

**WHY GO TO
COLLEGE?**

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Why go to college? by Alice Freeman Palmer

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An Address

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WHY GO TO COLLEGE?

To a largely increasing number of young girls college doors are opening every year. Every year adds to the number of men who feel as a friend of mine, a successful lawyer in a great city, felt when in talking of the future of his four little children he said, "For the two boys it is not so serious, but I lie down at night afraid to die and leave my daughters only a bank account." Year by year, too, the experiences of life are teaching mothers that happiness does not necessarily come to their daughters when accounts are large and banks are sound, but that on the contrary they take grave risks when they trust everything to accumulated wealth and the chance of a happy marriage. Our American girls themselves are becoming aware that they need the stimulus, the discipline, the knowledge, the interests of the college in addition to the school, if they are to prepare themselves for the most serviceable lives.

But there are still parents who say, "There is no need that my daughter should teach; then why should she go to college?" I will not reply that college training is a life insurance for a girl, a

pledge that she possesses the disciplined ability to earn a living for herself and others in case of need ; for I prefer to insist on the importance of giving every girl, no matter what her present circumstances, a special training in some one thing by which she can render society service, not amateur but of an expert sort, and service too for which it will be willing to pay a price. The number of families will surely increase who will follow the example of an eminent banker whose daughters have been given each her specialty. One has chosen music, and has gone far with the best masters in this country and in Europe, so far that she now holds a high rank among musicians at home and abroad. Another has taken art ; and has not been content to paint pretty gifts for her friends, but in the studios of New York, Munich, and Paris, she has won the right to be called an artist, and in her studio at home to paint portraits which have a market value. A third has proved that she can earn her living, if need be, by her exquisite jellies, preserves, and sweetmeats. Yet the house in the mountains, the house by the sea, and the friends in the city are not neglected, nor are these young women found less attractive because of their special accomplishments.

While it is not true that all girls should go to college any more than that all boys should go, it is nevertheless true that they should go in greater numbers than at present. They fail to go because they, their parents, and their teachers, do not see

clearly the personal benefits distinct from the commercial value of a college training. I wish here to discuss these benefits, these larger gifts of the college life, — what they may be, and for whom they are waiting.

It is undoubtedly true that many girls are totally unfitted by home and school life for a valuable college course. These joys and successes, these high interests and friendships, are not for the self-conscious and nervous invalid, nor for her who in the exuberance of youth recklessly ignores the laws of a healthy life. The good society of scholars and of libraries and laboratories has no place and no attraction for her who finds no message in Plato, no beauty in mathematical order, and who never longs to know the meaning of the stars over her head or the flowers under her feet. Neither will the finer opportunities of college life appeal to one who, until she is eighteen (is there such a girl in this country?), has felt no passion for the service of others, no desire to know if through history, or philosophy, or any study of the laws of society, she can learn why the world is so sad, so hard, so selfish as she finds it, even when she looks upon it from the most sheltered life. No, the college cannot be, should not try to be, a substitute for the hospital, reformatory, or kindergarten. To do its best work it should be organized for the strong, not for the weak; for the high-minded, self-controlled, generous, and courageous spirits, not for the indifferent, the dull, the idle, or those who are

already forming their characters on the amusement theory of life. All these perverted young people may, and often do, get large benefit and invigoration, new ideals, and unselfish purposes from their four years' companionship with teachers and comrades of a higher physical, mental, and moral stature than their own. I have seen girls change so much in college that I have wondered if their friends at home would know them, — the voice, the carriage, the unconscious manner, all telling a story of new tastes and habits and loves and interests, that had wrought out in very truth a new creature. Yet in spite of this I have sometimes thought that in college more than elsewhere the old law holds, "To him that hath shall be given and he shall have abundance, but from him who hath not shall be taken away even that which he seemeth to have." For it is the young life which is open and prepared to receive which obtains the gracious and uplifting influences of college days. What, then, for such persons are the rich and abiding rewards of study in college or university?

Pre-eminently the college is a place of education. That is the ground of its being. We go to college to know, assured that knowledge is sweet and powerful, that a good education emancipates the mind and makes us citizens of the world. No college which does not thoroughly educate can be called good, no matter what else it does. No student who fails to get a little knowledge on many subjects, and much knowledge on some, can be said

to have succeeded, whatever other advantages she may have found by the way. It is a beautiful and significant fact that in all times the years of learning have been also the years of romance. Those who love girls and boys pray that our colleges may be homes of sound learning, for knowledge is the condition of every college blessing. "Let no man incapable of mathematics enter here," Plato is reported to have inscribed over his Academy door. "Let no one to whom hard study is repulsive hope for anything from us," American colleges might paraphrase. Accordingly in my talk to-day I shall say little of the direct benefits of knowledge which the college affords. These may be assumed. It is on their account that one knocks at the college door. But seeking this first, a good many other things are added. I want to point out some of these collateral advantages of going to college, or rather to draw attention to some of the many forms in which the winning of knowledge presents itself.

The first of these is happiness. Everybody wants "a good time," especially every girl in her teens. A good time, it is true, does not always in these years mean what it will mean by and by, any more than the girl of eighteen plays with the doll which entranced the child of eight. It takes some time to discover that work is the best sort of play, and some people never discover it at all. But when mothers ask such questions as these: "How can I make my daughter happy?" "How can I

give her the best society?" "How can she have a good time?" the answer in most cases is simple. Send her to college — to almost any college. Send her because there is no other place where between eighteen and twenty-two she is so likely to have a genuinely good time. Merely for good times, for romance, for society, college life offers unequalled opportunities. Of course no idle person can possibly be happy, even for a day, nor she who makes a business of trying to amuse herself. For full happiness, though its springs are within, we want health and friends and work and objects of aspiration. "We live by admiration, hope, and love," says Wordsworth. The college abounds in all three. In the college time new powers are sprouting, and intelligence, merriment, truthfulness, and generosity are more natural than the opposite qualities often become in later years. An exhilarating atmosphere pervades the place. We who are in it all the time feel that we live at the fountain of perpetual youth, and those who take but a four years' bath in it become more cheerful, strong, and full of promise than they are ever likely to find themselves again; for a college is a kind of compendium of the things that most men long for. It is usually planted in a beautiful spot, the charm of trees and water being added to stately buildings and stimulating works of art. Venerable associations of the past hallow its halls. Leaders in the stirring world of to-day return at each commencement to share the fresh life of the new class.