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Higher education's dropout paradox

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Last week, the world mourned the loss of Steve Jobs to pancreatic cancer.

Unlike many other well-known figures, Jobs' direct and indirect contributions to society are every bit tangible. He was an innovator, a visionary and, of course, a college dropout. But that didn't stop Reed College, the destination of Jobs' semester-long rendezvous, to honor one of its "most visionary former students" on its website.

This kind of phenomenon also takes place at the University of Texas. Last year, the Texas Exes — which does not limit its membership to alumni or even former UT attendees — revealed a list of Extraordinary Exes in celebration of its 125 years of existence. Longhorn legends such as Dell-founder Michael Dell, broadcaster Walter Cronkite, businessman Red McCombs, NBA star Kevin Durant, Olympic gold medalist Mary Lou Retton, "Charlie's Angels" icon Farrah Fawcett, former Texas Lt. Gov. Ben Barnes, and former U.S. Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn all fall short of being traditional alumni.

This illustrates higher education's dropout paradox: A university's poster children of success may be the same poster children whom critics point to when those individuals are reduced to a number or a percentage of the "did not graduate" persuasion. While their achievements may be boundless, they stand equally degree-less.

Some may point to the paradox as a way to illustrate the insignificance of a university education. After all, it seems as though college was simply a roadblock on their paths to greatness. Yet this assumption misses the well-documented influence universities had on many of the aforementioned dropouts' successes.

Jobs, in his famous commencement speech at Stanford in 2005, talked about his experience in a calligraphy class he audited after dropping out of Reed as the reason for the Macintosh's revolutionizing "multiple typefaces and proportionally spaced fonts."

Dell launched his industry-transforming company from his campus dorm room. Cronkite wrote for "The Daily Texan" and said his first time in front of a microphone was reciting sports scores. Before becoming private investigator Jill Munroe on ABC in the late 1970s, Fawcett modeled for students and faculty at UT's art department, which got her noticed by several publications.

Though nontraditional, these situations illustrate what universities have always done best: Serve as resource centers for society. Universities are points of collaboration, boasting pockets of world-class expertise and resources in very specific areas.

What Texas' recent higher education controversy has shown is the inherent difficulty in translating the intangible benefits of being a resource center into tangible, measurable outcomes. Having a premier conglomeration of top experts in the history of American foreign policy or housing the archives of David Foster Wallace is difficult to measure in dollars, cents and productivity hours.

Institutions have significant administrative discretion to create policies that push students to graduate on time. Pledging to increase four- and six-year graduation rates is essentially an agreement between the university and the state that says, "We'll promise to take care of this as long as you promise to leave us alone."

The university's real focus should be on finding avenues for students and the community to tap into and contribute to the institution's rich resource centers. For example, UT's Intellectual Entrepreneurship Consortium is a leader in experimenting with creative programs to connect students to those resources, but it would require greater support for it to flourish. The Texas Center for Education Policy works to bridge the gap between community and academia but is more of an exception than the norm.

Jobs finished his Stanford commencement speech by quoting the last words published in the Whole Earth Catalog: "stay hungry, stay foolish."

Students come into the university with both hunger and foolishness. Let's not let that go to waste.

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