Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore or, What’s the Value of a Residential College Experience?¹

A classic residential college experience is a beloved, nostalgia-drenched, coming-of-age ritual in America...as well as an oft-parodied interlude of friendships, faculty mentors, football weekends, fraternity parties, and finding oneself (and maybe even a mate). Cue in the background music—“Bright College Years,” of course!—as the eponymous hero of Stover at Yale rhapsodizes about his joy [quote] “when he had swung amid the torches and the cheers past the magic battlements of the college, one in the class...consecrated to one another, to four years of mutual understanding that would form an imperishable bond wherever on the face of the globe they should later scatter.”²

It is undeniable that millions of high school students and their parents still dream of this experience. But as online education becomes widespread—and especially as pressure to award competency-based degrees grows—we must recognize that these new models call into question the significance of a residential college. They compel us to consider how we can rigorously counter claims of inefficiency or obsolescence.

This afternoon, as we inaugurate the new president of one of America’s finest residential colleges, I’d like to share some still-crystallizing thoughts about the value of this particular flavor of education. Why is the residential college so cherished? Should it be? And—even if it is especially worthwhile—how much of this wonderful thing is enough? Are there diminishing marginal returns from a residential college experience...and just how fast do they diminish?

I’ll begin by discussing...

Why this is a successful educational model

Justifications of why to go to college fall into three broad categories...and each of these desirable outcomes, in my view, is enhanced by a residential college experience.

¹ With apologies to the 1974 film “Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore” by director Martin Scorsese and writer Robert Getchell.
First, students go to college to

**Acquire (and burnish) essential practical skills**

Beyond specific disciplinary knowledge needed for jobs or admission to graduate or professional school, there are life-enhancing and career-enhancing skills and talents best developed in a residential setting. For instance:

**How to encounter, navigate—and appreciate—diversity**

In our increasingly global economy, one major attraction of a residential college is the sustained opportunity it provides to engage deeply with—and to learn from—other students, especially those who come from very different backgrounds or hold very different values. This growth follows from coursework that confronts cultural distinctions, but also from more mundane experiences like roommates who are forced to negotiate sleeping and study habits and conflicting standards of cleanliness.

At residential colleges students also learn...

**How to assume responsibility and accept ACCOUNTability**

A college isn't the only place to learn this, but the lesson takes deeper root when—unlike a job where you can punch in and out—you cannot avoid face-to-face encounters with community members who depend on you, whom you have hurt/wronged, or who have previously wronged you.

Second, students go to college in order to

**Prepare for citizenship**

As Amy Gutmann argued in her book *Democratic Education*, "learning how to think carefully and critically about political problems, to articulate one's views and defend them before people with whom one disagrees, is a form of moral education to which young adults are more receptive and for which universities are well suited."³

A superb, Lafayette-style residential education teaches students:

**How to engage in serious discourse**

You develop this ability through heated debates in class, of course, but also through unhurried, free-wheeling—and thus all the more rare and memorable—conversations walking across the quads, over dinner, or in late-night bull sessions in the dorms. It’s in these latter, lower-stakes settings that we most safely learn how to retreat from outrageous positions; how to employ humor to puncture pretension; how to politely shred someone’s argument; and how not to take it personally when your own argument is the one being shredded!

How to lead and how to follow

Extra-curricular activities and service learning offer students superb venues to develop the ability:

To lead others;

To follow as part of a team;

To sublimate one’s goals to a larger objective; and

To value the contributions made by others.

All of these are essential to a genuinely healthy democracy. A further word on “valuing others’ contributions.” One of the most powerful ways students in residential settings learn this lesson is by noting the work ethic and achievements of college staff: groundskeepers who shovel the paths before anyone else wakes up; secretaries who are not just the institutional memory but the soul of academic departments; and food service workers who offer smiles of encouragement alongside portions of shrimp tempura or vegan lasagna.

Finally, students go to college in order to

**Equip themselves to live lives of meaning, purpose and fulfillment**

Here too, residential colleges offer profound lessons and provide benefits not easily (if ever) replicated in other educational settings. At such schools, a student can:

**Learn what matters most to you**

Andrew Delbanco, in his book *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be*, argues that college is a place and time where students “have the capacity to embrace the precious chance to think and reflect before life engulfs them.”⁴ He celebrates an education purely for enjoyment’s sake that “is among the invaluable experiences of the fulfilled life.”⁵

---


⁵ Ibid, p. 32.
At residential colleges, students

**Learn how to carve out your identity or niche within a broader community**

These institutions purposefully construct a safe and nurturing environment for young people at the very moment when—developmentally speaking—they are defining themselves, becoming comfortable with independence, and trying out new personae. Our colleges empower students to reassess their values and backgrounds, viewing them in a broader intellectual, moral and emotional context.

Finally, under this rubric of self-fulfillment, residential colleges enable their graduates to

**Learn how to make your way in the world**

Much of this rests on the enhanced opportunity at a residential college to forge bonds with professors outside of class, developing mentors who will be a source of counsel, help, and encouragement across future decades.

Our impressionistic sense of the benefits of a residential college experience is confirmed by research. George Kuh’s 2005 Documenting Effective Educational Practice case studies found that “Students are more likely to flourish in small settings where they are known and valued as individuals than in settings in which they feel anonymous.” Such findings are very much a piece of Blimling’s 1993 studies, which “indicate(d) that residential students (versus commuters) participate in more extracurricular activities, report more positive perceptions of campus social climate, tend to be more satisfied with their college experience, report more personal growth and development, and engage in more frequent interactions with peers and faculty members. The evidence both in this study and elsewhere (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991) indicates that these involvements and changes have a positive influence on persistence.”

However, we increasingly hear arguments that a 4-year residential college experience should be curtailed or eliminated.

Some of this pressure arises from a straightforward desire to cut costs. If a four-year residential college is perceived as too expensive—either by families footing the bill or politicians eager to

---


further reduce budgets—it is appealing to suggest that we simply “cut college costs by 25%’’ by moving to a three-year bachelor’s degree.\textsuperscript{8}

Some of this pressure on the residential liberal arts model stems from a desire to tailor one’s education to specific interests and immediate needs. From this instrumental perspective, the self-exploratory, reflective nature of a residential college—and even the “soft” skills it consciously develops—are at best an unnecessary luxury and at worst a diversion from the pressing business of getting a high-paying job right now. This tension between utilitarian and self-actualizing education is not new; it regularly rears its head in parlous economic times like the present.

What is a novel line of attack on residential college is the current fascination… hope…desire…even certitude (!) that online learning will prove so effective and efficient that residential learning will become obsolete. Now, it’s important to note that some of the most ardent promoters of online learning and proponents of “disruptive innovation” in higher education remain fiercely committed to residential learning. For example, Rafael Reif, the President of MIT—whom I greatly respect—is committed to ensuring that his University’s forays into online pedagogy also improve the quality of the instruction offered in Cambridge. But even as he acknowledges the enduring value of face-to-face educational communities, Reif muses that distance learning might make it feasible to substantially reduce the time spent in a residential setting. He has posed a provocative question: “If we understand the magic of what we do, how many years do we need? And could we do it in three years?…Doing one year online while the learner is doing something somewhere else….?’\textsuperscript{9}

As much as I treasure the four-year residential learning experience that MIT, Carleton, Williams, Lafayette, and others provide, we need to acknowledge there may be some merit to the claim that there’s nothing sacrosanct about four years. And if four years are essential, we’re going to have to do a much better job of demonstrating—with hard evidence—the marginal value of additional time spent in such learning communities.

In many sophisticated higher education systems across the globe, a baccalaureate degree is earned in less than four years. Thus:

\textsuperscript{9} MIT President Rafael Reif, Comments delivered in “Opening Remarks and Session 1: Blended Models of Learning: Bringing Online to On-Campus,” at the Summit hosted by MIT and Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, 2013.
Oxford and Cambridge offer three-year Bachelor’s;

the Bologna Process has largely standardized a three-year baccalaureate in Continental Europe; and

it typically takes just three years to acquire a BA in India.

Of course, there are major differences in secondary education systems and cultural reasons behind America’s traditional model. But an insistence upon spending four years of college in one place may be increasingly idiosyncratic.

As we proudly (and accurately) trumpet the benefits of international study, at some level we’ve ceded the point that an ideal residential experience should last four years. For many students, the broadening, disorienting experience of immersion in a foreign culture outweighs the extra time that could beneficially be spent on campus. At many institutions, a majority of undergraduates already spend 3-1/2 or fewer years in our distinctive communities. (Indeed, at Carleton, 74% of students participate in at least one sustained off-campus experience.) Many of our schools also promote internships, externships and service learning in preference to additional semesters on campus. Further, when we accept significant numbers of transfer students (especially graduates from community colleges), we are willing, for good reason, to reduce the length and intensity of the residential experience. In short, we’re already encouraging and implementing many “blended” models of residential learning. So we should guard against self-righteously setting tight boundaries on how long a residential experience must last.

In this era of here-to-stay-and-ought-to-be-embraced-accountability, we should collect and scrutinize data on what a 3rd and 4th year in residence offers (or should offer) to enhance the value of one’s education.

Are there leadership roles students disproportionately assume in a final year?

Do our curricula coalesce or peak in four years in ways they could not over three years?

What do our students’ arcs of social development and maturation dictate about the ideal duration in residence?

Even if there is no sanctity to the four-year paradigm, we must not lose sight that something profound is accomplished in this setting—something that must be cherished and protected and promoted and celebrated. As my fellow panelist Jeff Selingo has wondered, with an “unbound,” but highly personalized college experience: “Will [students] discover subjects they never knew
existed? If a computer is telling them where to sit for classroom discussions, will they make those random connections that lead to lifelong friends? Will they be able to develop friendships and find mentors...?\textsuperscript{10}

I would caution the best residential colleges about too easily “letting go” of this on-site experience or allowing it to become overly diluted. At the very moment the four-year residential model is being questioned, fuller development of the benefits of this model—and the demonstrated realization of those benefits—may be the best way to secure a future of “bright years” for our colleges! Rather than retreating from the residential model, our market niche may be to reinforce it.
