

THE LOST PURPOSE OF LEARNING

by Joseph Clair, William Penn Honors College, George Fox University

In the autumn of AD 386, a thirty-two-year-old academic superstar named Aurelius Augustinus made a radical move: he resigned his position as imperial professor of rhetoric in Milan and retired early. The position, as prestigious as an endowed chair of government at Harvard today, represented the pinnacle of intellectual achievement in its time. Yet Augustine was disillusioned, tired of teaching “résumé virtues” to “excellent sheep.” He complained that liberal education in the later Roman Empire had become purposeless and disoriented, preoccupied with the ephemeral aims of career, wealth, and fame. Intellectual and spiritual vitality had vanished from lecture rooms and pupils alike. The soul of education was dead.

While Augustine’s conversion in the garden at Milan is justly famous, it’s easy to forget that his change of heart represented not merely a commitment to ascetic self-purification but also a bold rejection of the vacuity and soullessness of Roman education. “[I’m] finally freed from this gnawing need to seek advancement,” he sighed as he quietly departed. It signaled the beginning of a new phase in the history of liberal education.

Augustine was an educator, entrepreneur, and serial school founder. He abandoned the elite network of imperial educators at Milan to embark on new experiments in Christian learning, first in the lake country of Northern Italy, and later back home in Thagaste and Hippo, in his native North Africa. He saw that Christian revitalization and transformation of a decaying culture—indeed, of an entire civilization on the brink—required a new curriculum and new communities of learning. The schools he founded on the margins of the Roman world were more than retreats or resentful withdrawals—they sought to provide a wholly new intellectual itinerary that synthesized Christian thought with the riches of human wisdom expressed in ancient Greek and Roman letters. This synthesis must have seemed as improbable to his contemporaries as the reconciliation of science and religion or science and the humanities seems today.

In an age of fragmentation, specialization, and professionalization—much like our own—Augustine sought the integration and wholeness of a mind perfectly ordered around the transcendence and authority of

Joseph Clair is director of the William Penn Honors Program and associate dean for the liberal arts at George Fox University, and author of a forthcoming book on Augustine and education. This article was originally published in First Things at <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2017/09/the-lost-purpose-of-learning> and is reprinted by permission.

Christ. The liberal arts, he recognized, made pathways by which the mind journeys to God—who, as the ultimate source of unity, cohesion, and interconnection in everything that exists, is also the ultimate subject of inquiry. This interconnectedness makes liberal education properly moral, Augustine would later write, because it teaches the student to recognize her proper place in and responsibility to the permanent order of things, the hierarchy of being.

Augustine's experiments in school-founding were as much attempts to re-educate himself as to educate others. One of his earliest works, *On Order*, gives voice to his hunger for a coherent curriculum and authentic learning community. Although his vocation led him down the path of service to the Church, these early efforts as an educator forever changed him and the course of history. His masterworks—*On Christian Teaching*, *The Confessions*, *The Trinity*, and *The City of God*—became bulwarks of Christian education in the West, and eventually served as the intellectual foundation for the first universities at Paris, Oxford, and Cambridge in the later Middle Ages.

The careerist-turned-saint had deserted the proverbial Ivy League and its utilitarian ethos for something idealistically moralizing and unabashedly spiritual—and then did it one better.

With the academic year in full swing on American university campuses—and bipartisan discontent over higher education's sorry state now stronger and louder than ever—it's worth asking what we can learn from Augustine's example.

We are right to bemoan in Augustinian fashion the fact that higher education today, as widely reported, is thoroughly and singularly oriented toward economic goods. The very idea of learning for a moral or spiritual purpose appears bizarre—or worse, quaint. But it's also worth asking what happens when even the economic value of college is cast into doubt.

One can easily imagine Augustine applauding Silicon Valley tycoon Peter Thiel and his audacious Fellowship that seeks to lure the best and brightest away from college with the promise of more direct routes to success: \$100,000 and a top-flight professional support network. Without presenting a genuine educational alternative, the existence of Thiel's program does show that the emperor has no clothes. Having lost its vision of integration and moral formation, the American utiliversity may be driven out of business by Thiel-like entrepreneurs who know that the fast track to a million bucks needn't pass through academia. An Airbnb or Uber-style revolution, for instance, could easily and instantaneously outmode our clunky information-delivery model of education.

The four-year journey to college is a cultural tradition deeply embedded in the American psyche. But has it become an empty routine? A mere going through the motions? The first crisp autumn days, the cheer of the football stands, flirting with a classmate: it's all fun and games, good for TV and film, but hard on parents' pocket books and increasingly out of step with our economy. Tuition costs are soaring. Student debt is spiking. The economy is dragging because of it. What's the point of taking loans for courses that are available for free online?

A recent Pew survey reveals that 58 percent of Republicans (or Republican-leaning people) believe colleges and universities are actually having a negative effect on the way things are going in our country (with 36 percent saying they have a positive impact). That's a dramatic shift from two years ago, when those two numbers were reversed. Although partially attributable to conservatives' perceptions or misperceptions of progressivist campus values, the change also highlights a palpable negative sentiment toward higher education across the country. As one prospective parent recently told me on a visit to our campus: "Listen, I'm not going to pay for my kid to go and find himself for four years."

The weakest links in college life today are the same as those in Augustine's day. We lack a sense of the integral nature of knowledge (the work of "general education" or a "core curriculum") and the moral and spiritual formation that rightly accompany intellectual labor and professional preparation. Though these two elements—integration and formation—are the most costly parts of college life, they are also the only reasons not to reduce the spendy, four-year residential model to a two-year, web-based, vocation-focused, trade-school model of higher education. If a college or university can't coherently articulate the integrated nature of its core curriculum—if it can't explain how all the disciplines relate to one another, or what role is played by moral and spiritual formation alongside the free enterprise of inquiry—then we should think twice about working for, attending, or sending students there.

Augustine's conversion and early retirement took place in a moment of epoch-making political, religious, and moral upheaval. The end of the Empire—and the dawn of a new Christian society—were just around the

corner. The benefit of this historical crisis for Augustine was that the veneer of the status quo fell away.

All cultures are eventually forced to identify what they care about and pass it down to the next generation through education. Colleges are one of the rare types of institutions in our own time that have histories longer than our nation's. Thus, educators must think as much about how to prepare students for today's workforce as for the next phase of civilization. Colleges, and the students educated in them, are time capsules by which we send noble—or ignoble—ideas and virtues into the future. To foreshorten higher education's range of vision to the immediate economic horizon is to imperil the next generation's spiritual survival.

I'm a professor and administrator. So it must be said that I'm sawing off my own branch. But I am convinced that higher education must be revitalized and transformed in a way that justifies its eternal value and better prepares students for an uncertain future. If anybody—administrator, teacher, or student—points the way, I will be the first to cut class.



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