




2018

Thinking Like a Fox: Individual Choice and the Unique Role of Liberal Arts Colleges in Empowering America's Future Leaders

Christopher Tan

Ursinus College, chtan@ursinus.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.ursinus.edu/ethics_essay

 Part of the [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [Liberal Studies Commons](#)

Click here to let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Tan, Christopher, "Thinking Like a Fox: Individual Choice and the Unique Role of Liberal Arts Colleges in Empowering America's Future Leaders" (2018). *Richard T. Schellhase Essay Prize in Ethics*. 15.

https://digitalcommons.ursinus.edu/ethics_essay/15

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the U-Imagine Center for Integrative and Entrepreneurial Studies at Digital Commons @ Ursinus College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Richard T. Schellhase Essay Prize in Ethics by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Ursinus College. For more information, please contact aprock@ursinus.edu.



2018 RICHARD T. SCHELLHASE ETHICS ESSAY

Thinking Like a Fox: Individual Choice and the Unique Role of Liberal Arts Colleges
in Empowering America's Future Leaders



MARCH 2, 2018
CHRISTOPHER TAN
chtan@ursinus.edu

Introduction

The dilemma faced by Dean Kelly Smith on whether to allow Chris Williams to graduate from her college challenges the current model of higher education in the United States from an economic and normative perspective. When considering the situation that Dean Smith faces, this paper aims to demonstrate how Chris Williams should not be allowed to graduate without first passing the Senior Seminar after: (1) exploring the role of liberal arts colleges in encouraging agency among their students; (2) assessing the qualitative value of a college education in diversifying students' knowledge base and providing students with the resources and opportunities for success.

Normative Role of the Liberal Arts College in Promoting Agency: Consciousness is Freedom... and Action

A central question that arises from this situation is what the role of colleges is. This section will focus specifically on the role of liberal arts institutions in creating agency among its students. Specifically, to understand how freedom and choice interact, it is necessary to evaluate Jean Paul Sartre and his ontological view on consciousness and the notion of freedom.

Sartre was a French philosopher who made significant contributions to the philosophy of ontology – a branch of philosophy studying the nature of being and things that have existence. The very nature of existence and the relationship with nature and humanity are key themes explored by the liberal arts education. Ursinus is well-known for its Common Intellectual Experience, a first-year curriculum focusing on “the central questions of a liberal arts education”: What should matter to me? How should we live together? How can we understand the world? What will I do? A key tenet of Sartre’s philosophy claims how humans, as agents, possess infinite freedom that enables them to make authentic choices. This freedom originates from consciousness.

Sartre poses the idea that there are two types of consciousness: the for-itself and the in-itself. The for-itself exists independently and in a non-relational way, while the in-itself is characterized by its lack of identity with itself and defined by its relation to something else. The in-itself is what many would recognize as a traditionally held belief about consciousness. For Sartre, consciousness is an “activity of pure directedness towards the world... pure intentionality” (West 2017). Through promoting critical examination of the world, the liberal arts education also promotes students to live more intentionally. Being introspective and purposeful in action defines both the liberal arts and Sartre’s idea of the human consciousness. This is not to say that those who are not students of a liberal arts college do not possess consciousness. Institutions that encourage intellectual curiosity and multi-disciplinary learning elevate an individual’s level of curiosity. While other universities and higher education institutions do this, this author finds it is the liberal arts that actively promotes such an education.

Thus, to be human is to possess consciousness, and to possess consciousness is to possess freedom of action. Sartre expresses freedom as something to be understood as a characteristic of the nature of consciousness. In understanding that consciousness is a deliberate intentionality toward the world, Sartre presents his notion of freedom as amounting to making choices, and indeed not being able to avoid making choices (Onof). Choice, is the ultimate manifestation of freedom – meaningful decision making as consciousness has many implications, the foremost being the idea of humans being responsible for their behavior. Human agency is defined as the capacity for human beings to make choices and impose those choices on the world. Sartre's definition of freedom aligns closely with this idea. Through the emphasis on multi-disciplinary learning, introspective examination, and critical analysis, college education and the liberal arts aims to elevate students' consciousness, enhancing their ability to live deliberately, make informed, thoughtful choices and ultimately take ownership of their lives by accepting the responsibility of their choices.

The Value of a Liberal Arts Education: Thinking like Foxes and Optionality

It is true that college tuition continues to rise at unsustainable levels. When comparing increases in pricing levels, Forbes notes that since 1985, the overall consumer price index rose 115% while the college education inflation rate rose nearly 500% (Odland 2012). The prohibitively high costs of American colleges create steep barriers of entry, often at the expense of disadvantaged or lower income Americans. Widespread expectation of attending college has inflated student debt in America to the point where as of 2018, nearly 44.2 million Americans cumulatively possess a total of \$1.48 Trillion in US student loan debt (Student Loan Hero 2018). Despite such expensive costs, there is a pervasive expectation that students must attend college. Both expensive tuition costs and the predatory nature of the student loan industry pose grave systemic issues to American families. Chris Williams' struggles are sadly not unique, with many families and students forced to seek alternative forms of financing in the face of high college tuition. Considering the onerous financial burdens shouldered by Williams' family, it is understandable why he would seek to realize a return on his investment.

When assessing the value of college, perhaps one of the greatest assets of a college education, (and more specifically a *liberal arts* education) is the tools it imparts to its students. Specifically, this author would claim that a liberal arts education teaches students, to use a metaphor posed by Isaiah Berlin, to think like a fox. In his essay, Berlin explores a theme central to liberal arts institutions: 'the power of ideas'. Berlin references the Greek poet Archilochus's line: "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing" and characterizes thinkers and writers by this dichotomy. A fox draws upon a wide variety of experiences and disciplines and is an individual who perceives the world as nuanced, contradictory, and unable to be boiled down to single idea, whereas a hedgehog views the world through a single defining idea or principle (Berlin 1953). The liberal arts education creates value in teaching students to view the world like Berlin's

foxes. What is the goal of the liberal arts curriculum, if not to cultivate the self-knowledge necessary to live a thoughtful, independent, and responsible life?

For smaller liberal arts colleges, the main value proposition lies in fostering the essential skills of critical reading, careful interpretation, effective discussion, clear writing, and the use of evidence to construct a compelling argument. In a report published by PricewaterhouseCoopers, by 2021, 69 percent of U.S. business employers will prefer job candidates with data science and analytics skills. However, only 23 percent of graduates will be in possession of such skills, creating a widening skills gap in the business industry (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2017). The forecasted skills shortage highlights (1): a systemic issue with American colleges in preparing students with the adequate skills for entering the workforce, and (2): how students in the 21st Century are entering a rapidly changing workplace and economy that demands flexibility. Students of the liberal arts education are uniquely suited to operating in a rapidly changing environment and handling ambiguous and uncertain situations. By exposing students to multi-disciplinary curricula and ideas, students are better able to apply a diversified knowledge base in meaningful and dynamic ways to solve new challenges. This author thus asserts that it is the foxes of the 21st Century who will enjoy the most opportunities for prosperity in a rapidly industrializing and ever-advancing economy. It is the liberal arts institutions that create value in teaching students to think like foxes.

Ultimately, a college's obligation should be to provide the necessary tools and opportunities for success, be it in the form of instructional teaching, extracurricular opportunities, networking opportunities, etc. It is the student's right, but not obligation to take advantage of these opportunities and to benefit accordingly. Essentially, colleges introduce optionality for students. Optionality gives students the *ability to choose* and retain the main advantages while discarding any adverse outcomes. Students with a rich, multi-disciplinary education are better suited to using the resources around them to enact positive change and benefit. Take, for example, a networking fair. Students are not mandated to attend a job networking fair but are highly encouraged. If a student feels that their opportunity cost in attending is too great, they have the option of not attending. On the other hand, the student can choose to attend and possibly realize a job or internship opportunity. In either scenario, students retain their ability to choose whether to take advantage of the opportunity and suffer no adverse penalties either choice. It is this student agency and realization of agency that makes the liberal arts such a potent transformative force. The obligation of college then is and should continue to be to facilitate student success by making sure tools and resources are available to augment and enhance student opportunities, should they *choose* to take advantage of them.

Caveat Emptor: Evaluating Why Dean Kelly Smith Should Not Allow Chris Williams to Graduate

It is the opinion of the author that Dean Kelly Smith should not allow Chris Williams to graduate. At its core, the problem Dean Smith faces is that of an individual whom waited until the last minute

(two days before graduation) to seek help. Williams demonstrated a lack of responsibility and accountability by waiting until the semester already concluded to approach Dean Smith. Small liberal arts colleges empower and encourage students to take charge of their education by ensuring the necessary resources for success are at the disposal of the student. Assuming Dean Smith's small liberal arts college is akin to Ursinus College, numerous resources are available for academically or emotionally struggling students. The extent to which Williams' situation escalated demonstrates a profound failure on both the college and on Williams.

Regarding the college's failure, the small nature of the school coupled with Williams' frequent absences should have immediately been addressed by the professor. For small classes, particularly senior seminar classes, participation and attendance is mandatory, and it is shocking how neither the professor nor Williams' classmates reached out to him. The personal attention given to each student is a key distinguishing characteristic of small liberal arts colleges, where professors take on the role of mentoring their students, rather than just teaching them. Additionally, colleges send early warning indicators if students academic performance drops below a certain threshold. The possibility of failing the Senior Seminar should thus come as no surprise to Williams. Williams situation demonstrates a failure of the school in adequately supporting him or contacting him when considering the lack of adequate intervention by his classmates or professor.

However, the reason more of the burden of failure rests on Williams' shoulders is the concept of *Caveat Emptor*, or the idea that in an economic transaction, the purchaser is responsible for examining or judging a product considered for purchase. It is both a legal term, as well as a Latin idiom. Essentially, the buyer is responsible for knowing their rights and protecting themselves. One of the arguments Williams makes is that "he has already sacrificed much to pay for college, and he will continue to pay the bill for years in the future". It seems that Williams does not understand that his tuition is not a guarantee that he will receive his degree. The tuition students pay goes toward compensating professors for their time and college upkeep. Whether or not a student receives their degree is contingent on their academic performance. Just as simply attending class does not guarantee a passing grade, simply paying for college does not guarantee a degree. By attending Dean Smith's college, Williams consented to conforming to the rules set forth by the college, which includes passing the senior seminar.

As a consumer of a liberal arts education, Williams failed to adequately demonstrate *Caveat Emptor*. At its core, the concept of *Caveat Emptor* places the onus on the purchaser to be diligent, thoughtful, proactive, and savvy when considering a transaction. These adjectives also describe the ideal liberal arts student. Williams, while certainly legitimate in his duty to care for his family, demonstrated negligence and passivity instead of being proactive in conceiving a way to maintain his academic performance as well as familial obligations. Advisors, teachers, counselors, and tutors are readily available college resources that could have helped him, had Williams informed them

of his situation. In this context, it seems that Williams chose not to use the resources made available by the college.

While Dean Smith should not allow Williams to graduate, she also has the obligation to help provide Williams with the tools to work around this problem. The close-knit communities of small colleges allow for greater flexibility in accommodating students. Most jobs start toward the latter half of summer, which leaves Williams three months to make up the remaining credits required to graduate, assuming the spring semester ends in May. This leaves three months for Williams to obtain the necessary credits to graduate. Should Williams choose, Smith could offer an intensive summer course. While he would not walk with his class on graduation, Williams would satisfy the requirement of passing the class before the start of his job (assuming he passes the summer Senior Seminar course), and thus be eligible to receive his college diploma. The advantage of small, liberal arts colleges is the strong community and flexibility offered by the personalized and characteristically small population and close student-teacher relations. It is easier for smaller colleges to fulfill their obligation in providing resources and opportunities for its students.

Conclusion

Thus, this paper asserts that Dean Kelly Smith should deny Chris Williams' request to graduate despite having failed the senior seminar, but help Williams find an alternative solution. In this situation, Williams failed to utilize the resources made available to him by the college, instead opting to wait until the end of the semester and two days before graduation to seek any form of assistance. Previously this paper determined that the role of a college education is to allow students to act independently and freely, while the obligation of colleges is to ensure that resources and opportunities are readily available for student use. In synthesizing these claims, the liberal arts education ultimately teaches students how to critically think and independently act, while providing the resources necessary for overcoming challenges and solving problems through dynamic and multi-disciplinary solutions. Had Williams acted in the true spirit of a student of a liberal arts institution and took advantage of college academic support services, a more practical and accommodative solution could have been reached. Agency makes it so that it is individual's prerogative to exercise their freedom of choice in the world. Williams chose *not* to act in a way that would benefit him, and thus must accept the consequences of his choice.

Ultimately, the liberal arts education and colleges create dynamic and unique thinkers... foxes, whom according to Berlin, "lead lives, perform acts and entertain ideas that are centrifugal rather than centripetal; their thought is scattered or diffused, moving on many levels, seizing upon the essence of a vast variety of experiences and objects for what they are in themselves, without, consciously or unconsciously, seeking to fit them into, or exclude them from, any one unchanging, all-embracing, sometimes self-contradictory and incomplete, at times fanatical, unitary inner vision."

References

- Berlin, Isaiah. 1953. *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson. Accessed 2018.
http://www.blogs.hss.ed.ac.uk/crag/files/2016/06/the_hedgehog_and_the_fox-berlin.pdf.
- Hershbein, Brad, and Melissa Kearney. 2014. *Major Decisions: What Graduates Earn Over Their Lifetimes*. The Brookings Institute. September 29. Accessed 2018.
http://www.hamiltonproject.org/papers/major_decisions_what_graduates_earn_over_their_lifetimes/.
- Odland, Steven. 2012. *College Costs out of Control*. March 24. Accessed February 24, 2018.
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/steveodland/2012/03/24/college-costs-are-soaring/#2b223ec21f86>.
- Onof, Christian. n.d. *Jean Paul Sartre: Existentialism*. Accessed 2018.
- PricewaterhouseCoopers. 2017. *Investing in America's data science and analytics talent*. January. Accessed 2018. <https://www.pwc.com/us/dsa-skills>.
- Student Loan Hero. 2018. *A Look at the Shocking Student Loan Debt Statistics for 2018*. January 4. Accessed 2018.
- West, Stephen. 2017. "Episode#104... Satre and Camus pt. 5 - Consciousness is Freedom." *Philosophize This*. (June 1). Accessed 2018.