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Professor Vose

English 103.16

Spring 2012

<div align="center">A Dream That's Still Worthwhile</div>

I grew up knowing that I would attend college. I also grew up reading stories that ended

with 'happily ever after'. The stories went the way of the Easter Bunny, but an image of college

persisted – retaining a kind of fairy tale glow. Now that I'm here, budgets are being cut, students

are protesting tuition hikes, and another class (most lugging debt) prepares to graduate – to face

the "B.A. bread line" (Penn). The question 'is college worth it?' pops up. As a freshman I can

afford to dream and explore a bit – student loans have not yet become overwhelming and we are

told the economy is recovering – but will the dream come true? Will I be able to find a job after

graduation? Will that job be more than a way to pay back debt? Will it be what I've dreamed of,

a meaningful position related to my field?

Today's college graduate is draped not only with a gown, but with a sense of panic.

Unemployment among recent liberal-arts graduates, as reported by New York Times' writer

Nathaniel Penn, was "9.4 percent,… higher than the national average, and student loan debt at an

average of nearly $25,000, had reached record levels". In fact, outstanding student loan debt, for

the first time, has surpassed the total amount of credit card debt and has "topped $1 trillion"

(Luhby). Even worse, as jobs open up, graduates are often not the first to be hired. There are

many older laid-off workers with experience competing for the same entry-level jobs.

This is *everyone's* problem. Parents are justifiably alarmed. Unable to find jobs,

graduates may not only return home to live with their parents again, but since loans are often co-

signed by parents, mom and dad may be pressured to put off retirement or tap a limited retirement fund. In some cases then, parents forced to hold onto positions longer prevent entry level employees from being promoted, resulting in very few positions for graduates. Student loan debt often means putting off major life decisions like purchasing a home – keeping the depressed market down. Debt from unpaid student loans raises deficits, hindering the recuperation of the economy. The problem of unemployment after college is not limited to the U.S. Employers in Britain also "put a higher premium on experience" and call for "an education system that prepares people for work" (Elliott). Hopefully, apprenticeships in Europe and internships here will introduce graduates to the workplace and give students crucial experience. This may help them get jobs right out of school because the employers know they have prior practice in the field.

Both of my parents attended college – both found jobs immediately. But the world has changed – college has changed. In high school, counselors were helpful in terms of getting into college, but they never fully explained what this experience would entail. They didn't mention how much harder you have to work in college to make it worthwhile. I can't help but feel that the fairytale my parents and high school counselors told us was a terribly out of date version. Studying hard in college and graduating are no longer enough to assure a job and continued success. Neither parents nor high school counselors explained the crucial importance of experience. Internships and field experience are no longer culminating exercises during senior year – but have become the focus of potential employers' interest and must be extensive, broad, and ongoing beginning early and continuing uninterrupted through graduation. I had been led to believe that finding what I loved while maintaining an outstanding GPA was my only job during my college years. I was wrong. On top of that we must learn to "do things that take trained

judgment and… some special skill… that employers value" (Davidson).  Is that rather vague, or is it just me?  It seems as if the experts describing this situation don't know exactly what is needed to succeed.  We're told that we are in pursuit of a B.A. that "no longer conveys intelligence and capability" (Davidson).  We're told that success has less to do with our "G.P.A.'s or [our] persistence" and everything to do with "family connections, fields of study, networking skills and luck" (Penn).  Oh, "charm, by the way, counts" (Davidson).  Where is *that* text?  Which classes will give us these things?  Where do I sign up?

Dr. Patricia Leavy, sociology professor, author, and researcher, suggests that college students must learn "critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, innovative thinking and a sense of [dealing with] a globalized world" (Leavy).  I agree that these skills are critical.  On most campuses, some classes are specifically categorized as 'critical thinking'.  More importantly, critical and innovative thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration are skills that are incorporated into most courses.  Today multicultural studies are not simply an exercise in tolerance, but develop effective ways of working with diversified groups in our 'globalized world'.  Solutions to our social, health, and environmental crises, Leavy insists, cannot be found in traditional "narrow disciplinary training".  I wholeheartedly endorse this point, and believe that universities must compel department heads to do some collaboration of their own.  Ideally, they should develop intentionally multidisciplinary courses as a way of expanding students' understanding of a variety of aspects of their field.  For example, an ESRM course might be taught in conjunction with a business course to explore how conservation programs impact the economy financially and how best to make such programs cost effective.  Clearly, it's essential that students understand that no career exists in isolation today.

Considering that New York Times writer Nathanial Penn describes last Spring's graduates as joining this "B.A. bread line" and paints a gloomy picture of "unemployed Phi Beta Kappa [grads] waiting by a silent phone", the question of whether college is worth it is understandable. Faced with these facts my dream has lost a bit of its shine. I've awakened to the truth that my degree is "no longer a guarantor of a [secure] middle-class existence", but only "a prerequisite for a decent salary" (Davidson). Without this prerequisite, however, the future is reduced, in most cases, to low skill jobs with minimum wages, few or no benefits, and no security. So, this degree I'm working hard for is worth something, it's simply not as valuable as it once was – by itself at least.

I admit that there are legitimate (and sometimes tempting) reasons to forgo college. I, however, cannot ignore the intrinsic value of education. The good news is that "workers with bachelor's degrees earn about $650,000 more over their lifetimes than their peers who only have high school diplomas" (Luhby). Despite the economic mess we've inherited I know that my generation is tenacious, creative, and flexible. I see it every day. We know that the world has changed drastically and that we are faced with countless domestic and global challenges. College will help equip us with the skills necessary to improve both our lives and the needs of society. When I assess my particular circumstances, I believe I am in a perfect situation to accomplish what's needed. At CI we are lucky enough to have access to career counseling (our own networking center), many professors who work in their fields in addition to teaching, and numerous internship opportunities – faculty and administration committed to helping us prepare to enter this new arena. Our undergraduate years are what we make of them. In order to succeed we must take on the additional responsibility of seeking out guidance and experience early in our

college careers.  It's possible to build a skill set that will look desirable to future employers and that will serve us well in the future.

     I haven't considered leaving college, but have decided to approach it in a much broader and more proactive way.  I *will* find what I love to do.  Besides doing well in classes, I'm willing to put effort into gathering as much experience as I can; building relationships with professors and taking seriously all advice they may have to share; and continuing to volunteer in my community.  In addition, as a biology major, I'm considering minors in what may seem like unrelated fields (such as economics or computer science) but which may, in reality, give me the abilities and perspective of a multidisciplinary approach.  There's no doubt that the transition from college to career is much more difficult today.  I believe, however, that my peers and I will use our talents and determination to create solutions to crises as well as good lives for ourselves.  All things considered, a degree *is* worth attaining – a degree enhanced with extensive experience, a personal reputation for persistence and hard work, and constructive relationships at school and in the community.

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<div align="center">Is a Picture Worth a Thousand Lives?</div>

I put the Hendersons' Christmas card on the bottom of the pile, afraid the news inside

would be bad.  Each year, Mrs. Henderson, a coworker of my moms who became a friend, sends

news of the family.  We always hesitate before opening it.  Her daughter, Megan, has struggled

with anorexia since high school and was hospitalized for it twice.  After college, Megan had

moved to Manhattan and two years ago, took a job with Harper's Bazaar.  Her family feared that

working anywhere in the fashion industry would increase the chances of relapse – and, as doctors

had warned, her heart might not survive severe relapse.  This year, luckily, the news was good –

Megan was fine – partly because she had found a support group that she attends regularly.

Megan was 16 when she developed this disorder and it turned her life and the lives of her loved

ones into a nightmare.  For eight years, her parents and doctors became the police – always

watching, always waiting for signs that she was not eating properly.  It's hard enough to imagine

a teenager dealing with the pain of anorexia; it is unimaginable to me that "children as young as

five are being treated in hospital[s] for severe anorexia" (Borland).  Anorexia is becoming an

increasingly dangerous health problem and is being seen in more children due, in large part, to

the expanding pressure from the media to have the 'perfect' body.  In order to slow the

increasing occurrence of this condition, communities must take steps to educate young people

about staying healthy to avoid eating disorders.  More importantly, perhaps, this trend may

reveal a more critical crisis.  Our culture's claims to value diversity and protect the welfare of

children seem highly hypocritical in light of the overwhelming prevalence of white, blonde, extremely thin models in advertising. This is, I believe, a fundamental failing of our society's priorities.

Anorexia is a complex disease in which sufferers severely limit the food they eat and often exercise too much, robbing their bodies of needed nutrients. According to the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA), the largest and most reputable organization in the U.S. dealing with eating disorders, "as many as 10 million [American] females and one million males are fighting … anorexia or bulimia" (National Eating Disorders Association). Eating disorders also include binge eating disorder and EDNOS (eating disorder not otherwise specified) and "have the highest fatality rate of any mental illness" (Heyworth 2). Anorexia, although exhibiting itself as a physical illness, is primarily a mental illness due to the fact that it stems from dissatisfaction with oneself, especially one's body, and is most often associated with anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorders, and perfectionism (Heyworth 4). Anorexia, in particular, can "lead to….an abnormally slow heart rate, and, in 10 percent of the cases, death" (Heyworth 2). Even more astounding to me is the data from the Agency of Health Research and Quality which shows that "the number of children under 12 who were hospitalized with eating disorders more than doubled between 1999 and 2006, the biggest increase for any age group" (Heyworth 2). These numbers don't include kids that fall just short of meeting the diagnostic criteria – "85% or less of what [their weight] should be" for their height (National Eating Disorders Association). Lynn Grefe, CEO of NEDA, points out that there are "children dieting or complaining about their bod[ies]", what she considers "'gateway' behaviors" to eating disorders (Heyworth 2). This trend is shocking and completely unacceptable.

Many factors play a part in the development of eating disorders, the main ones being genetics and cultural pressures (Beresin and Derenne). Although I agree that one cannot change their genetics, I must emphasize the fact that individuals with a predisposition to certain conditions like cancer or alcoholism, for example, may significantly lower their chances of developing the disease with attention to warning signs and by making healthy choices. There's reason to believe that this would apply to anorexia as well. The genetic component is something that is just recently being investigated.

Cultural pressures, however, although more complicated, are something that can be thoroughly understood and then challenged in order to fight the onset of eating disorders, especially in the most extremely vulnerable age group, children. There is nothing wrong with wanting to look one's best. It is the preoccupation with attaining an image that is perfect, yet false and unattainable, that is dangerous. It is important to understand that throughout our history "cultural ideals [have] always shaped the public's perception of the ideal female body type" (Beresin and Derenne). Most of us would agree, though, that today's culture is unprecedented in terms of its mass media – a huge, mighty, and insidious force through which we are "exposed to approximately 5,000 advertising messages per day" (National Eating Disorders Association). To make matters worse, "reality [TV] shows such as 'The Swan' and 'Dr. 90210'… feature plastic surgery" and extreme dieting (Beresin and Derenne). The fact that the process of 'fixing' women is a part of weekly entertainment makes it clear to me that this trend is spreading. Showing more (and more of) the 'perfect' female form is obviously selling products. Essentially, advertising takes advantage of women's insecurities and offers "products we should buy to fix… our numerous 'flaws'" ("Body Image: The Media Lies"). Children are bombarded with these shows and ads during critical developmental years, and turn these images

into major life goals.  Being taught that they are 'flawed' at a young age, I believe, will certainly

foster children's low self-esteem, and preclude development of more important goals.

Celebrated researcher and author in the field of media and body image, Jean Kilbourne,

has been studying and speaking out on the negative effects of media on women's self-image for

40 years.  One of the reasons that Kilbourne felt the need to come out with a fourth video is

because she saw models becoming "thinner and thinner" and saw more girls dying.  In the

disturbing but eye-opening video *Killing Us Softly 4*, Kilbourne insists that the effects of viewing

these unattainable bodies, these "double zero" sized women, and internalizing this ideal is

"cumulative" and "toxic" (Kilbourne and Jhally).  It's not surprising then, in my view, that

young girls begin to emulate these images in childhood and go to extreme measures to imitate

them earlier than ever.  Many people feel that they "are immune from [media's] effects", but

"this mistaken belief is one of the reasons it is so effective" ("Body Image: The Media Lies").  I

agree with this clever argument on the cunning aspect of the media.  Images of often painfully

thin women are everywhere and the messages about what's 'normal' are constantly being

absorbed.  It's impossible to deny that it's working – beauty (and one's perceived lack of it)

sells.  It's the only explanation for immense advertising revenues.  Authors of *Our Bodies,*

*Ourselves* remind us that "exposure to certain ideas can shape and distort our perceptions of

reality" ("Body Image: The Media Lies").  Anyone familiar with history and the effective use of

propaganda will agree.

Children are incredibly impressionable, and from the day they come home they begin

absorbing what goes on around them.  It's evident from observing "dress-up" play, that they

*model* these behaviors as well.  Each day, young girls are exposed to magazine, billboard, and

especially television ads that make clear society's overwhelming preference for thin, flawless

female bodies.  Such disproportionate information must be offset with messages from family and

community about more important values like good health, academic achievement, enjoyment of

the arts, and important personal qualities such as compassion, tolerance, and honesty.  Children

need good role models, but they won't find many in the media.  The pervasiveness of unrealistic

images tempts "girls… to compare themselves with 'size zero' models and celebrities when they

are still at primary school" (Borland).  These kids internalize the idea that there *is* a 'perfect'

look, and the sooner they achieve it, the better.  They don't yet understand that most photographs

in magazines "are not real because they have been airbrushed" (Borland).  Airbrushing has been

used for a relatively long time, nicely erasing blemishes and wrinkles.  Newer technology,

however, can create a composite face, using one model's eyes, another's nose, and then

stretching the neck and thickening the lips.  In reality, *no one* actually looks like the model in the

ad (Kilbourne and Jhally).  While flipping through a magazine or watching TV I don't think

anyone (not even adults who know airbrushing exists) tells themselves that the model they are

looking at isn't real.  Most of us think she is pretty and hope that they will look like (or date) her

one day.  The fact that children are being 'fed' this message and strive for something that is

physically impossible and dangerous is, in my opinion, extremely disturbing and abusive.

In addition to the media blitz, children also face peer pressure.  They are naturally

sensitive to classmates' attitudes about weight.  In fact, "overweight kids are at special risk,

because they may – out of pressure from parents or concerns about teasing" – more easily

develop an eating disorder (Heyworth 3).  With increasing concentration on childhood obesity in

the past decade, anorexic children may have been ignored.  Parents, teachers, and even

government funded programs have been "pushing for… less fat and sugar in kids' foods"

(Heyworth 3).  As positive as this seems at first glance, "the problem is [that] some kids are

interpreting the message to be… 'food is the enemy'" (Heyworth 3). Although I agree with cutting down on less nutritious food, I believe that kids must be allowed to eat all foods, even the 'bad' ones. Balance is the key.

In the face of the discouraging facts that I've presented so far, readers may feel that an "epidemic of food disorders" is inevitable (Brindley). I, however, believe that there are measures that we can, and must, take to stop this plague, especially in the younger, more impressionable population. Luckily, "studies have shown that children's eating behavior is influenced by the habits modeled by their parents" (Beresin and Derenne). After educating themselves, parents can be great role models by demonstrating and encouraging healthy eating and exercise. Families can eat dinner together, as research has shown that "kids who regularly dine with their family are less likely to develop an eating disorder" (Heyworth 7). They can also cook together, using a well-rounded variety of ingredients, including treats in moderation. These situations allow parents to model balanced eating and show kids that although food can be fun and delicious, their bodies should be respected by eating right. Parents and health professionals "should discourage dieting [and]… should try not to focus too much on appearance or weight" (Beresin and Derenne). In addition, parents must use their influence to help kids become critical viewers of media, develop a strong and positive sense of self based on qualities *not* tied to physical appearance, and to appreciate diversity.

The front line in countering media damage is, without doubt, the home. But, I think that in order to reinforce messages given there and to expand upon them, schools must become involved. The London School of Economics and Political Science has performed a study that "underlines the need for schools to teach children about self-esteem to help improve their sense of body image" (Brindley). I agree with this study and hope that these classes receive the

funding they deserve.  Kids need to be shown the discrepancy between what they see in ads and what is actually a healthy body type.  They need to understand that photographs in magazines and on TV are altered using airbrushing and newer technology to 'falsely' achieve the unachievable.  Investment in such programs would be costly, but I feel that it's justified when you consider that "Americans spend more than 40 billion dollars a year on dieting and diet-related products" (National Eating Disorders Association).  Unfortunately, the National Assembly's group on eating disorders in Wales "has been asking the Welsh Government for some years now – without success – for lessons on self-esteem to be an integral part of the main school curriculum" (Brindley).  Obviously, we will have to work hard here and abroad to gain government support for such programs.

Ultimately, this problem goes further than a physical illness.  It points to a deeper illness – one existing in the heart of our cultural value system.  As a society we have allowed the advertising industry to use seriously ill women as 'spokes models' for products.  We claim to value diversity and truth, and yet we have allowed our children to be told that appearance, specifically thin and beautiful, is the most important criteria for measuring happiness, success, and even worth.  That's *not* a belief I want handed down to children.  As a responsible society we are obliged to take a very close look at the values that define us.  For the sake of future generations we need to rethink the power that we have given to industries by supporting them with our money.

"It's like living with a drug addict," Mrs. Henderson once told my mother, "only her habit is celebrated by our society".

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