

Minutes

of the first meeting of the Concordia Forum
at Bowdoin College, Massachusetts Hall
on Friday, March 1st
at Seven PM

Attending: Ben, Lorenzo, Bruce, Tess, Jack, Rob, Dan, Briana, Paige, Elizabeth, Beth, Tim, Kate, Mollie, Sam, Lauren, Nikki, your correspondent, Andrew

Presiding: Ben

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After introductions and words of welcome from Andrew and Mollie, Ben begins the discussion with a question: does college contribute to moral education?

Follow up question: what changes do we or have we noticed in college life?

Bruce: the role of athletics has expanded considerably, in terms of time, energy, and importance

Discussion about competition for time, espeically students' time

Beth: (fighting bravely through a cold) Colleges like this one present a 'lifestyle,' which includes things like athletics, rather than a mission or purpose

Do sports teach values? Some think so—teamwork, etc.

And health—another college, which memebers of your correspondent's family have attended, was named as en example of an unhealthy anti-sport culture, where students were "weird and skinny."

The team is a community, it offers support and identity—isn't that a good thing?

But then again, many sports have a high barrier of entry, with the effect that admitting more athletes becomes a way of channeling higher-income students to the college

Nikki: (pivoting away from sports) Bowdoin could do more to tell us what this place is about, to be explicit about what we are supposed to get out of it

Discussion about the character or personality of different colleges, the culture shaped by the people there—who are the framers of a college's culture? Does it emerge by chance, or does it come from the top down?

Mollie (introducing what will be the main topic of the evening):
Bowdoin is often very career oriented. Perhaps it should be less so?

Kate: Do we assume that morality and academics are linked? Is a good student a good person? Do the goals of the curriculum include moral development?

Mollie: Maybe students should not graduate with "holes" in their education. Perhaps more requirements in curriculum? This could create more of a unified culture and identity for the college if we are in fact learning something in common

Your correspondent, who doesn't like disciplinary divisions at all, loves this thought, and is in favor of robust core curricula.

The topic of career planning came up, and dissatisfaction with that office was widespread.

But then again, the college needs capital, so there is a structural tradeoff in channeling students into high-earning careers

But what about the common good! That is stated but rarely felt or 'lived' on a daily basis

Paige: the tension between STEM fields and humanities fields is visible to students.

A struggle for the soul of the college's culture

Bruce: we know more than we used to, so specialization is appropriate. We can't romanticize the jacks of all trades from days gone by. Besides, talks are open, but people don't attend talks in other disciplines very much.

A call is made to zoom the discussion out

Your correspondent suggests, as a thought experiment, which he only happens to endorse, the abolition of grades as a way of improving the academic culture, fostering curiosity, limiting anxiety, etc.

Sam: That would be indulgent, since grades are necessary as a signal to employers

The tension between these last two thoughts raises a big question: *are material and intellectual goals at odds with one another?*

Is (public) education a public good?

A fancy college such as this one places students on good career tracks largely through networking. Can that be disentangled from other things people learn here? If prestige and networks really are that important, then is education like this even worth it?

Tim: A "hamster wheel" of anxiety defines the experience of this place from a job-seeking point of view. With it, there is a pressure to specialize.

A romantic ideal of exploration becomes only an "intellectual Disneyland," not the real value of education

The economy and the makeup of the student body heightens competition and pressure, which some (Some spoke for this point of view) consider legitimate

Tess: Academics are tempted to just recreate themselves in their students, as though academia were the only career track. There are more things to do with training in a given field than you probably think.

Praise of circuitous life paths, the exploratory experience of a residential college, and education as an end were sung

Sam: but Bowdoin must still face the realities of the market

The example of the "soul-stirring" encounter with art was discussed—is education the path to a more soul-stirred life? Is that subjective experience a way to measure education's value?

With these questions in the air, the company adjourned to the brewery, and your correspondent discreetly put his notepad away, as the hops, barley, and ideas flowed on.

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