

Student questions if college degree is worth the cost



Connor Stangler

Today marks the 2010 Freshmen Move-in Day, and the new students are brimming with hopes and tales of Truman State University, reveling in the excitement of attending the “Harvard of the Midwest” (Excuse me, the “Princeton of the Prairie”). But along with the crates and the anticipation comes an unwelcome disappointment that dampens the thrill of Truman Week.

On Aug. 11, Forbes released its 2010 list of top colleges. Truman State University, historically a strong performer when it comes to rankings, found itself 393rd in the country. For an institution that recognizes itself as one

of the best public universities in Missouri, it must have come as a surprise that its most obvious in-state rival, the University of Missouri-Columbia, came in 364th. (For those interested, Williams College, of Massachusetts, placed first). Granted, methodology was less-than-sophisticated (alumni income and ratemyprofessors.com, the primary measures of the study, are both less than professional), and I definitely overstated the story’s impact on the student body’s enthusiasm, but the news remains an imperfection, an embarrassment to be quietly and casually pushed under the administration’s rug. This troubling occasion makes many ask a question that, five years ago, would have been laughably inappropriate but today possesses an unsettling amount of seriousness: Is a college degree worth it?

Should I really jump to that kind of conclusion? If you begin to lose faith in your own school, then it’s surprising how quickly you begin to lose faith in higher education as a whole. An Aug. 2

article in The Wall Street Journal used the publication of a new book, “Higher Education?: How Colleges are Wasting Our Money and Failing Our Kids — And What We Can Do About It,” to highlight growing “public skepticism” in an American classic: the university.

The article revealed some troubling trends: In the past 30 years, the cost of attending a public university has risen almost 300 percent. Professors’ salaries have increased at a much faster rate than other occupations while other studies have shown that the amount of time they spend with their students is steadily decreasing. The article cites these and other facts as explanations for why 30 percent of enrolled students drop out of college only a few months after enrolling. The authors of the book, according to the article, conclude that “colleges and universities serve the people who work there more than the parents and taxpayers who pay for ‘higher education’ or the students who desperately need it.”

But even those startling facts and

denouncements are not enough by themselves to dismiss the potency of a college degree. The Great Recession has become such a dogmatic excuse that it’s almost a cliché. However, you can’t blissfully ignore the circumstances. The economic environment has changed completely for every American. Our upcoming entrance into the barren job market has caused us students to adjust our plans or perhaps even suppress them completely.

An Aug. 10 analysis in The New York Times pointed out that the economic crisis has shifted its gaze from blue to white collar workers. Fields usually reserved for college graduates — who have invested thousands in a potentially lucrative education — are eliminating jobs at a record pace. Additionally, the analysis points out that employment has risen for those who never attended college and fallen for those who did.

A degree — or at least the pursuit of one — has long been a professional no-brainer. It carried not only prestige but

also the potential for economic security. What was once a golden ticket is looking more and more like a useless stub.

In spite of financial realities and Truman’s loss of regional standing, I do not expect an exodus. We’re here because we are willing to take a chance on an inexpensive education, because maybe intellectual benefits are more than if not equal to financial ones. By keeping costs down, Truman remains above what has become a villainous educational tradition. But that formula benefits us only if our school continues to offer what it claims: a first-rate education you can’t find at another public university in Missouri. The paths you choose — financial and intellectual — are, of course, your own, but before you forsake an education, consider what a Truman degree might offer.

Connor Stangler is a sophomore

English and history major from Rocheport, Mo.

AROUND THE QUAD

What are you most looking forward to about the semester starting?



“Getting to know the professors and making connections.”

Lacey Holt freshman



“Meeting new people and seeing old friends.”

Nik Bentzinger junior



“Seeing my friends and hopefully getting good grades.”

Jen Cleary junior



“Classes beginning and seeing the campus liven up.”

Anthony Channel freshman

Cross-generational friends help lead to insight



Zach Vicars

I’m one of those people who needs pressure to stay motivated. That’s part of the reason I like writing for a newspaper.

With a deadline looming, I actually manage to get some writing done. Without a deadline, I would just stare at a blank screen all day. I have the same problem with staying in shape.

I can’t drag myself out of bed to run, bike or lift weights unless I have a goal urging me on — an upcoming backpacking trip or a long ride with a buddy usually does the trick.

That’s why a few months ago I agreed to train for the Kirksville triathlon with two friends. One of them enjoys swimming, the other running and so they called on me, their “biker friend,” to fill in the third spot.

In most cases, I wouldn’t consider an 18-mile ride through the back roads of Kirksville worthy of a column in the Index, but this time is a little different. You see, my two friends aren’t some floor buddies from freshman year or even guys I knew back in high school. Rather, these are two men I work with.

One is in his late 30s, the other is in his early 50s. I’ll be racing with guys who are twice my age or more. So maybe that doesn’t seem too out of the ordinary, either. But imagine participating in a triathlon with someone old enough to be your professor ... or your parent.

I know this is ridiculous, but I had this preconceived notion that anyone born around the time of the Berlin Wall’s collapse possesses a certain indescribable quality that makes them fun to hang out with. For this reason, it wasn’t my first instinct to hang out with someone old enough to remember Joe Montana’s glory days or Nixon’s presidency. But during the last few weeks, I’ve been surprised at how my prejudices have been shattered by getting to spend some time with my triathlon teammates. I’m realizing that my single-generation bubble, in which I was sure I had all the right friends, really inhibits me from getting the most out of life.

For one thing, it seems that in spite of my “Harvard of the Midwest” schooling, my cross-generational friends still have quite a bit to teach me.

Both of these men have two children, and one of them is in the process of fostering two more. I hope to one day have a family of my own, and the insights I’ve gained from how they raise and interact with their children has been invaluable to me. Although I might not have envisioned spending afternoons pushing tractors around with 2-year-olds, I’ve grown more as a person through those encounters than I have in many other friendships.

The life experiences that my older friends have shared with me have given me an exciting new perspective. When I hang out with my same-generation friends, we share stories and we come from different backgrounds, but there’s still a certain limit to how much you can experience in 20 something years of life. These guys, however, have lived more and have the stories to prove it. One of them spent months at a time underwater in a nuclear submarine. The other walked the hard road of working in child services, defending children from desperate situations of abuse or neglect. Through our interactions, both men provide the wisdom that comes only with age that I simply would miss out on without cross-generational friendships.

As college students, we often shy away from friendships (or even any contact at all) with people our parents’ ages or older. Too many of us believe that any generation older than our own is too old-fashioned, too backward or too conservative. However, through the process of preparing for this triathlon, I’ve found that these cross-generational friendships really have given me a look at life that I was missing with my same-generation friends alone. Sure, the guys might listen to worn-out music, make ancient movie references or hold slightly different political views from me, but the lessons they’ve taught me on leaving a legacy, valuing others and getting the most out of life has been such a wake-up call for me.

Now that I see the difference they’ve made in my life, I feel extremely blessed to have cross-generational friends, and I hope that more college students will seek to develop friendships with cross-generational family members, co-workers, professors or spiritual mentors. The depth of insight you’ll gain is more than worth the effort and the occasional corny jokes you’ll have to endure.

Zach Vicars is a junior philosophy/religion and linguistics major from St. Charles, Mo.

Parents should handle early sex education



Molly Skyles

Today may be the beginning of higher education for most, but think back a few years to the beginning of kindergarten.

When I was 5, my top concerns were learning how to read and write, and the most I knew about the opposite sex was that they butted in front of me in line and had icky cooties.

Why would anyone want to ruin that simple innocence? Five year olds today however, are going to be taught about sex. At the time when most kids learn the differences between vowels and consonants, today they also will learn the anatomical differences between the male and female body and where babies come from.

A school district in Montana is debating the issue of beginning sex education lessons for children as young as 5 years old, according to a July 15 HLN News and Views video on CNN.com. After a vote on Aug. 10, the curriculum is being revised to include the new sex education program. However, the issue is still under much debate and has not yet been finalized.

As a college student, education at all ages is important to me. However, when it comes to children as young

as 5, let them believe the stork brings the baby to mommy’s belly, and if they have any questions, it should be the parent’s call on how to answer them — not some across-the-board curriculum that will confuse children and expose them to material much too advanced for their level of comprehension. Sex education is a necessary part of school curriculum, but there is a proper time for such sensitive material, and it is not kindergarten. Can’t we just finger-paint a little longer?

Those in favor of spoiling an untouched mind argue that teaching children these topics at a young age will make them more aware of the potential consequences of sexual behavior. I argue that it will establish a premature curiosity. Why do you think kids begin dating and kissing in middle school? Yeah, hormones are raging, but they are also curious and wonder if all the stuff they learned in class is true.

I know not every middle school student rushes out to have sex after learning about the pleasure of an orgasm in class, but it does kick-start something in their heads telling them it would be wonderful if they just did it. Plant that bug in a kid’s head at a younger age, and the curiosity and potential implementation is sure to follow.

If this measure were to get passed, children today would be stripped of their childhoods, and the college students of tomorrow will be much more advanced. My generation began to notice the opposite sex and experienced that magically awkward first

kiss in middle school. Kids today are making out in the back corners of movie theatres by the third grade. This can only mean that they will start having sex at an earlier age too, which can ultimately lead to more unplanned teen pregnancies.

Thirty-four percent of females become pregnant at least once by the age of 20, according to familyfirstaid.org. Of those who follow through with the pregnancy, only one-third receive a high school diploma, and only 1.5 percent of teen moms get a college degree. If these numbers were to increase, who knows what the next generation will look like?

To stop this potential downward spiral, schools need to implement an effective sex education curriculum. Teaching kids these important lessons should start early. However, early does not mean kindergarten. The best way is by starting with kids in fourth or fifth grade. These are the ages just before a child hits puberty, and teaching them about positive sexual decision-making will be the best way to protect them from unwanted pregnancies and STDs.

Sex education and curiosity are not bad things, but when prematurely developed views are formed, nothing good can come of it. This advanced curriculum should never be passed because, as they say, curiosity killed the cat, or should I say impregnated the cat.

Molly Skyles is a junior communication major from St. Louis, Mo.

Boycotting BP might not be right solution



John Hitzel

It’s hard not to think about the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill that occurred this summer, beginning on the most terribly ironic of days — April 20th, Earth Day — still spewing now and far into the future.

When I consider the spill, disturbing images come to mind. Seabirds in oil tuxedos, the texture of melted candle wax. The miles of churning orange-brown surf along the pristine white beaches of the northern Gulf Coast. The path of the current near the Bahamas and up the Eastern U.S. seaboard. The slick itself, visible from space. And piles of god-forsaken money.

The BP boycott sounded like a great way to do that existential something, to firmly plant my fist in the face of a corporate mega power, especially one that deserves much more retaliation from the entire living world (humans too) than a mere face-fisting. It would be empowering to hurt the perpetrators of what I perceive to be a great evil in the place they’ll really feel it: their wallets.

BP is a corporation. It exists to make money. That is its purpose, its programming, its ethics. Deprive the money-hungry of money and suffering results. Balance is restored to the universe.

But the more I consider the issue and the more I recognize that my desire to seek vengeance upon BP stems from my gut, the more I think the boycott is a bad idea.

My instinct tells me it’d feel great to do something to hurt a corporation. They have the power. Taking it back would feel liberating.

But let the brain and not the gut analyze the situation and a whole new

world of crude arises from the deep.

If the boycott succeeds, then what? Who gets hurt?

The local BP gas station owners, who are under contract with BP and can’t change the brand of gas they sell, suffer. The BP employees, who number in the tens of thousands, lose their job security as money dries up. The cleanup effort itself is hurt, since it is funded by BP. The economy suffers, too. If BP drowns in a wash of negative public opinion, they can’t pay the fines levied against them by the U.S. government.

The most disheartening aspect of this investigation, though, is that BP doesn’t just make money from gasoline sales, so trying to hurt them at the pump has little-to-no effect since they also make money selling their product to manufacture rubber and plastic. And by taking my business elsewhere, I’d just be helping out all the other major oil companies, none of whom are friends of Greenpeace.

Unless I think more big-picture and

take my desire to do something further than simply not purchasing a certain brand, the problem remains that there is such a demand for crude oil in America as to cause the suppliers to take such risk-laden measures to acquire their ever-precious product. It’s worth considering not using gas entirely.

But what then? Do I also not use plastics or rubber? Or my shoes or phone or computer? What about the rubber tires on my bicycle?

The responsible thing to do would be to economically motivate — because that’s the only motivation besides entertainment that accomplishes anything on a large scale in America — a movement to renewable energy and alternative materials, immediately. But the money power needs to get behind this effort. Otherwise, we’ll just get more of the same, and more opportunities to repeat this tragic event.

My gut churns with fury at these greedy, short-sighted fools who have poisoned, sullied and otherwise putre-

fied, one of the most beautiful areas on the only planet we have, all in pursuit of the dollar.

But my brain, responsible for higher thought, realizes we are better off with BP existing to clean up after itself and pay for its mistake than we are without it around to do either.

I still need to see some CEOs in shackles to show the other crude harvesters that America means business if they’re going to interfere with the integrity of U.S. land and the ecosystems it supports. However, I think it is more important to try to fix the damage that’s already been done. Because saving the world is a very powerful thing to be able to do. No matter the price.

John Hitzel is a senior communication and English major from St. Louis, Mo.