The Social Costs of a College Education

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Forthcoming in *Academic Ethics Today*, ed. By Steven Cahn (Rowman and Littlefield, 2022)

What does a college education cost students? Familiar expenditures include time, effort, tuition, and related debt. In return, students receive an education along with some mix of valuable credentials, meaningful experiences, and increased earning potential. Consider, however, the unanticipated or hidden costs some students encounter:

> "For four months I attended lectures on geography and history and politics. I learned about Margaret Thatcher and the Thirty-Eighth Parallel and the Cultural Revolution; I learned about parliamentary politics and electoral systems around the world. I learned about the Jewish diaspora and the strange history of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. By the end of the semester, the world felt big, and it was hard to imagine returning to the mountain, to a kitchen, or even to a piano in the room next to the kitchen."[1]

> "The biggest challenge" [of being at Renowned] "is the pressure to become one of them. When you come here, you become one of the elite. … People forget where they come from. They live here for four months and they're not living at home and they forget what it means. Then, after four years, they don't go back home. They go to New York. They're just consumed! Forty percent of people go into consulting after graduation. Forty percent of people don't come into Renowned thinking of consulting. People are transformed."[2]

> "It was almost like I was given the choice . . . to sacrifice relationships for being able to survive college."[3]

College transformed each of these students, making it hard for them to go back home. Being unable to return or return in the same way to even a difficult home is a genuine cost, one paid both by the students themselves and the families and communities they left. Unlike the price of tuition, these costs are rarely announced up front and cannot be paid by others or waived by the college that may ultimately prepare students for a life that takes them far from home.

This essay explores these social costs, how a college education imposes them, and how colleges can help students bear them. It does so by examining an education's effect on trust.

Shaping both our knowledge and our social ties, trust helps explain why certain forms of education impose these social costs. A college education aims to enhance a student's capacities as a knower, what might be called epistemic standing. Colleges do this not merely by expanding a student's storehouse of knowledge or teaching a set of specialized intellectual skills. Colleges also re-shape student "trust networks" as epistemic bases for genuine knowledge. But sometimes this reshaping affects social networks as well in ways that incur social costs.

Very different groups of students face these costs, including those whose experiences have been the touchstone of varied criticisms of college. Some religious, conservative, and rural families worry that colleges indoctrinate students into a foreign, left-wing ideology. Working class, poor, first-generation, and traditionally underrepresented students argue that colleges are often unaccommodating or downright hostile environments for them. Despite the diversity of these groups, they share a concern that these institutions may change whom and what they trust. Identifying this common ground does not deny significant differences among these communities but rather helps us think differently about how to move forward. What follows is a description of the obstacles in question and recommendations for confronting them.

Chains and Networks of Trust

I normally trust my senses to provide information about the physical world. I don't try to verify what they tell me or if they are functioning properly. Similarly, I trust the information I get from various instruments, devices, and people. As I go about my day, I believe what my watch says about the time and what my search engine says about where to find things on the Internet. I typically follow the directions of a stranger in an unfamiliar city without hesitation or consulting my map. Trusting these sources of information involves adopting what philosopher C. Thi Nguyen calls "an unquestioning attitude."[4]

Trust of this form plays an outsized role in the kinds of knowledge that is the bread and butter of college coursework. My knowledge of US History or theoretical physics comes from reading books and attending lectures. Most of what is in those books and lectures relies on other, perhaps more specialized, sources that also rely on additional sources. Further knowledge mediates even conclusions drawn from basic archival and experimental evidence. Experiments often rely on machinery whose workings the scientist may not understand or question, or on other experimental work that regards this as evidence for that. Treating an archival document as evidence involves processes of authentication and continuity of storage. Trust linking these chains of support makes information at their ends usable. Because I trust my sources of knowledge who trust their sources of knowledge and so on, their information directly informs my further thinking.

Chains of trust then intersect and work together to form broad trust networks that shape what we know and how we add to this knowledge. If I believe a newspaper report about the rate of economic growth in the US in the last quarter, it is not because I personally know and trust the reporter or that I have independent grounds for believing the figure. I accept what is reported because I trust in a complex background network of institutions and practices: those that hire, educate, and credential reporters, fact checkers, and editors, as well as those that collect data and develop theories for interpreting it. In all these cases, watchdog agencies that call attention to mistakes along the chain of transmission and determination bolster my trust. I believe that there are no such mistakes because I have not been alerted to any. If my trust in any of these institutions or individuals wavers, this erodes my confidence in the reported figure, which I might question more closely or stop believing altogether.

Trusting is an unavoidable feature of human life. We all inhabit some set or other of trust networks. The difference between a college graduate trained in critical thinking who relies on government agencies, scientific bodies, and university expertise and a person without such training who relies on social media, neighbors, family members, and religious authorities is not that one forms beliefs on the basis of trust while the other does not. The difference lies in what and whom each trusts.

Trusting offers others direct and unmediated access to our thinking process, thoughts, and psyche. Like other forms of intimacy, trusting leaves us vulnerable to mistakes, bad judgments, and manipulation, among other things. Like other networks of intimacy, our trust networks also situate us socially. This connection between trust and intimacy goes both ways. We trust those in our social networks and by extension what and whom they trust, giving these people an outsized influence on the shape of our trust networks. Also, and as important, the shape of our trust networks determines who can be in our social networks. Two people with vastly divergent trust networks will have difficulty talking to one another or relating in ways that foster and sustain community. They won't just disagree; we can form close social ties to those with whom we disagree. Rather, they will find each other inscrutable because each works from a different set of accepted facts.

Goals of a College Education

Trusted sources of information appear and disappear through all sorts of processes, some reflective and critical, some not. Because network sources and configurations are not all equally trustworthy, we improve our capacity as knowers by improving our ability to discern trustworthiness. A college education works by reshaping and restructuring student trust networks

to improve them epistemically. Consider, for instance, three widely touted aims of a college education.

Disciplinary fluency. Training involves not merely amassing a body of facts but also becoming familiar with the methods and standard sources of a particular discipline. College students learn to read its academic journals, absorb the material it takes as evidence, and work with its distinctive tools. Using these methods and sources fluently involves taking an unquestioning attitude to them, or at least to the background network that brings them to light. Insofar as the discipline has developed credible networks, fluency adds nodes to a student's trust network, expanding it in trustworthy directions.

Critical thinking. While fluency grows one's trust network, critical thinking prunes it. The habits and skills of critical thinking encourage students to question previously unquestioned sources, which alters their trust networks in one of two ways: they may no longer believe a given source of information, or they may continue to believe it but in a distanced and more suspicious fashion. In the second case, students change their trust network without changing their beliefs, only their relation to them.

New social ties. As they make new friends and acquaintances, college students have less time and opportunity to spend with old ones. Colleges make a concerted effort to achieve this natural effect of any change in a social environment for their students. While this phenomenon is most in evidence at residential colleges where students may interact all day with people from unfamiliar backgrounds, it also happens at commuter schools. Commuting students spend time on campus that they might otherwise spend in their neighborhoods and enmeshed in previous social spaces. Both residential and commuter schools foster student involvement with their campus as a student success strategy, consciously and intentionally changing the social spaces their students occupy.

Since social ties and trust networks shape one another, by changing where and with whom students spend time, colleges further change whom and what these students trust. And as this third pathway makes clear, the effect of colleges on the trust networks of their students is not merely a result of what happens in classrooms.

These three goals clearly shape the trust networks college students end up inhabiting. A college education thus involves a rather intimate transformation. What justifies such a transformation, if anything does, is that it improves the epistemic standing of the student who undergoes it. A college education promises to make students better at knowing, and that means improving the trust networks they rely on as knowers. But how can we be sure that the trust network students leave college with (if all goes according to plan) is epistemically better than the one they entered with? This turns out to be a harder question than it first appears.

Distinguishing more from less trustworthy sources is not a straightforward matter. There is no path of unmediated access to "the facts" for comparison with what a given source reports. We have to interrogate the source's methods, position, constraints, and so forth to decide whether to trust it. In many cases, even experts won't agree completely about which networks are more trustworthy. This is in part due to the complexity and compartmentalization of much of advanced human knowledge.

Dysfunctional Topologies and Their Repair

One method for judging the trustworthiness of a given network is to examine what might be called its topology. Trust networks can take on distinctive shapes that create dysfunctions and pathologies in our ability to know about the world. One way a college education can improve students' epistemic standing is to identify, and then repair or reshape, the dysfunctional

topologies of their trust networks. To see how this works, consider four topological features that can contribute to a network's dysfunction, and the remedies colleges offer to improve them.

Epistemic valleys. Restricting information to locally available sources, epistemic valleys encourage their occupants to make judgments about the world based not only on limited information (we all do that) but on the basis of limits inherent in their epistemic position. Being illiterate, not understanding probability, only speaking a single language and lacking access to translated material, relying on a single news source, or only ever talking to people in your small town, insular neighborhood, online social network, academic discipline or political party, all of whom also only talk to each other, all create epistemic valleys. Colleges lift students out of such valleys by broadening their horizons: exposing them to unfamiliar ideas and cultures, helping them develop new skills and methods of investigation, and teaching them to access new forms of information.

Filter bubbles. Disguised versions of epistemic valleys, filter bubbles limit access to certain sources of information but hide their filtering. Individual newspapers or news networks can create filter bubbles. The *New York Times*, for example, gives its readers "all the news that's fit to print." Yet the *Times*, by making all sorts of decisions about what is fit, filters and selects the information it prints for readers. Those who get information about the world only from the *Times* are in the equivalent of an epistemic valley, though they may think they are standing on a mountaintop with a broad and wide vista. The algorithms that drive search engines also create filter bubbles. Search results on Google or the contents of Facebook feeds, for instance, are a function of the information they have amassed on users and those who are paying them for access to those users. These results do not provide unfiltered, direct access to what is available on the Internet about a given topic. Moreover, Google and Facebook's filters reinforce sources of

information we have relied on in the past and thereby further strengthen our bubble. Teaching college students to recognize filters, even when, or especially when, they are not evident, helps them break out of their bubbles. This involves the development of critical thinking skills and may also require learning about the sociology of knowledge or the structure of their media landscape.

Echo chambers. More sinister than filter bubbles, echo chambers don't block information, but encourage their occupants to distrust or reject outside sources. Cults and conspiracy theories create echo chambers, and some scholars argue that conservative media in the US does as well. People in an echo chamber are primed to distrust or reject new sources of information that might contradict their beliefs. New contrary evidence presented to people in an echo chamber often has the seemingly paradoxical effect of strengthening their original beliefs. Since escaping an echo chamber requires reversing our judgment about the trustworthiness of certain sources, trusting someone outside the echo chamber for other reasons is often required. By fostering close social ties with outsiders, whether they be teachers, staff, or fellow students, colleges can help students combat this problem.

Epistemic nests. Positive reflections of echo chambers, epistemic nests also shape the attitudes their inhabitants take to sources of knowledge rather than limiting access. Whereas echo chambers work by cultivating distrust of outside sources, nests provide positive social incentives to trust only insiders. (Actual networks often do both in that a shared distrust of outsiders generates a sense of community and vice versa.) Epistemic nests rely on the connection trust networks create between our beliefs and our social ties. The positive social incentives provided by occupying an epistemic nest come via the value of belonging to its community. Communities can form epistemic nests without engaging in the abusive practices that mark echo chambers or

by threatening to expel members who stray from a particular orthodoxy. The process can be more subtle: those who have left the nest no longer share the same assumptions and reference points with those still inside, making interaction and conversation more difficult. All three aims of a college education—greater fluency, enhanced critical thought, new social ties—encourage students to leave their epistemic nests or sometimes just push them out. Insofar as staying in an epistemic nest limits your trust network, leaving it improves your epistemic standing. But abandoning an epistemic nest jeopardizes social ties with those who remain. The price of epistemic improvement and an education is the loss of a certain intimacy with a community of which one was once a part.

The social costs of leaving epistemic nests are not borne by all college students or equally by those who do. The trust networks of some new students are already well-aligned with those college faculty and staff inhabit and champion. They come from families and backgrounds that trust credentialed expertise, the peer-review process, and the unlimited and unerring powers of critical thought and reasoned argument. They come from communities that have not been systematically harmed by major social, political, and economic institutions. These students acquire what a college education has to offer, including its epistemic improvements, without really leaving their nests.

Other students start college with very different trust networks. They grew up trusting religious authorities or the wisdom and accumulated knowledge of their communities. They arrive skeptical of the good will or reliability of sources colleges teach them to trust. Some of that mistrust may be well-founded as not all institutions that figure prominently in college fostered trust networks are blameless or harmless. And even mistrust resulting from misinformation or misunderstanding may connect students to their home communities. A college

education that achieves its aims radically transforms these students' trust networks and takes them out of their epistemic nests. These students are the ones who bear the social costs of a college education.

Recommendations for Confronting Social Costs

What, then, ought college faculty and staff do in the face of these social costs? How can they help their students bear them? I end with five broad recommendations. These are not specific policies or practices but regulative ideals that college policymakers should keep in mind.

First, a college must ensure that it is in fact epistemically improving the trust networks of its students. Are curricula and courses well designed for this task? Do they broaden student horizons, for instance, yet fail to offer help identifying and remedying filter bubbles, echo chambers, and epistemic nests? Are colleges and their courses merely replacing one set of dysfunctional structures with another, even if the latter is more widespread among the college educated? Departments and disciplines can form their own dysfunctional epistemic topologies. Sometimes these structures help generate new knowledge by focusing on narrow problems and solutions within a discipline. But teaching from such a perspective can be epistemically harmful to students. Epistemically beneficial teaching may require abandoning or adjusting a design primarily intended to initiate undergraduates into a discipline.

Second, a college education should not only epistemically improve student trust networks but also equip students to assess trust networks, including those the college is simultaneously promoting. This requires courses designed to accept and reveal complexity and uncertainty rather than form certain beliefs and reach certain conclusions. Not only does this entail teaching openness and non-dogmatism, it entails teaching that is open and non-dogmatic. From having students read opposing and credible views on a topic to exposing them to unfamiliar epistemic

networks and ways of thinking, there are many ways this can be done. Beyond helping students develop mastery of material and methods and an ability to find flaws and criticize, it requires teaching students to engage charitably and responsively with material they disagree with or find unfamiliar, and identifying what is interesting or valuable even in positions and perspectives they might ultimately reject. Faculty can model this by discussing charitable accounts of positions they disagree with or even deem wrong and coaching students on how to be critical of views the faculty member accepts or defends. While many college faculty across disciplines do this kind of work in their classes as a matter of course, many do not.

Third, colleges need to earn the trust of their students and the families and communities who send them to college. These institutions and their employees have a duty of care not to exploit the dependency of those who entrust the development of their trust networks to them. Colleges should take care to neither amplify their students' vulnerability nor shape their trust networks for partisan or sectarian purposes. A college education should have the potential to be transformative without being an exercise in conversion. Setting out to convert students to a particular position, value system, cause, or concern exploits the opportunity student trust provides and thus betrays their trust. This is another area where orientation as a researcher or scholar may need to stand apart from orientation as a teacher. A scholarly career will be filled with the development of compelling arguments for particular conclusions. An undergraduate course shouldn't operate in exactly the same way. In addition to ethical reasons for not betraying student trust, there are pragmatic ones: colleges will have a much harder time effectively educating students who do not trust them.

Being trustworthy also involves not heightening the anxiety that may ensue from trusting. If you trust me to take care of your prized Ming vase, I should not juggle with it, even if I am an

expert juggler and my juggling the vase does not risk breaking it. Colleges can reduce the anxiety of students, their families, and home communities through outreach and greater transparency about the distinctive features of a college education as well as its hidden social costs. They can also discourage their faculty and staff from taking a high-handed attitude to the networks of their students. College faculty can be haughtily dismissive of epistemic positions they reject or trust networks different from their own. They can be arrogant about the value of their own networks, seeing them not as networks that rely on trust but solely on unequivocal facts, reasons, arguments, and science. Faculty should recognize that their own trust networks, despite their epistemic value, are not unimpeachable or unquestionable. They should remain open to challenge and criticism from students, and keep in mind the social costs for those who abandon familiar trust networks for new ones, even in the name of epistemic improvement.

Fourth, colleges should provide students and their home communities with resources and tools needed to manage the social costs of their education. This starts by offering students a way of thinking about and understanding what is happening, such as the description of the transformation of trust networks offered here. It might also involve helping them reestablish social ties in peril. Colleges could teach students how to move among epistemic nests (through code-switching or other forms of intellectual flexibility). They could also teach students how to build bridges, turning isolated nests into more complex networks by developing new lines of trust.

Finally, colleges are less likely to overlook the costs they impose and their own epistemic limitations if their faculty, staff, and administrators come from a variety of backgrounds or have demonstrated attention to and familiarity with such backgrounds. Note that the faculty diversity required here is not of viewpoint or identity (which is not to take a stand on whether these forms

of diversity also have value). Diversity of background concerns where people are from and the attendant social costs of their own college education. Faculty or staff who grew up in a socially conservative rural community or who are first in their family to go to college are more likely to recognize the social costs of a college education as well as college policies and practices that make those costs harder to bear, even if they no longer share the views of their family and community or look like the students who face similar challenges where they work. Beyond merely diversifying faculty and staff this way, this diversity should be made apparent to students, their families, and others on campus. Unlike diversity of identity or viewpoint, diversity of background can go unnoticed if not welcomed and highlighted. In discussions of curricula, teaching practices, and student life policies, it is important to hear and seriously consider the observations and insights of people from diverse backgrounds.

I have argued that a college education can impose social costs through the same processes that improve the epistemic value of its student trust networks. This discussion suggests a number of significant issues for colleges to consider as they develop curricula, teach classes, create extracurricular programs and spaces, advise students, and hire faculty and staff. Determining what precisely a college should do to help its students bear the hidden social costs of a college education requires sensitivity to local context—the particular students being educated, the connection of the college to the local community and the communities of origin of its students, the composition of its faculty, and the nature of its curriculum. But many other values and costs are also at stake in providing a college education. Determining how these various concerns interact and should be addressed, however, is work I leave to involved readers, trusting that they are up to it.[5]

[1] Tara Westover, *Educated* (New York: Random House, 2018). ch. 27.

[2] William, a white, "doubly disadvantaged" student quoted in Anthony Abraham Jack, *The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges Are Failing Disadvantaged Students* (Harvard University Press, 2019). "Renowned" is the pseudonym Jack gave to the elite college where he conducted his research.

[3] Todd, quoted in Jennifer Morton, *Moving up without Losing Your Way: The Ethical Costs of Upward Mobility* (Princeton University Press, 2019)., p, 29

[4] C. Thi Nguyen, "Trust as an Unquestioning Attitude," forthcoming in *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*, vol. 7.

[5] Thank you to Harry Brighouse, Michael McPherson, Steven Cahn, Gina Schouten, James Tully, Jennifer Morton, Sarah Stitzlein, Sam Fleischacker, Anne Eaton and the members of the Center for Ethics and Education Graduate Summer Institute (2020) for helpful feedback on earlier versions.