

A Project Manager's View of the Value and the Costs of Higher Education

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Ask any parent of a university student about the spiraling costs of higher education – *be ready to duck for cover*. College costs seem out of control while the value of a college degree seems increasingly dubious. My perspective on this topic may come across as biased and self-serving. However, my longtime association with higher education [tenured professor, adjunct instructor, and employee] is tempered by my lifelong career in project management.

In this article, I will offer my Project Manager view of the value and the costs of Higher Education. My commentary follows an adage of Henry Ford II [aka Hank the Deuce] – *no apologies, no excuses*.

Higher Education is a Bastion of PMIs

During my 40 years as a member of our professional society, I have come to learn that the acronym *PMI* has additional *humorous* meanings other than *Project Management Institute*. For some PMI Global Operations Center staff support, *PMI* relates to their daily work life – *perpetual meeting incubator*. For certain members of the Project Management Institute, *PMI* also means *put money in*.

Both alternate *PMI* meanings are rife in academia.

Perpetual Meeting Incubator. Countless meetings [where the minutes are taken, and the hours are lost] are a continuous staple in the ivy-covered halls. Seemingly meetings upon meetings to satisfy the shared governance desires and dictates of government oversight, faculty contracts, alumni and benefactors' involvement, student engagement, and the monitoring and control of administrators by trustees/regents. In academia, a *just do it* approach will get one fired. The University management style of "management by committee, decision by default" does not jive well with the Project Manager's pragmatic ethos of "make it happen." Meetings are essential to gain consensus in both venues; the PM just gets there faster.

Put Money In. The unfunded mandates and continual dictates by the Federal, State, and local governments have severe financial consequences to the bottom line of any University. In addition, politicians bent on scoring points with their constituents regularly defund higher education. *There is no such thing as a free lunch*. State University budgets must be balanced; any overspending is deducted from the following year's State appropriation. The trustees of private institutions take a similarly heavy hand. Conversely, the Project Manager's approach to balancing project scope requirements with project priorities, and then budgeting appropriately, requires hard financial cost decisions. The PM decides what "out of scope" items to cut (i.e., controlling scope creep) by performing a costs-benefits analysis [CBA]. The Project Manager has the flexibility to determine *how* to achieve the overall project requirements if they stay within the cost/time/quality budget parameters. The bottom line, in both cases, rules.

In the next section, I offer my reflections on the bottom line of my BS in Engineering education.

***"Nothing is a waste of time if you use the experience wisely."* Auguste Rodin**

Many years ago, when I was an undergrad engineering student at Lawrence Tech, I was harassed regularly by naysayers who claimed my higher education was a waste of time and money. "You will never use any of that bunk in the real world," they forbode. Quite bothersome and emotionally degrading at the time. Yet I prevailed. 2 ½ years after graduation, while flying over the Pacific Ocean on my Saudi ARAMCO annual home leave, I performed a different type of cost-benefit analysis on my Lawrence Tech degree. First, I made a list of all the courses I took as a student. Then, I put a checkmark next to those courses that a nugget of knowledge/wisdom, which I gained from the course, was applicable to my professional work and life experiences with Saudi ARAMCO. What percentage of my coursework was checked? ***100%!*** Amazingly relevant were my classes in Political Science and Science Fiction Classics to my living in a company town in a developing Third World Nation. For me, my BS degree in Construction Engineering was essential. First, my engineering degree was required to get the project management position with Saudi ARAMCO. And then, the proper preparation to perform as a professional. *Try the checklist test on your degree*.

The next section addresses the purpose of education – the *why*.

The Three Ss of Education

The purpose of education can be summarized simply in these three Ss: *Self*, *Skills*, and *Society*. A quick discussion of each S.

Self. A formal university education provides the group learning environment enabling a college student to learn and develop self-knowledge, life skills, and social skills, which will help optimize one's life chances and quality of life. The bestselling book *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* by Robert Fulghum says it well in the title. For the Project Manager, "play fair" and "clean up your own mess" are especially appropriate. (The complete kindergarten learning list follows this article.)

Skills. A critical objective of earning a college degree is to obtain the knowledge, understanding, and professional skills to enable future employment and economic well-being. The skills list includes:

- People skills: Communication (both oral and written), Cooperation, and Collaboration
- Process skills: Critical thinking and problem solving, Creativity, and the use of Computational, Information, and Communication [CIC] technologies
- Purpose skills: Career planning and lifelong learning

[NB: The 7-Cs are organized into the 3-Ps. This is another one of many Dr. Bill-isms.]

Society. Thomas Jefferson, in drafting the Constitution of the United States, understood that an educated citizenry [electorate and constituency] is essential for a democratic form of government to function. Ironic that as American citizens become more highly educated, the USA becomes less tolerant and more dysfunctional as a country. (Maybe it's time for Project Managers to become more active as intelligent, informed, and concerned citizens.)

The *Skills* portion of education is likely of most interest to business and industry, although the *Self* and *Society* goals are of equal importance in developing PM professionals. The next section addresses the value proposition of higher education.

The ROI of Higher Education

Education is an investment in one's future. Dr. Leland Lahr, one of my very wise LIT professors, put it well. *The value of Education is like chopping wood. The more time spent sharpening the axe makes the job ahead easier.* The savvy Project Manager, who spends most of their time planning with their team, understands the value of planning to prepare for the future. Should the preparation for a career in project management be solely formal education, just from the "school of hard knocks" [experience], or a combination of the two? Blended learning of *Self*, *Skills*, and *Society* is best.

A mastery of Emotional Intelligence [EI], an essential quality for the project management careerist, starts with an understanding and control of oneself. Self-development happens best when one is challenged in unfamiliar surroundings. A university education affords a controlled setting for this self-development, allowing practice without fatal consequences.

The 7-C's Skills, listed above, are essential for the project management apprentice to master. These 21st-century skills are best learned through Project Based Learning [PBL], a constructivist pedagogy (that is, hands-on learning). PBL opportunities abound in the college setting – within many courses and in learning beyond the classroom.

The PMI Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct requires "all practitioners in the global project management community [to] make decisions and take actions based on the best interests of society, public safety, and the environment" [2.2.1]. This aspirational standard demands that we are well schooled in our societal responsibilities, in which a college education offers a depth of understanding.

Although the applicability [value] of a college education to our profession of project management is established, the affordability [cost] side requires scrutiny to complete the return on investment [ROI] analysis of higher education. As project managers, we understand the consequences of rising costs without adding equal value. The discipline of project management requires the practitioner to be disciplined in their practice. Institutions of higher education collectively will benefit from implementing the discipline of project management, especially in controlling costs. A new frontier for PMI to consider.

In conclusion, as with any project endeavor, the proper balancing of costs versus benefits is essential, ensuring the costs [affordability] are in sync with the value [applicability].

As always, your questions, comments and criticisms are welcome. Feel free to contact me in care of email:

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Best regards,

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Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*

These are the things I learned in Kindergarten

1. Share everything.
2. Play fair.
3. Don't hit people.
4. Put things back where you found them.
5. CLEAN UP YOUR OWN MESS.
6. Don't take things that aren't yours.
7. Say you're SORRY when you HURT somebody.
8. Wash your hands before you eat.
9. Flush.
10. Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.
11. Live a balanced life - learn some and drink some and draw some and paint some and sing and dance and play and work every day some.
12. Take a nap every afternoon.
13. When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.
14. Be aware of wonder. Remember the little seed in the Styrofoam cup: The roots go down and the plant goes up and nobody really knows how or why, but we are all like that.
15. Goldfish and hamster and white mice and even the little seed in the Styrofoam cup - they all die. So do we.
16. And then remember the Dick-and-Jane books and the first word you learned - the biggest word of all - LOOK."