

## ESSAY

### THE EDUCATED PERSON<sup>1</sup>

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My interest in the educated person question goes back a long way. Just how far back was confirmed the other day when I found a tattered, twenty-year-old file containing my diploma, my transcripts and a list of graduation requirements. These documents took me back to a hot June day in 1964. The day I graduated from college...

At 11 a.m., several thousand black-cloaked comrades and I gathered outside the football stadium for the graduation ceremony. Soon we trooped into the stadium and spread over row upon row of folding chairs parked between the 20- and 50-yard lines. Once seated, I started daydreaming, imagining myself quarterbacking a dazzling, length-of-the-field touchdown drive. Unfortunately, the droning of innumerable deans and dignitaries bogged down my football fantasy well short of the goal line.

Frustrated in my make-believe athletic glory, I tried to forget the sweaty heat and tried even harder to focus on the major commencement speaker. Only his final words caught my attention.

He spoke earnestly about the need for students to reflect on the question: "What is an educated person?" He said that answers to that question should be the preface, substance, and measure of an undergraduate education. For those of us planning to continue on in academic life as college faculty, the speaker emphasized that the educated person question should be at the center of our professional lives.

"What the hell is he babbling about," asked one of my friends, still suffering the after effects of the previous night's party. I laughed and said, "I have absolutely no idea."

But that wasn't quite true. I understood much of what the commencement speaker had said, and I took him seriously at that moment because I planned a career in college teaching.

I didn't, however, remember that the university had ever discussed the educated person question with me or any of my classmates. And it seemed odd that the last formal activity of undergraduate study would be the first mention of this consequential question. If, as the commencement speaker had so strongly suggested, the question had such importance for higher education, my classmates and I should have discussed it at some point before we graduated. But we never had.

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<sup>1</sup> (From: Steltenpohl, Snipton & Villines. Orientation to College: A Reader On Becoming an Educated Person). Fair Use Reprint

We had completed our college education without discussing the educated person question, without questioning the rationale behind graduation requirements, without any process by which to plan out four years of undergraduate study, and without any standards we understood by which to judge our educational progress. We just drifted from one classroom to another, followed the required paths toward graduation, and never took responsibility for making our own academic decisions. Speaking for myself, only by chance did I acquire some of the essential perspectives I identify now, many years after the fact, as essential for becoming an educated person.

Of course, the transcript of my college education -- a curious jumble of numbers, course abbreviations, and A, B and C's -- gives the impression that I gained the depth and breadth of learning so honored by college presidents in their graduation speeches and fund-raising pitches. But I know better. That transcript merely charts my stumbling, unwitting progress toward graduation.

I know today that I didn't master a number of important subjects and skills during my undergraduate years. I certainly had but little exposure to interdisciplinary thinking and teaching. I didn't appreciate the values and abilities that survive the memory of specific course content and give college study its strongest hold on life. And finally, I couldn't explain to anyone with any measure of confidence and sophistication exactly why my college education gave me any special claim to being an educated person.

What if I had confronted the educated person question as an undergraduate student? Why would it have made a difference?

The process of posing the educated person question and searching for legitimate answers to it would have been invaluable for me as I started and as I progressed through college. Digging out the answers would have made it possible for me to plan my college study with some larger vision -- even within the structured system of graduation requirements I faced. I could have understood better why certain subjects had to be included in my education. I could have looked for the understandings and skills in each learning experience that would serve me in study across the curriculum and in the contexts of life outside the college classroom. I could have tried a wider range of study with my elective choices rather than building a specialized major and minor. I could have seen more clearly the relationship between various disciplines and how they can strengthen and enliven each other. I could have judged the value of my overall college education as well as the academic reasoning that stood behind it. Most important, I could have known that becoming an educated person is part of a lifelong process of learning, study, reflection, experience and action -- not just four years of classes.

## Activities and questions for Reflection on essay "The Educated Person"

1. What is your conception of an educated person as begin your current studies? To provide information to help you begin defining an educated person, select several people you know, admire, and consider to be educated and ask them how they would describe an educated person.

After reflecting on your discussions and your own ideas, write several paragraphs describing your ideal educated person. You may wish to us someone you know as a model or you may wish to describe an ideal combining characteristics you think are important.

2. Do you see any gaps between your present knowledge and the qualities of the educated person you described? What are they?