**Some Commentary on College Expectations**

**—one from a student, one from a prof.**

Directions: I don’t have formal homework questions for these, just consider as you read what both writers have to say about different ways to approach college.

* How did Amy Wu’s expectations of college clash with the reality she found, and how did that clash influence how she handled herself in college?
* How does Mark Edmundson’s analysis of students’ expectations—both those who see college as merely an “investment” in their future career success and those who see college as a banquet to feed their “hungry hearts”—relate to Amy Wu’s argument? Are these writers mostly in agreement or not?

**Scrimping on College Has Its Own Price** By AMY WU  
Published: March 03, 1996 in the *NY Times*

I AM one of a growing number of young people who are condensing their college education from four years to three. My decision to graduate a year early has much less to do with ambition, however, than with saving a good deal of money.

I decided to graduate a year early even before I entered college. Tuition at my school of choice, New York University, was about $16,000 my freshman year; yearly increases would far exceed the inflation rate, and room and board and books would add several thousand more. The financial aid office didn't help, so my father considered refinancing the mortgage and I planned to fit a job into my study schedule.

It was amid the worry over these bills that I realized the value of the 27 college credits I had earned in high school. What had been the amorphous byproduct of several honors classes became real currency. To graduate as a history major from the College of Arts and Sciences, I would need 128 credits, an average of 32 a year. With the credits from high school, I already had nearly a year's worth and could fairly easily make up the difference over three years. My father seemed almost triumphant when I told him that I would not need the fourth year. To celebrate, he took out a calculator instead of a champagne bottle. "That saves close to $28,000," he said.

The benefits of saving on the cost of higher education seemed plenty. My college classmates were envious when I told them that I'd be out sooner than they would and would therefore get a head start in the work force. One roommate, inspired by my situation, decided to take summer classes and graduate a semester early.

Then, as I met more students, I found that we were far from alone. As the months passed, I noticed that more of my classmates were introducing themselves not by the traditional "freshman" or "senior" labels but by how soon they were graduating. It was common to hear people describe themselves as "freshman-sophomores" or "semi-seniors." Those who have been around the university a long time tell me that this lingo didn't exist 20 years ago.

Instead of comparing grade-point averages or how much we had learned in a certain course, my college friends and I began to compare how many credits we had until graduation. I wasn't far into my second year -- as a sophomore-junior, that is -- when I marked graduation day with an "X" on my calendar.

The excitement I felt toward higher education diminished every time my father received the tuition bill, which by my third year had grown to more than $19,000. I felt almost guilty and apologetic for going to college.

In high school, my friends and I couldn't wait to go to college. We had the typically idealistic view of ivy-covered buildings, lifetime friendships, romantic dances. In the early summer before freshman year, we pored over course booklets as if they were J. Crew catalogues. We wanted to take everything, to learn everything. But the thrill faded under the weight of tuition payments that promised to go only higher as financing for higher education declined.

So my friends and I started college bent on cutting corners, and we became ingenious at scrimping and saving. We copied pages from library books instead of spending $500 a semester on our own texts. One classmate took advantage of the college bookstore's two-week refund policy. She would buy the books, read or copy them, then return them before the deadline. My roommate bought Cliff Notes instead of the real books because the Cliff Notes were cheaper and easier to comprehend. Many of us built up our credits with odd electives: I indulged in modern dance and Chinese cooking; others delved into the meaning of Elvis's music and the history of U.F.O.'s.

In the end, the high cost of higher education has created a generation whose determination to cut that cost has drastically altered the college experience. As more students finish their educations faster, spend more spare time on jobs to meet tuition bills or choose community colleges they can afford over prestigious universities they cannot, little time is left for the camaraderie of college, for learning free from other pressures, for making the transition to adulthood leisurely. These days, young people worry more about debt than the quality of intellectual debate on campus -- or how to survive rush week.

Sometimes a co-worker in the university press office, usually someone older than 30, will talk about the good old days at college, the lifelong friendships with roommates, the pleasant hours spent sprawled on the lawn reading Greek tragedies, the luxury of worrying more about the next term paper than the next bill payment. Today, for many of us, college has been reduced to a piece of paper without this rich collection of memories. And you can skip the final, traditionally memorable ceremony, too. Before receiving her diploma in December, a semester early, a friend observed, "We can even have it Fed-Exed to us if we want."

SLOWLY, I have come to see the tragedy in all this. I grew up in a household where education was coveted, where my father believed that "the more you learn, the more you earn." I have learned, but not all that I believe I might have.

The consequences of a generation that has scrimped on its college education may include a less qualified work force and a less knowledgeable adult population. But most unfortunate is the changed perception of higher education. For too many in my generation, higher education has become a bothersome stage of life that must be endured solely to satisfy the marketplace with that decorated piece of paper. It is now more a burden than a benefit, more a curse than something coveted.

The other day, my roommate and I had a long conversation about our frustrations with college. She asked me what I would see as my greatest triumph in college when I looked back 10 years from now. "Saving $28,000," I said. She laughed, until she realized I was serious.

<http://www.nytimes.com/1996/03/03/business/from-the-desk-of-amy-wu-scrimping-on-college-has-its-own-price.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>

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###### Opinion

# Education’s Hungry Hearts By MARK EDMUNDSON Published: March 31, 2012

--Batesville, Va.

“EVERYBODY’S got a hungry heart,” Bruce Springsteen sings. Really? Is that so? At the risk of offending the Boss, I want to register some doubts.

Granted my human sample is not large — but it’s not so small either. I’ve been teaching now for 35 years and in that time have had about 4,000 students pass my desk. I’m willing to testify: Not all students have hungry hearts. Some do, some don’t, and having a hungry heart (or not) is what makes all the difference for a young person seeking an education.

There’s been a lot of talk lately about who should go to college and who should not. And the terms that have guided this talk have mainly been economic. Is college a good investment? Does it pay for a guy who is probably going to become a car mechanic to spend $20,000 to $30,000 going to a junior college for a couple of years? (I’m including the cost of room and board here.) He’s probably going to leave with a pile of debt that will take him years to work off. What’s more, the current thinking goes, he didn’t need that associate degree to end up with his job in the garage. Something similar is true for the young person who is going to become a flight attendant, a home health care aide, a limo driver or a personal security guard. It’s not a good investment, we’re told. It’s not the right way to spend your dough.

The implication here is that paying for college is like putting money into a set of stocks or a mutual fund. It’s an *investment*. If the money spent on college doesn’t result in an actual cash advantage, then you’ve made a mistake. If you end up not needing a college degree to pursue your professional life at all, then school was more than a strategic mistake: it was a complete waste. They saw you coming. You got yourself taken.

All of this may be true, but it’s true only for those students who showed up at college without the attribute Bruce Springsteen sings about (and in his way celebrates): a hungry heart. For kids who aren’t curious, alive and hungry to learn, going to college and then moving on to a job they could have had anyway is no doubt ill advised. But that’s not everyone. There are plenty of young people out there who will end up in jobs that don’t *demand* college degrees: yet college is still right for them.

Thirty-five years of teaching has taught me this: The best students and the ones who get the most out of their educations are the ones who come to school with the most energy to learn. And — here’s an important corollary — those students are not always the most intellectually gifted. They’re not always the best prepared or the most cultured. Sometimes they think slowly. Sometimes they don’t write terribly well, at least at the start. What distinguishes them is that they take their lives seriously and they want to figure out how to live them better. These are the kids for whom one is bought and sold. These are the ones who make you smile when they walk into your office.

How do they get this way? Why is it that some young people, often young people who have not had remarkable advantages, are so alive? They’re an amazing pleasure to teach even if their subject-verb agreement isn’t always what it might be and they don’t know what iambic pentameter is. I can teach them those things. What’s way harder to teach — maybe it’s impossible — is the love for learning and the openness to experience that these students bring to the seminar table.

TOO many current students conform to the description that Lionel Trilling offered in a famous passage from an essay called “On the Teaching of Modern Literature.” Trilling had been teaching his students Kafka and Blake, Nietzsche and Freud. “I asked them to look into the Abyss,” Trilling writes, “and, both dutifully and gladly, they have looked into the Abyss, and the Abyss has greeted them with the grave courtesy of all objects of serious study, saying: ‘Interesting, am I not? And *exciting*, if you consider how deep I am and what dread beasts lie at my bottom. Have it well in mind that a knowledge of me contributes to your being whole, or well-rounded men.’ ”

And the hungry ones, what about them? Why are there some people who don’t see the Abyss of modern literature as a mere cultural acquisition or the equivalent of a theme park ride? Freud says that vital curiosity in adult life often comes from a very active curiosity about sexual matters during childhood. But this seems too much of a reduction, even for Freud. I sometimes think that what the truly hungry students have in common is pretty simple: Their parents loved them a lot and didn’t saddle them with gross expectations, spoken or unspoken. These students aren’t adventurous because they’re insecure and uncertain. It’s very much the opposite. Students willing to risk their beliefs and values in school do so because they have confident beliefs and values to risk.

I had a childhood friend named Paul Rizzo. Paul had a hungry heart. He wanted to see everything, know everything, read everything, go everywhere. He had what you might call an associative mind, and he surely didn’t cold-cock his SATs. But he did want to learn. He went to some colleges; he took some courses. But I don’t think he ever got the quality of education he deserved. That kind of schooling was too often reserved for kids who aced their boards and charmed their teachers and were elected presidents of the Climbers Club by unanimous acclaim.

Paul is still out there, driving a cab, writing fiction, reading what he can and trying to figure it all out. He sees himself as an Everyman type, but not without aspirations of an intellectual and even spiritual sort. Not long ago he used the phrase “Hamlet with a coffee to go” in a note to me and that describes Paul pretty well. The Boss would probably like him, maybe even enough to slip him into a song. Hungry hearts — smart or slow, rich or poor — still deserve a place in the class.

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[**http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/01/opinion/sunday/educations-hungry-hearts.html?\_r=0**](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/01/opinion/sunday/educations-hungry-hearts.html?_r=0)