

A We're very pleased to have as our guest today a professor of philosophy at a university in New York. We'll be talking about an article he recently wrote entitled "What Is the Point of College?" Professor, as you teach at a college, I assume you believe attending college is worthwhile.

B Absolutely. But my point is that there are two distinct visions of higher education. One focuses on how college can be useful - useful to its students by increasing their potential earning power on graduation, useful to employers, and useful to America by increasing its GDP. Followers of this vision believe in what I call "Utility U".

A And the second vision is very different?

B Yes, very much so. The other vision believes that the purpose of higher education is to get students ready for life as free men and women. Students should learn to think critically about the values that guide them and test out those ideas and ideals. This is what I call "Utopia U".

A The second vision reminds me of what John Stuart Mill called "experiments in living" - building students' souls as much as their skills. But can you define in more detail what Utility U and Utopia U are like?

B You'll find followers of both visions on the same campus. Let me give you two examples, they're both caricatures but they make the point. One is the performance studies major who collects signatures for petitions to reduce the use of fossil fuels, who puts up fliers for talks by someone like Naomi Klein, who questions whether the gender equality group she's part of is as inclusive as it should be.

A She's on the Utopia U side.

B Yes. And on the other side, again a caricature, is the engineering student who is never without her textbooks, who believes all discussions about identity politics are distractions.

A Identity politics refers to the idea that some social groups are oppressed?

B Yes, for example, that one's identity as a woman makes one peculiarly vulnerable to cultural imperialism.

A Listening to your two student portraits, it almost sounds as if they were living in two different kinds of society, one concerned with value, the other with values.

B Those are precisely the terms I'd use. Students who believe in the value model or the Utility U model consider themselves to be consumers who have needs the schools must meet. In establishments where this model prevails, you'll find mainly adjunct professors, who are hired when there's a need for them, and let go when there isn't, because this is considered cost-effective.

A And the values model?

B In the values or Utopia model, we find more tenured professors, that is, professors who are guaranteed employment until retirement. They're free to pursue research in an ethos of intellectual freedom which has helped make our best universities the powerful research centres they are and places that inspire students.

A Are there other differences?

B With the Utility U model, where students behave like consumers and efficiency is the goal, there must be tools for students to evaluate the service providers, in other words the teachers. When I was on a committee at a school that was looking at how students evaluated their courses, we found we could predict whether or not a student liked a course if that student answered yes to the question "Did the professor respect you?" Customers like to be loved. That's a very different criterion from whether or not the student changed through the class and what was the nature of that change. .

A Which might be among the criteria for evaluation at Utopia U, I imagine. Now, these jays students graduate from college burdened with an average debt of several tens of thousands of dollars. Parents and students sacrifice a lot to pay for tuition and other costs. Isn't it reasonable for some to question if they're getting a good return on their money?

B It all depends on how you define return. The students I've taught have learned that what you can do and who you can be are two different questions that you can't necessarily separate. And they've learned that college is a pretty good place to work out some answers to both, to adhere to both the Utility U and the Utopia U models.

**Outline** One vision of higher education, which can be called Utility U, focuses on how college can be useful to its students by increasing their potential earning power on graduation, useful to employers, and useful to America by increasing its GDP. The other vision, which can be called Utopia U, believes that the purpose of higher education is to get students ready for life as free men and women by helping them to think critically about the values that guide them and test them out. One vision is concerned with value, the other with values. Parents and students sacrifice a lot to pay for tuition and other costs and may well question if they are getting a good return on their money, but it all depends on how you define return.

### Questions

1 Which model reflects the kind of university education you would prefer? 2 What should universities do: keep costs down or provide students with the best possible education? 3 What are the most relevant criteria for evaluating higher education institutions? 4 Should universities look upon students as consumers?