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# Our University: Marriage

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## Our University: Marriage

The relationship of a student to the university is a bit like a marriage. The idea of that relationship is shifting as George Bernard Shaw predicted it would. As with marriage, the university experience is becoming a contractual affiliation rather than a deep relationship.

*"The progressive modification of the marriage contract will be continued until it is no more onerous nor irrevocable than any ordinary commercial deed of partnership."*

George Bernard Shaw

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According to the Congressional Budget Office, in 1970 the average annual tuition at a state university was \$960. By 2000, it was \$11,917. Even in inflation adjusted dollars it was almost three times as expensive to go to school in 2000 as in 1970, and that trend has continued over the last decade. Expected value has skyrocketed but results have sagged.

Over the next few weeks, I would like to address what students should expect for this investment and how students and universities can work together to forge a relationship based on mutual accountability that allows them to maximize the value of the educational experience.

Though it seems counterintuitive, universities operate most effectively for students when faculty members treat students as sources of learning and exploration rather than mere recipients of their expertise. At powerful institutions, students pay more for a presumed better and more effective educational experience, but these payments are only a part of what institutions expect to gain from their students.

With the notable exception of Mick Jagger's pronouncement that, "you can't always get what you want", the popular culture embraced by the baby boom generation created a tradition where we believe we not only can, but deserve to have everything we want. The expectation of many students arriving at a university is that, if they pay the tuition, enroll in courses, and show up, that they will gain credit for a course with little, if any, effort.

Many students are able to string together enough courses where their professors agree with this sentiment that they accumulate enough class credit to claim a bachelor's degree. University marketing and sales efforts actually play on this misbegotten and ill-conceived view of what University is. From top-tier research universities to community colleges the mantra is always the same, "Come on in, the water's fine, get your degree and lead a happy life."

But this is not quite true.

The point of education is to grow, to change, and to develop. The university must challenge the student and the student must challenge the university, not to guarantee that students will find jobs once their tuition has been paid and their time served, but to build on their assets; their intelligence, their experience, and the values learned from mother and father, family, friends, and worship communities. (I have purposely not included primary and secondary education in this list. Too many primary and secondary school boards are hobbled in their desire to pursue excellence by their fear of giving offense.)

Today, students expect, and universities willingly oblige, that these low expectations are a perfectly acceptable situation. This has undermined the relationship between the student and the university. I believe that it's time to acknowledge that we each have things to learn, faculty and student alike, and that this is something to celebrate.

My father-in-law told every college age person he knew, "Get that piece of paper, nobody can take it away from you." He was right up to a point, but we have come to view the university experience as a piece of paper, a contract, like G.B. Shaw saw marriage becoming, "...*any ordinary commercial deed of partnership.*"

Shallowness has its price.

We've been denying students the opportunity to experience the satisfaction of true achievement by letting them slide by with work that's less than challenging. Engaging the mind, the heart, and the soul in the pursuit of knowledge creates more work for students and faculty, but it is the only way to create value from what we do.

In the coming weeks I will address choices regarding curriculum and what it should yield, the expectations students and faculty members should have for each other, and why these issues must be attended to. As costs increase, students and parents have a right to understand what can be gained by the pursuit of a bachelor's degree, and what they need to bring to the table to reach their goals.

The struggle for the best universities in America will be how to blend that pragmatism of immediate employability, with the joy and aspiration of a productive, challenging, vibrant, life of the mind.

That is our job.