

Value Proposition

Sonny Ramaswamy, President

This is a gist of my conversation during a recent Uber ride.

The identity of the Uber driver and the institution are concealed to protect them.

The Uber driver, female in her 20s, recent graduate in the health area from an NWCCU-accredited four-year institution, first generation student of color, Pell recipient, with approximately \$20,000+/- in student debt.

9:25 pm. November 14, 2019

After initial pleasantries, Uber Driver: *Hope you had a good flight. Where are you coming back from?*

Me: *From Washington, DC, returning home to Redmond.*

Uber Driver: *I love Washington, DC. What were you doing there?*

Me: *Me too.*

My organization supports and holds universities and colleges in the Pacific Northwest accountable. We are an accreditor.

I attended a meeting with other accreditors, United States Congressional representatives and staff, and US Department of Education staff.

We had conversations about higher education. The cost of higher education and indebtedness. Graduation rates. The value of higher education.

Uber Driver: *Oh wow. That's cool.*

They failed me and my classmates.

Me: *Hmm. What do you mean? Who's They?*

Uber Driver: *My college.*

Me: *Hmm. Tell me more. Did you like your education? Did they offer you support? Did you have any internships? What about career counseling? Advising?*

Uber Driver: *Well ..., my classmates and I in the program were basically not given any extra help. I asked if I could modify my courses to be more in line with my career interests.*

I was told: "This is the program of study for this major." No further conversation. The implication was: take it or leave it.

My internship was a joke: It was for two months in my last year and not related to what I really wanted to learn in health care management.

One prof told me: "Get a master's degree. That's the only way you can get a job."

Some of my classmates and I are doing what we were doing before we went to college. Being paid hourly wage. A bit under \$20. Exactly the same wage we made before. One classmate was a CNA (Certified Nursing Assistant) and after her degree, went back to being a CNA.

I have three jobs. I drive Uber. I work in corporate (physical) security for a large multi-national. I do odds and ends. I have student loans for which I am making payments. I also take care of my family. It's tough. It's frustrating. I thought a college education would help me and my family.

Me: *Do you have any connections with others on campus? Around the area? Your church? Alumni? Did your college help with connections?*

Uber Driver: *I have no connections.*

My experience at my college was not good; and I don't see any value in my degree.

Listening to this young lady, I was disheartened.

I thought to myself: *This college is definitely not "student ready." It did not help her succeed and offered no value.*

Here, I'd like to expand on this idea of value.

In a now famous opinion from 1964, U.S. Supreme Court Associate Justice Potter Stewart stated that he could not define pornography. *"But I know it when I see it."*

I was reminded of and used this quote multiple times during the last several months as I have visited and spoken at several institutions on the value and changing landscape of higher education, being student ready, accreditation, NWCCU's revised Standards, Negotiated Rule Making, efforts on Capitol Hill to reauthorize the Higher Education Act, and other sundry topics of relevance to us.

The triggers were mostly questions pertaining to what "success" means in education and the "value" of higher education or accreditation.

This question of the value proposition has come up in many different contexts.

As a singular noun, value (proposition) has come up in the context of "why should anyone go to college?" or "why should I care about student learning assessment and outcomes?" or "who cares about accreditation?"

A recent survey tells us that the higher education enterprise is "failing the United States," because 74 percent of registered (party affiliation concealed) voters felt a four-year liberal arts degree is no longer worth the cost; almost a similar percentage stated our nation's workers need more "skills" training. The bottom line, according to the results of this survey of this group is that higher education is not providing

“value for the money and generally not offering the types of education needed to ensure a prosperous future” for America.

There are also efforts in the United States Congress to allow states to, I assume, force higher education institutions to set up “credentialing systems for trade, apprenticeships, and other training programs,” which will allegedly result in helping individuals get well-paying and stable jobs.

My concern is that, not unlike the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) education bandwagon, what these efforts are going to create are a bunch of technically qualified Americans who can only aspire to either jobs in manufacturing, which are disappearing rapidly in our nation, or as technicians, most of which are or will be done by robots, according to multiple recent studies. What has made America globally competitive is its combination of technical, cognitive skills, along with the non-cognitive, essential skills, such as critical thinking, problem solving, communication, teamwork, and other such skills, and, most importantly, the ability to question assumptions. We refer to these in our new Standards as “core competencies.”

In addition, we see the value of accreditation and accreditors being questioned by various entities that represent the continuum of the American political spectrum. Indeed, we have seen recent headlines trumpeting accreditors as “barriers to higher education reform,” and that the key to transformation is to bring in “free-market principles” to reform accreditation, or that accreditation is the “work of Satan” and that accreditors are “missing the mark on student outcomes.”

We have also seen in the United States Department of Education’s new regulations a different vision and construct for accreditation, which could potentially upend the longstanding regard and credibility of accreditors as the primary authority on quality in higher education in the United States.

The bottom line is that higher education and accreditors have failed to demonstrate the value proposition of education to the American public, which requires a reimagining and reengineering of both enterprises, laser-focused on student success and closing equity gaps, accountability, and transparency.

College education continues to be worth the investment; indeed, college graduates on average earn about two times as much as high school graduates, have greater career mobility, and realize a better quality of life.

And, the recent handwringing about student debt, when looked at objectively, is actually not as dire as advertised. Recent studies have shown that much of the total student debt is held by people who went on to receive graduate and professional degrees and indeed are repaying their student loans. Then there’s a number of people who have borrowed small amounts of money to attend college, drop out without completing requirements for a credential or degree and, thus, don’t have labor market value and default on their loans.

Application of effective and formative accreditation approaches, as incorporated into NWCCU’s new Standards, can contribute to tangible improvements in student performance and graduation rates. Additionally, they can promote greater accountability and transparency, help mitigate concerns about higher education and accreditors, and provide the return on investment and value.

In light of national conversations, we are reimagining and reengineering accreditation in support of higher education by: promoting innovations, experimentation, and risk taking at institutions; supporting deployment of a risk-based accreditation system; development and deployment of alternative reaffirmation processes; encouraging institutions to leverage technology in support of efforts to increase student achievement and success; accommodating and recognizing new and emerging educational models, including alternative credentialing, badges, competency-based education, certificate programs, and other such approaches; promoting data and evidence-informed approaches for continuous improvement in educational outcomes; simplified reporting; mentoring by staff liaisons and experienced evaluators; promoting strong and effective training and education on accreditation, assessment, and student learning outcomes; improving communications; and enhancing transparency.

The value proposition—i.e., of success and reputation—based on a renewed and vigorous commitment to student success by colleges and universities is in promoting ways to enhance graduation rates while closing equity gaps, improving learning and building upon the skills of students to serve a changing world, and reducing the cost of education.

This will require approaches to enhancing the cognitive and non-cognitive skills of students through learner-centered experiential opportunities.

This will require creating student ready campuses, which include paying attention to student needs and tailoring courses, course offerings, and programs to the needs of the student, such as my Uber driver.

This will require helping students meet their aspirational goals, through experiential learning opportunities, networking, and making connections.

Creating value is easy, if every individual makes a commitment: students, faculty, staff, administrators, parents, alumni, legislators, regulators, and accreditors.

Let's roll up our sleeves and create value for all students, including ones like my Uber driver.