is a total of thirty-six months. During that time, being a student will be your full-time occupation. Furthermore, this is a tough and demanding place. There are few, if any, "gut courses." You will have to work hard for your degree. We leave you no choice. You should want to know the purpose for which you are making such a prodigious effort.

Second, you and your parents are going to pay a lot of money for your Chicago education. That would be true if you were at Stanford or Swarthmore or Harvard or NYU. No matter where you go to college these days, it is *very* expensive. The estimated total cost per student for the present academic year at Chicago is \$32,175, which means that the cost of a four-year education here is now over \$120,000. I am sure that many of your parents wake up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat, thinking about how to pay for your college education. And I am sure that many of you will have to work hard during summer breaks, and even during the school year, to help make ends meet. On a personal note, I have four children: one is a junior in college, and two others are in high school. Next year, I will have two children in college. I sometimes feel like all I do is work to pay the costs of educating my children. So, I understand and appreciate, as do many of my colleagues, the financial pressures that you and your parents face. My bottom line is that you should want to know the purpose for which you and your parents are spending so much money.

Finally, there is little doubt that college is a truly important experience that will have profound consequences for what happens to you for the rest of your life. Where you go to college also matters a great deal. Generally speaking, it is better to go to an elite college than a second- or third-tier school. Of course, you know this, which is why most of you worked so hard in high school to get admitted to a place like this, and it is why you and your parents are willing to pay the costs of a Chicago education. In blunt terms, we have something to offer that you think you want very much. You should want to know exactly what it is that Chicago provides its students that makes it such an attractive place. You should want to know what we are aiming to do with you. Let us now turn to that subject.

The Aims of Education at Chicago

I believe that this university has three main goals in educating its undergraduates. First, it aims to teach you to think critically. Second, the University seeks to broaden your intellectual horizons. And third, it tries to promote self-awareness in each of you.

Critical Thinking

Chicago prizes critical thinking above all else, and its faculty will work hard to help you acquire that ability. If there is a single mission that informs the structure of our curriculum, it is our commitment to teaching you how to think hard and well.

Critical thinking is a rather straightforward process that involves asking important questions and making convincing arguments of your own in response to those questions. I am tempted to say that teaching critical thinking is all about teaching you how to argue, but that would be an incomplete description of the enterprise, because it fails to capture the fact that asking questions is also a crucial part of the process. In particular, we encourage you to focus on big issues and to ask the central questions in those issue areas. We don't aim to produce graduates who have an instinct for the capillary, that is, individuals who ask rather trivial or small-minded questions. Instead, we aim to produce graduates who have an instinct for the jugular, that is, individuals who are constantly on the lookout for interesting and important puzzles regarding the world around them.

Furthermore, we train you to formulate answers to those questions. We don't want you to axiomatically accept the conventional wisdom on a particular subject. Indeed, your first instinct should be to question it. If you find it satisfactory, that's fine, as we are not encouraging argument for argument's sake. But if you find the conventional wisdom wanting, we would expect you to challenge it and make a convincing argument of your own. Of course, there are almost always alternative views to any argument you might make, which means that to make your own case, you have to pay serious attention to the counter-arguments. In particular, you have to show why your position is superior to the alternatives. You have to convince others that your answer to the question at hand is right and the alternative explanations are wrong. Thus, in part, critical thinking is all about making and winning arguments in the marketplace of ideas.

Let me give you an example from my own field of political science that illustrates what I mean by critical thinking. It concerns the Cold War, which was the dominating fact of life in world politics from 1945 to 1990. All of you were born during the Cold War. Indeed, most of you came into this world in 1979, when the Cold War was intensifying after a long period of detente, and when President Jimmy Carter was about to be voted out of office, in part, because he was considered too soft on the "evil empire."

When I teach about the Cold War, I think it is important that you know lots of facts about that conflict. I want you to be able to describe the Cold War in considerable detail. I want you to be able to name the key leaders, detail the key events, and have a good sense of the chronology of the Cold War. Nevertheless, those are secondary, not primary concerns. What I care most about is that you focus in on the defining questions of that particular historical experience and that you make your own arguments in response to those questions. For example, I would be very interested in what you have to say about the origins of the Cold War. How did it start? Who caused it? During World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union were allies in the fight against the so-called Axis powers: Italy, Japan, and Germany. We have all seen pictures of Roosevelt and Stalin, along with Churchill, sitting together to plot war-time strategy. Yet soon after World War II ended in August 1945, the United States and the Soviet Union became bitter enemies, and remained so for more than four decades. How did this happen?

Some of you might blame it on aggressive Soviet behavior, perhaps paying special attention to the evils of communism. Others might argue that the United States, not the Soviet Union, was the

driving force behind the Cold War. American policymakers, you might argue, were bent on creating a capitalist world order for selfish economic reasons, and to accomplish that end they had to dominate the globe militarily. Others might argue that neither superpower caused the Cold War, but that the conflict was the result of competitive pressures that the international system places on all states. In effect, the system is to blame. According to this logic, the most powerful states are always looking for opportunities to gain advantage over each other, because it pays to be powerful in the international system.

Although I have clear-cut views on which explanation is correct, and anybody who takes a class with me will quickly figure out my position on the causes of the Cold War, my main aim would not be to convince you that I have the approved solution. Instead, my principal aim would be to help you reach your own conclusions about the causes of the Cold War and to help you figure out how to best defend your position against the competing alternatives. Again, the aim is to teach you to make your own arguments about important issues. We aim to encourage each of you to become an independent thinker, an individual with a nose for important questions and a facility for answering them on your own.

Two further points about critical thinking are in order.

First, critical thinking is synonymous with disciplined thinking. Your arguments must be carefully formulated and they must also be consistent with the available evidence. Sloppy arguments are guaranteed to get you in trouble here. For example, faulty logic in an argument is the kiss of death, as is lots of contradictory evidence. You can rest assured that others, including your fellow students, will pounce on any such flaws in your arguments. Therefore, we push you hard to develop thoughtful and rigorous arguments that can stand up to withering criticism.

Second, in teaching you to think critically, we encourage you to acquire both hubris and humility. These two qualities are somewhat contradictory, but nevertheless it is important that you have large doses of both. Let me explain.

We promote hubris simply by encouraging you to be bold. We urge you to ask big questions, to challenge prevailing truths when you think they are wrong, and to offer your own views on important subjects. We want you to stand up when the time is right and say that the emperor has no clothes. That requires a certain amount of hubris. At the same time, however, we promote humility by encouraging you to recognize that your thinking about a particular issue may be wrong. The line of argument you are pushing might not cut the mustard and might not be worth pursuing, while someone else may have an argument that is ultimately more convincing than yours. Therefore, it is especially important to listen carefully when others criticize your argument and avoid getting locked into defending your own position when the evidence tilts against you. In short, it is important to be thoughtful.

My colleague at MIT, Stephen Van Evera, and I have invented a concept that we call the hubris-humility index. We often refer to it when talking about ourselves or other people we know. The index is designed to measure the amount of hubris and humility packed into any individual. To get a high score on the hubris-humility index, which is desirable, it is essential to have large quotients of both hubris and humility. If an individual has an abundance of one quality, but a shortage of the other, then he or she gets a low score. A lot of hubris cannot compensate for a lack of humility, and vice versa. In short, you need hubris *and* humility if you are to be a first-rate thinker, and we will go to some lengths to fill you with both.

Some of you might be saying to yourself that critical thinking is obviously of central importance for university professors and their graduate students, but it probably does not have much utility in the "real world," which is where most of us are going to end up. I disagree with that viewpoint. Regardless of what profession you pursue after graduating from Chicago, I believe that critical

thinking will be central to your job. For example, if you are a doctor, you will frequently be called upon to offer your opinion on what ails the patient. The available information or evidence about the patient's illness will sometimes allow for different diagnoses. You will have to offer your own assessment and then listen carefully to different assessments by other doctors. Since doctors sometimes deal with life and death situations, it takes real hubris to make judgments that might be the wrong ones, which is why it is important to be humble as well as bold. If you are a lawyer, you will be constantly making arguments for your clients and working to defeat the other side's arguments. It is obvious that there is no substitute for good critical thinking skills in the legal profession. If you are a social worker, you will often find yourself trying to figure out what has gone wrong with a particular individual or family and what is the best solution to the problem at hand. You will sometimes find yourself confronted with a situation that is very difficult to evaluate, but you will still have to come up with a solution to the problem and then make the case that your answer is better than the alternatives. I could easily point to many other occupations where critical thinking is part of the warp and woof of daily life and where success will generally go to those whose ideas are razor-sharp.

Broadening Intellectual Horizons

The second goal of a Chicago education is to broaden your intellectual horizons by exposing you to a wide range of issues and ideas, many of which you have not thought about before. You will take courses in the humanities, to include art and music classes. You will take courses in the social sciences, the biological sciences, and the physical sciences. In addition you will take classes dealing either with Western civilization or a non-Western civilization, and you will take math and foreign language classes. There is not much agreement among the faculty about the details of what you should know, but almost all of us agree that you should be exposed to a wide variety of disciplines, so that you have a firm appreciation of the diverse array of human creativity.

As colleges go, Chicago is a wonderful place to gain an appreciation of the rich variety of modern intellectual life, because it is a large and multifaceted institution. Specifically, the college you are entering is part of a larger research university, unlike colleges such as Amherst, Smith, and Swarthmore, which are essentially colleges unto themselves. The difference in size alone means that there is a wider variety of intellectual activity at Chicago and other research universities than at smaller liberal arts colleges. Of course, you cannot help but be exposed to much of what goes on at this university.

It is also worth emphasizing that you are now living in one of the world's great cities, which will also contribute to your appreciation of the diversity of the human experience. Part of your education here requires learning about the real world, so make sure that you get out of Hyde Park on occasion and explore what this wonderful city has to offer.

Our aim, however, is to do more than just give you an appreciation of the diversity of intellectual life at Chicago. We also seek to get you thinking seriously about a wide range of enduring questions regarding the workings of human society. Furthermore, we aim to give you a sense of why these questions are important and how they have been answered in the past. If we successfully engage you in this enterprise, we will enhance your ability to identify important questions and express your own ideas clearly and persuasively. In essence, broadening your intellectual horizons will help you to think critically.

Being exposed to new subjects and learning new ideas is also likely to prove exciting, because it is ultimately very satisfying to gain knowledge about how the world works. This is not to deny that there is a lot of drudgery, or what I like to call "scut work," associated with getting a college degree, because there is. But hopefully, there will be more than a few occasions when you leave class and cannot wait to talk with your roommate, or your boyfriend or girlfriend, about some new idea you learned in class that day. Moreover, when many of you go home for the holidays, I am sure you will relish the opportunity to tell your parents about some of the new ideas you picked up

in your classes. In short, you are likely to be fascinated by a lot of what you learn here and want to share it with others.

A final point about our efforts to expose you to a wide range of intellectual activities. Most of you will discover after you graduate from college that the imperatives of life in the modern world push you towards specialization. You will choose a specific career and then devote considerable time and resources to gaining the necessary expertise to do your job well. You will then spend much of your time doing that job. For many of you, much of your spare time will be devoted to raising a family. Thus, you will not have much opportunity to broaden your intellectual horizons but instead will watch them narrow with time. You will grumble about your fate, but there won't be much you can do about it, unless, of course, you become a multimillionaire and take early retirement to go back to school. But, sad to say, that is not likely. For most of you, this will be your last great opportunity to build a broad base of intellectual capital. In fact, we will be pushing you hard to learn as much as you possibly can about as many subjects as possible. This is a wonderful opportunity, and you want to make sure you don't blow it.

Promoting Self-Awareness

Chicago's third educational aim is to promote self-awareness among its students. To be more specific, your experience here will give you a better sense of both your *interests* and your *capabilities*. You are all young and for the most part you have led rather sheltered lives up to now. Most importantly, you have lived in your parents' home and under their supervision for almost all of your life. That is all for the good, for sure, but it does mean that your previous experiences with the wider world have been limited and somewhat circumscribed. This is not to deny that you have developed interests of your own or that many of you have a sense of what you want to do with the rest of your life. Nor is this to deny that most of you already have a good sense of your capabilities. I am sure that you already know a lot about what you are good at and what you are not so good at.

Having said all that, however, you are going to learn a lot more about yourself over the next four years. Your interests are likely to change at least somewhat, and quite radically in some cases. That change will be due to the fact that you are entering a new world, where you will be exposed to new people, new ideas, and new ways of doing business. As your perspective on life widens, you will find yourself abandoning some long-standing interests and replacing them with new ones. Of course, this does not mean that when you return here to Rockefeller Chapel in June 2001 to graduate, all of you will know what you want to do with the rest of your lives. In fact, my experience with your predecessors tells me that a good number of you will exit the University unsure of what to do next. Nevertheless, I am quite certain that almost every one of you will have somewhat different interests in 2001 than you have in 1997.

Chicago is also going to help you learn a lot more about your capabilities, to include your strengths and your limits. The reason is simple: you will be operating in a competitive environment that is stocked with talented people. For most of you the competition will be nothing new, since the American educational system is highly competitive from the get-go, although society often goes to considerable lengths to disguise that fact. But the actual competition will be much stiffer at Chicago than it was in high school, because the talent pool is much richer at this level. Whereas you probably had a handful of really smart classmates in high school, here you are going to be rubbing shoulders with really smart people all the time. In short, you have just graduated from the minor leagues into the major leagues.

The thought of finding yourself in the company of so many other talented students at such a prestigious school probably makes most of you nervous, and may even strike fear in the hearts of a few. However, I believe that this is the wrong way to think about your new circumstances. The fact is that you are very fortunate to be in this competitive environment with so many first-rate students. To start, you learn a lot from hanging around with smart people, and because you are

going to spend a lot of time with smart comrades, you will learn a lot from them. Furthermore, many of you are going to discover that you have capabilities that you didn't realize. For example, you might think that you do not write well, but you may discover after a quarter or two that you are actually quite good at it, but you just happened to be a late bloomer. Others who never worked terribly hard in high school and think they have no real appetite for long hours of study might find that in this new environment they really enjoy the life of a workaholic. Of course, others may go in the opposite direction, from hard-working high school student to not-so-hard-working college student. I am somewhat embarrassed to report that I followed that less than distinguished trajectory in my four years as an undergraduate. However, the key point is that you want to be prepared to be surprised about your capabilities, and you want to recognize that you are quite often going to be pleasantly surprised.

Nevertheless, I do not want to make light of the fact that you will also learn a lot about your limits. For most of you there will be disappointments along the way, as you discover, for example, that you do not have much aptitude for a subject that you not only like, but was one of your best in high school. The truth is that most of you are going to fail to realize at least some of your dreams, and that is likely to be painful. However, failure is an important part of success. We all have limits and we all run up against those limits from time to time, and get the wind knocked out of us in the process. Not every basketball player in the NBA can be Michael Jordan. But we learn to pick ourselves up and move on with our lives. It is very important to know how to deal with adversity, and we help teach you that at Chicago. So, when you are feeling down about school, realize that there is probably a silver lining in that dark cloud hanging over your head.

To sum up, I have argued that Chicago has three main goals when it comes to educating undergraduates. First, it aims to teach you to think critically. Second, it aims to broaden your intellectual horizons. Third, it aims to promote self-awareness in each of you. Let me now shift gears and focus on two particular goals that the University might pursue, but in fact does not. Those two non-aims concern truth and morality.

The Non-aims of Education at Chicago

Providing Truth

There is a powerful bias at the University of Chicago against providing you with *the* truth about the important issues we study. Instead, we aim to produce independent thinkers who can reach their own conclusions. To put the matter in slightly different terms, we expect you to figure out the truth, if there is one.

There is no question that there is a body of accepted knowledge in every discipline that will be taught to you in a rather straightforward way without stirring up much intellectual debate. For example, there is not likely to be much discussion in a basic physics class about whether objects falling towards earth accelerate at 32 feet per second. All of this is to say that you will sometimes find yourself in classes where there is in fact only one right answer to the question at hand, and there is no good reason for you to question it, or how you got it. This is not to deny that you will want to understand the underlying logic of the solution.

It is probably fair to say that you are likely to find a larger body of accepted knowledge in the biological and physical sciences than in either the social sciences or the humanities. I believe that you are least likely to find approved solutions in your courses in the humanities, where pretty much everything is up for grabs. In the social sciences, you are likely to find considerable variation, with economics looking a lot like the physical sciences or mathematics, and history and anthropology looking more like the humanities.

Nevertheless, there are a bevy of key questions in every discipline that have no approved solutions and where there are raging debates about the correct answer. In fact, in some fields, you will find disagreement about whether there is any such thing as a correct answer to an important question. In any field, the open questions are the ones that faculty care most about, and thus they dominate their research agendas. These questions define the frontiers of knowledge in different disciplines. More importantly for your purposes, these will be the defining questions of your undergraduate experience. The reason that they will be so important for you is that they have no approved solution, and thus you can use your own critical faculties to figure out which answer in the relevant literature is best. If you are not satisfied with any of those, then you will be encouraged to come up with your own.

In short, I am saying that there is a powerful norm at this institution to *not* tell you what to think about important issues, but instead to let you reach your own conclusions. Our forte is teaching you how to think, not what to think.

This is not to deny that faculty will often believe that they have the approved solution to controversial questions. Many of us think we have the truth about important issues. I believe, for example, that I have correct answers to many of the key puzzles in international relations. Unfortunately, there are more than a few scholars who think my answers are misguided and that their alternative explanations are superior to mine. The key point for you, however, is that we will not attempt to impose our theories on you. We will certainly tell you what we think, and we will try to convince you that our perspectives are the correct ones, but we will also present you with the alternative views and then leave it up to you to decide what you think. Indeed, that is what critical thinking is all about.

Teaching Morality

Not only is there a powerful imperative at Chicago to stay away from teaching the truth, but the University also makes little effort to provide you with moral guidance. Indeed, it is a remarkably amoral institution. I would say the same thing, by the way, about all other major colleges and universities in this country.

To illustrate this point, I want to tell you a story about this chapel and the founding of the University of Chicago. As most of you know, John D. Rockefeller was the principal benefactor of this school when it was established at the end of the nineteenth century. He was the Bill Gates of his day, and he gave generously to this university. The building on campus he cared most about was this chapel, which bears his name. He cared so much about this chapel because he was deeply interested in promoting Christian values at Chicago. Regarding the construction of this chapel, Rockefeller explicitly stated, "As the spirit of religion should penetrate and control the university, so that building which represents religion ought to be the central and dominant feature of the university group. Thus it will be proclaimed that the University in its ideal is dominated by the spirit of religion, all its departments are inspired by religious feeling, and all its work is directed to the highest ends."

Those very words of John D. Rockefeller, in fact, are chiseled in the stone wall at the back of this chapel. On the same wall, there is another chiseled message. This one is from the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Fund, which provided money to cover the ministrations of this chapel over time. The inscription reads: "The purpose of this fund is to promote the religious idealism of the students of the university and of all those who come within its gates through the broadest and most liberal development of the spiritual forces centering in and radiating from this chapel."

Rockefeller was not some lone voice in the wilderness at the time. Indeed, William Rainey Harper, who was the first president of this University, and by almost all accounts did a splendid job, was a deeply religious man who believed that religion had an important role to play on

campus. He saw no conflict between morality and knowledge. Indeed, he instituted mandatory chapel at Chicago in 1897; all undergraduates were required to attend chapel services once a week. Moreover, Chicago was not an anomaly among top-flight colleges in the late nineteenth century. Religion also played a central role in campus life at schools like Yale and Stanford, just to name two.

The importance of religion at elite educational institutions like Chicago diminished greatly in the first decades of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, educational leaders were convinced that you could still study and teach morality without religion. They believed that the scientific method could be used to discover the correct moral precepts. Social scientists, in other words, could employ their tools to study ethics, and in the end, you would have a scientific morality. Social scientists would take the place of the clergy. In essence, proponents of this perspective believed that there was no conflict between critical thinking and the pursuit of knowledge on one hand, and the study of morality on the other hand.

Over the course of the twentieth century, the effort to develop a scientific morality failed almost completely. Today, elite universities operate on the belief that there is a clear separation between intellectual and moral purpose, and they pursue the former while largely ignoring the latter. There is no question that the University of Chicago makes hardly any effort to provide you with moral guidance. Moreover, I would bet that you will take few classes here at Chicago where you discuss ethics or morality in any detail, mainly because those kind of courses do not exist.

There is, however, one important exception to what I have just said about ethics. The University does explicitly condemn cheating, academic fraud, and plagiarism. Not only do virtually all the faculty believe that it is morally wrong to cheat or steal another person's ideas, but such behavior is also antithetical to the pursuit of truth, which we care so much about. After all, creating false data thwarts knowledge-building, while stealing ideas from another person is a direct violation of critical thinking, where the emphasis is on using your own faculties to analyze a problem. However, this qualification aside, I believe that Chicago is a fundamentally amoral institution.

I want to re-emphasize that Chicago is no different than other elite colleges on this score. The trends I described above cut across the board. I also want to emphasize that I am not saying that Chicago, or any of its peer competitors, are immoral institutions, but instead I am saying that they are essentially amoral. These schools are largely mum on ethical issues. Furthermore, I am not saying that individual faculty members don't have strong views on the subject. My point is that collectively we are silent on the issue of morality, and instead we concentrate on teaching you to think critically. Finally, I am not saying that moral questions are unimportant and that you should pay them little attention in the years ahead. On the contrary, individuals and the societies they live in constantly run up against troubling ethical questions, and they have no choice but to wrestle with them and attempt to find the right answers. However, for better or for worse, we do not provide much guidance in sorting out those issues. That burden falls squarely on your shoulders.

In describing the aims and non-aims of a Chicago education, I have probably left you with the impression that this university is filled with hard-nosed individuals--like me--who will demand much of you. That was certainly my intention. However, I would be remiss if I gave you the impression that a Chicago education is nothing but an endless grind of reading, writing, debating, and worrying. There will be lots of that, to be sure, but there will also be food fights, romance, movies, trips to blues clubs, intramural and varsity sports, idiotic pranks, and the other forms of youthful insanity that occur at every college campus in America. You are here to learn a great deal--and you will--but we expect you to have a lot of fun in the process. It really is okay to blow off a little steam now and then, and the fact is, you'll be a better student if you do.

The Benefits of a Chicago Education

Virtually all of you are interested in leading the good life after you graduate, although I am sure that there would not be much agreement among you on what comprises the good life. Regardless, I believe that a Chicago degree will go a long way towards helping each of you to lead the good life, however you define it.

To start, your degree will help you in important ways on the career front. A Chicago education not only increases the likelihood that you will find an interesting job, but it also makes it more likely that you will be successful in your chosen profession, which in part means that you are likely to make lots of money over the course of your lifetime. To be perfectly candid, a Chicago education is a meal ticket.

There is an abundance of evidence that college graduates make considerably more money than high school graduates, and that graduates of elite institutions like Chicago make more money than graduates of less distinguished institutions. Of course, one of the main reasons, perhaps the main reason, that your parents are willing to sacrifice to pay for your Chicago education is that they know full well that it markedly increases the prospects that you will be financially well-off in the years ahead. I might add that virtually all of the faculty I know at Chicago who have children think essentially the same way. They too want their children to go to the best schools so that they can achieve an upper-class lifestyle.

Of course, hardly anyone says in polite company that a Chicago degree is a meal ticket, because it seems crass to admit that one is getting a college education for material gain. However, I believe that is a wrongheaded way of thinking about the issue. It is terribly important for an individual's happiness to have an interesting job that motivates you to get out of bed every morning. After all, you are probably going to work for about fifty years. Most of you will be roughly twenty-two years old when you graduate, and most of you will probably work until you are into your late sixties or early seventies. So it is not unreasonable to assume that you will work for fifty years, give or take a few years. Over that long time span, you will spend half or more of your waking hours each day in the workplace, save for weekends, holidays, and vacations. That is a lot of time in the workplace. I can assure you from personal experience that there are few things worse than a bad job and few things more satisfying than a terrific job. So, the fact that a Chicago education enhances your chances of landing up in a job that you like is wonderful news.

Furthermore, the fact that a degree from here increases the prospects that you will make a lot of money, and maybe even become very rich, is also great news. I don't say that because I expect that you will use that money to lead a life of debauchery. On the contrary, I believe that you will soon become adults with significant responsibilities, and to meet those responsibilities, you will need lots of money. For example, most of you will marry, have children, and buy a house. Putting a roof over your head and sending Billy and Suzy to the University of Chicago will certainly cost you a lot of money when your time comes. So be prepared, which is another way of saying, make sure you have a lot of money in the bank, and the more of it you have the better.

Nevertheless, it is important to warn you that a Chicago degree does not guarantee that you will find happiness in your career or that you will be successful and make a lot of money. There are more than a few Chicago alumni who never really got out of the starting blocks after graduation. Furthermore, as you well know, there are many successful individuals who either never went to college, dropped out of college, or went to colleges not known for their academic excellence. The key point to keep in mind, however, is that a Chicago degree significantly increases the likelihood that you will be successful on the career front.

A Chicago education is likely to help you deal with the personal as well as the professional side of your life in the decades ahead. Virtually every person goes through a few major crises in his or her lifetime. Bad things happen to all of us. Some of you might be staggered by the sudden death of a parent, or worse than that, the loss of a child. Others of you might discover that you cannot have children, and find the news so disturbing that it precipitates a major personal crisis. Some of

you might lose all your money on a bad investment or even lose your job. And somewhere down the road, many of you will have mid-life crises, where you question what you have made of yourself in life and where you are headed in the remaining years. I could go on, but enough of you have read Ann Landers and Dear Abby, and know enough about adult life from watching your parents and their friends to understand what I am talking about.

It is worth noting that it is difficult to anticipate personal crises. Indeed, they often come out of the blue and catch you off guard. You find yourself completely unprepared for dealing with the trouble at hand. Hopefully, each of you will have little trouble in your lifetime, but don't bet on it. We live in a fast-moving and sometimes confusing world where there is plenty of opportunity for each of us to get blindsided by the fates.

It would be foolish to argue that a first-rate college education can provide you with solutions to the personal crises that you might face in your lifetime. It cannot. But it can help you make sense of these problems, help you figure out possible solutions, and provide you with some of the emotional sustenance that can help you get through tough times. The sort of critical thinking we encourage is especially necessary when you are facing a personal crisis, and having a broad array of intellectual resources can be a source of real comfort. Having faced tough challenges here, you will know that you can overcome obstacles that once looked daunting. Having been exposed to a variety of disciplines, you will have a better sense of the knowledge and expertise that might help. And with a better sense of your own strengths and weaknesses, you may also have a better idea when to tough things out alone and when to ask for help.

Again, I am not arguing that the education you will get here can inoculate you against all of life's troubles. But I do believe that a diverse and rigorous education will be a genuine asset when those troubles arise.

Finally, and not least importantly, there is something intrinsically exciting and wonderful about education. I cannot prove it, but I believe that human beings are hardwired to be intellectually curious. For most of us, there is something fascinating and thrilling about studying new subjects for the first time, or learning new ideas about old subjects. In my own case, I have become interested in recent years in the question of why the dinosaurs disappeared some sixty-five million years ago. I am especially intrigued by the argument that it was the result of a monster asteroid hitting the Yucatan Peninsula. According to this theory, so much dirt and debris was thrown into the atmosphere that hardly any sunlight could get through to plant life on earth, which effectively destroyed the dinosaurs' food supply, starving them to death. This topic has hardly anything to do with my work in political science, but I take great pleasure in reading about the different explanations for the dinosaurs' demise, and thinking about how to prove which one provides the best explanation.

I don't think I am unusual in this regard. In fact, I believe that the explosion of interest in adult education courses over the past decade has been fueled in good part by the basic intellectual curiosity of my fellow baby boomers. Many people feel that their lives are enriched by education and therefore they remain hungry for it long after they graduate from college. This is the reason, I would surmise, why so many older people have told you over the past few months how lucky you are to be going to Chicago, and how they would love to trade places with you.

What I am saying is that a Chicago education is much more than a means to a good paying job. It is an end in itself because it is exciting and gives us pleasure. Even if a college education mattered little for achieving success in the real world, I would bet that most of us would still go to college if we could, because we believe that we are better and happier people for having a college education, especially from a great center of learning like the University of Chicago.

In this regard, we are going to cultivate your innate intellectual curiosity in very subtle and powerful ways over the next four years, and we are also going to provide you with a broad intellectual foundation which you can build on for the rest of your life and gain great pleasure in the process. If that does not happen, you will never be able to say that you led the good life, because success on the career front by itself will not make you happy. You need intellectual stimulation along the way.

Conclusion

I would like to close by reiterating my opening comment that not only are we fortunate to have you here as students, but you are fortunate to be students at this great university. The Chicago system, as I have tried to convey, is primed to provide you with a college education as good as you can get anywhere. In short, you are staring a great opportunity in the face. Please, make the most of it.

University of Chicago

John J. Mearsheimer is the R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor in the Department of Political Science and the College at the University of Chicago.