

Our language is missing lots of words for important things. The absence of words often warps debates. The current controversies over college are a good example.

If college is a necessary good that everyone in our society should have, then it is one thing. If it is a status granting experience necessarily restricted to the favored few, then it is another thing. Of course, we can have both, colleges for the many and colleges for the few.

If college is about getting a job, then it is one thing. If it is about enhancing a life, then it is another. Of course, we can have both, job training for the many and life enhancement for the few. Or even training for bad jobs for the many, training for good jobs for the few, and life enhancement for whoever is rich enough or poor enough not to care about a job as the purpose of life.

Here is a question, though: Even when one is well and truly “trained” for a job, is there some level of “schooling” that one should/could have that has nothing to do with jobs and money and success? If we added this level of “schooling” at the end of the job training level, would it just eventually become another level that everyone needed in order to get a job or get along in society, perhaps because we had devalued earlier levels of schooling/training because everyone now had them?

Let’s imagine a group of people coming together to explore the meanings of things, the meanings of life, society, humans, the natural world, and all they contain. Some are “professors” who passionately profess their views on the meanings of things so “students” can compare and contrast them and come up with their own passions. The basic rules are: evidence counts; things are not true just because you say them; and you have to be brave enough to change your mind even when it makes you uncomfortable.

Because exploring the meanings of things does not necessarily lead to anything useful or financially rewarding, it might end up open only to those with the resources to save them from “real work”. It would then give status and soon people would care more about the status than the thing.

If professors were paid more for espousing some things and not others, their views would be warped. It would no longer be passion, but rather profit, that fueled them.

It is clear that the “explore the meanings of things” enterprise cannot exist if profit or status is strongly at play in the enterprise. The enterprise to be valuable would have to be “worthless” in the sense of not being a matter of profit or status.

The ancient university avoided profit and status by being religious and claiming that Truth and Beauty were akin to God. People could be excused for doing worthless things because they were doing things of “higher worth”. Alas, exploring things led to an exploration of religion itself, an exploration that eventually scared the sponsors off.

Asking what Emily Dickinson meant will bring one no profit or status (anymore). Asking what the bible meant will bring one no profit or status, but perhaps some grief from others. Asking why anyone would ever think a corporation was a person will bring no profit or status, but perhaps some despair or maybe even activism. But the point of the enterprise is not what it will bring or not. The point is to enlarge the semantics of the human mind and of human society, something that does not necessarily bring happiness or joy. The point is a larger vocabulary. The enterprise is about “language”.

It bothers people—conservatives and liberals alike—that some activity could have no point other than some people are impassioned to do it because it feels good, right, and necessary. But lots of things in life have no point, most things in fact.

So, what should we call this “worthless enterprise”? It is not a college as we know it, certainly not now, if ever, though it was the dream of some. It is not something everyone wants or even believes could exist. The Internet has allowed such “worthless enterprises” to arise among impassioned groups going it on their own, though they don’t always follow the basic rules.

We have no name. I will call it a “semantacademy”, a place to follow some basic rules for finding and making meaning, little lights in the dark, and connections among things and people. It brings no profit or status to know the javelina breaking into my garage to get the bird seed is not a pig. I just think it would be wrong not to know. For me it shows respect for the javelina, though I adore pigs as well. Some people want to hunt the javelina, others to enjoy him with no name. I want to revel in his ancient New World presence, imaging him cavorting with the mega-fauna we once had. De gustibus...