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Our Universities: What am I, or Who am I?

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Our Universities: What am I, or Who am I?

Universities help students answer the question, **What am I?** Accountant, architect, engineer, teacher, butcher, baker or candlestick maker. But the equally important question, **Who am I?** is abandoned for the perceived efficiency and cultural clarity of the “what.” A value-free, valueless educational process is embraced.

*He gave me hope when hope was gone,
He gave me strength to carry on,
Who am I, I'm Jean Valjean,
Who am I, 24601.*

Jean Valjean

Most indicators of student propensity for success in college are deeply embedded. Before a student arrives on campus family life and experience begin shaping the “who.”

According to a May 2000 study in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*, “*Family Structure and Children's Success: A Comparison of Widowed and Divorced Single Mother Families*,” college students raised in single mother families whether fatherlessness was caused by death or divorce, attain lower educational levels, have weaker job prospects, and are not as happy as adults as students in a two-parent family.

As an advisor to countless undergraduate students for more than three decades, I found that students who consistently performed well and then hit a brick wall are often dogged by family turmoil. Too frequently divorce. Students confessed that their parents felt the divorce would have little impact because the students had left the house and were enrolled in college. Parent and family status affects how students perceive who they are. Forever.

Sira Park and Susan Holloway agree in a piece in the *Journal of Educational Research* this month. Parental influence is important and can be increased through effective parent-school relationships. While this study addressed high school success, the principles carry into college life as well. Students determine who they are based on family experience.

Additionally, students on every step of the learning ladder are in some measure defined by whom they run with. A forthcoming February 2013 entry in the *Educational Research Journal*, “*Along for the Ride: Best Friends' Resources and Adolescents' College Completion*” unsurprisingly suggests friends and peers affect student likelihood for success. In fact, a student who has a best friend whose mother is a college completer significantly increases his or her likelihood of college completion. The environmental effects are pervasive in addressing the “who.”

A BYU and Rice University investigation published in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* concluded that, “*churchgoing teens are 40% more likely to graduate from high school and 70% more likely to enroll in college.*” Students from Catholic, mainline

Protestant, and black Protestant congregations were twice as likely to finish high school and 80% more likely to enroll in college. Maybe they had a sound answer to the query, "Who am I?" Among forceful, faith-coupled influences were mentors in the lives of young men and women.

A January 2013 *Journal of Counseling and Development* piece called "*Parental Characteristics, Ecological Factors, and the Academic Achievement of African American Males*" suggests that a father's educational level and expectation are powerful predictors of African American male achievement. There are countless mitigating factors, but fathers who likely spend time engaged in discussions with their sons address the question, who am I?

A university might have many reactions to this loose collection of observations.

Possibly, faculty and staff believe students' self perceptions are fully established when they arrive to pick up their class schedule and football tickets. If that's the case, I am forty years overdue. Or, maybe such excursions are above the pay grade: struggles of identity are personal and off-limits. The worst case scenario is the ill-formed concept that the "who" and the "what" are unrelated and/or disconnected.

The unfortunate reality of contemporary college life is that, for reasons of convenience or disengagement, educators hesitatingly, if ever, tread on the ground where the answer to the question "Who am I" lies. If the expedition is shrouded in the gauze of political correctness, the essence of the question is lost. The outing becomes a fool's errand as commitment and passion are hidden in assumed institutional acceptability. Groupthink.

What a tragedy.

The question, "What am I?"... Engineer, historian, lawyer, is nearly meaningless devoid of the answer to the more probing, piercing, powerful question, "Who am I?" Absent the "who," the "what," carries little value: A smidgen of worth that can be attained by enrolling at the University of Phoenix. A \$10,000 online bachelor's degree is child's play for the "what": In fact, it's bling-bling.

The marketplace says buyer beware.

The educational experience cannot be segregated from the personality development process that helps create engaged citizens -- the Holy Grail of learning in a free society.

Jean Valjean understood it.