

In Defence of the Ivory Tower

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Going to college for the sake of learning is like booking an international flight for the sake of the meals. Or so at least according to Jason Brennan and Phillip Magness, authors of *Cracks in the Ivory Tower* (p. 14).

Brennan and Magness's point is that going to university is expensive, both because it costs a lot and because you're forgoing gainful employment to attend. Students saddle themselves with the expense only because they believe having a degree will improve their economic prospects later on. (Brennan and Magness are skeptical that it's the knowledge and skills one acquires that are what improves one's prospects; they're skeptical because they doubt students actually learn all that much.)

They add that if learning is one's goal, one could do just as well watching lectures on YouTube. (In Will Hunting's words, "You dropped a hundred-fifty grand on an education you coulda got for a dollar-fifty in late charges at the public library.")

Brennan and Magness's analogy is a bit off. Going to college for the sake of learning is like taking an international flight for the sake of flying. Tidying up the analogy, though, exposes its weakness. People do fly for the sake of flying. Some people might well seek to fly internationally simply for the sake of enjoying a lengthy flight high up in the air in a huge, magnificent machine. (In – for her – a rare failure of imagination, philosopher G.E.M. Anscombe once doubted that anyone could value for its own sake a saucer of mud.)

People, even young people 19 or 20 years old, can and sometimes do value study for its own sake. They enjoy understanding things and they enjoy the process of coming to understand things. The process of coming to understand things includes reading, or watching YouTube videos – but it can also include participating in lectures and class discussions, performing experiments, constructing and administering surveys, going on field trips, talking with both peers and professors, and considering constructive criticism of one's work.

Attending university for the sake of learning is, for many who value study for its own sake, superior to using the public library just because the process of study includes discussion and other activities one cannot engage in on one's own. (Will Hunting's antagonist wasted \$149,999.50 because he hadn't used his Harvard opportunity properly, that is, to develop the ability to think for himself.)

People can study for the sake of study, and many do, and universities might provide a better occasion for engaging in study than any other institutions can. Nonetheless, going to university is expensive. Even those who love study for its own sake will want at the end of three or four years to have become valuable to employers.

Whether engaging in study for its own sake has the effect of making one attractive to employers depends on what employers want. It may, certainly, in some milieux, make one less attractive. Few, I suspect, though, would surrender their autonomy for a job.

Universities thrive when both students and professors value study for its own sake, but that can happen on a large scale only when employers and people generally value the effects study for its own sake has. Universities will not thrive by attempting to make graduates ready for the world of work, even if they succeed at that task. If, instead, they serve their mission to be places at which people gather to study for the sake of study, then they will at least have a chance of making a difference.