“Who Are You And What Are You Doing Here?” Article Review

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Introduction

Mark Edmundson’s “Who Are You and What Are You Doing Here?” is written as direct advice to students entering college, but its real subject is the purpose of education in a culture that increasingly treats a degree as a commercial credential. Edmundson congratulates first-year students and then unsettles them: a meaningful education will not arrive automatically through admission, good grades, or a prestigious institutional name. Students must actively seek courses and teachers capable of challenging their inherited ambitions and their assumptions about who they are. The original review correctly noticed the essay’s attention to students, professors, parents, administrators, and market pressures, yet it reduced the argument to career choice and declining strictness. A closer review shows a more demanding thesis. Edmundson defends liberal education as “Soul-making,” a process through which students test possible values and identities rather than merely preparing to earn income (Edmundson, “Who Are You”).

The Essay’s Rhetorical Situation

The piece first appeared in the Fall 2011 education issue of *The Oxford American* and carries the subtitle “A message in a bottle to the incoming class.” That framing matters. Edmundson does not write a neutral report about higher education; he adopts the voice of an experienced professor trying to reach students before the routines of college absorb them. His audience is primarily incoming undergraduates, but parents, faculty members, and administrators are also implicated. The “message in a bottle” image suggests both urgency and uncertainty: the writer can send counsel, but he cannot control whether the intended reader will recognize or use it. By addressing readers as “you,” Edmundson turns an institutional critique into a personal challenge. Students cannot blame the university alone because they, too, may cooperate with a system that rewards credentials, surface achievement, social activity, and strategic compliance (Edmundson, “Who Are You”).

The Central Argument: Education Must Be Chosen

Edmundson begins by contradicting the reassuring idea that admission itself guarantees education. Colleges contain remarkable opportunities, he argues, but students must struggle to obtain them. The struggle is not primarily about surviving assignments or obeying stricter rules. It concerns attention and purpose. A student can complete every formal requirement while never allowing a book, scientific problem, philosophical claim, or teacher to alter the direction of life. This distinction between schooling and education organizes the entire essay. Schooling supplies schedules, grades, credits, credentials, and institutional belonging. Education occurs when a student encounters ideas seriously enough to ask whether current desires and values are true. Edmundson's claim is deliberately provocative because it transfers responsibility to the learner while also exposing structures that make intellectual transformation inconvenient (Edmundson, "Who Are You").

The University as a Credential Market

One of the essay's strongest sections describes the economic pressures that turn higher education into an exchange. Students often seek a degree because employment, social status, debt repayment, and family expectations make credentials consequential. Edmundson does not dismiss these needs; he recognizes that poverty and student loans make economic calculation rational. His criticism is that the calculation can become total. When the diploma is the main objective, classroom content appears secondary, and students live psychologically in the future job rather than in the present act of learning. This analysis remains persuasive because universities routinely advertise earnings, placement rates, networks, amenities, and rankings. Nevertheless, Edmundson's argument is not that employment preparation is corrupt. The problem arises when professional preparation excludes reflection on what work is worth doing, what kind of success is desirable, and who the student might become (Edmundson, "Who Are You").

The Bargain Between Students and Professors

Edmundson extends the market critique to faculty members. Professors are rewarded for specialized scholarship, publication, grants, professional reputation, and outside offers, while undergraduate teaching may receive less institutional weight. Students, meanwhile, may conserve their energy for friendships, activities, networking, and career positioning. The parties can therefore form an unspoken bargain: the professor avoids demanding personal intellectual engagement, and the student produces acceptable work without expecting the course to matter deeply. Edmundson's description is intentionally exaggerated, but it identifies a genuine conflict of incentives. Scholarship and teaching are not natural enemies; research can enrich instruction, and students can learn how knowledge is produced. The sharper point is that incentives shape attention. When neither side expects education to transform the learner, efficient performance replaces inquiry, and brilliance can become

emotionally detached from consequence (Edmundson, “Who Are You”).

Parents, Administrators, and Institutional Fear

The essay also examines forces surrounding the classroom. Parents may direct students toward secure or prestigious careers, sometimes projecting their own hopes into the child’s future. Administrators, according to Edmundson, are often concerned with satisfaction, publicity, retention, lawsuits, and donor relations. These concerns are not imaginary: institutions have legal duties and must protect students from arbitrary treatment. Yet a customer-service model can make educational conflict appear as institutional failure. Serious teaching may unsettle convictions, expose weak reasoning, or require a student to abandon a flattering self-image. Edmundson worries that universities designed to minimize discomfort will also minimize transformation. His examples of cheating, weak discipline, and fear of controversy are rhetorically forceful, though they sometimes generalize from anecdote. The valid insight is that education needs procedural fairness without promising that every worthwhile encounter will feel comfortable (Edmundson, “Who Are You”).

The Father’s Advice and the Question of Class

The personal story about Edmundson’s father gives the argument emotional credibility. As a first-generation college student with limited financial resources, Edmundson considered pre-law because lawyers appeared to earn good money. His father insisted that wealthy students studied what interested them and that his sons were intellectually equal to them. The advice does not romanticize poverty; it refuses the idea that economically disadvantaged students deserve only vocational calculation while affluent students receive exploration. This is one of the essay’s most important class arguments. Liberal education can be presented as a luxury for people whose material future is already secure, but Edmundson’s father treats intellectual freedom as a form of equality. At the same time, the anecdote cannot solve the modern cost problem. Students facing large debt may reasonably combine meaningful study with practical planning. The story is best read as a challenge to unequal educational imagination, not as a command to ignore finances (Edmundson, “Who Are You”).

Soul-Making and the Revision of Identity

Edmundson’s positive alternative is a college education devoted to discovering and creating the self. By the time students arrive, families, schools, religions, tests, communities, and media have already told them what they are. Those judgments may contain wisdom, but they are not final. College provides access to competing visions of human life: a student can encounter Emerson, Plato, Freud, scientific inquiry, historical testimony, art, and political argument, then test inherited assumptions against them. “Soul-making” does not mean expressing whatever one already feels. It requires discipline, comparison, criticism, and a willingness to be changed by ideas. The goal is neither

permanent rebellion nor obedience. It is a more deliberate identity. Edmundson's strongest moral warning is that a person who never undertakes this inquiry may achieve conventional success while living as someone chosen by other people's expectations (Edmundson, "Who Are You"; Emerson, "Self-Reliance"; Keats, Letters).

Rhetorical Style and Persuasive Methods

The essay's style combines second-person address, humor, autobiographical narrative, cultural criticism, literary allusion, and deliberate overstatement. Edmundson's jokes about reincarnation, university amenities, scholarship, and his explosive father keep a long argument from becoming a formal lecture. His movement between anecdote and institutional analysis allows readers to see abstract pressures in lived situations. He also uses sharp oppositions—education versus credentialing, classroom engagement versus life "elsewhere," self-discovery versus externally scripted success. These oppositions make the message memorable, although they sometimes simplify mixed motives. A student can seek employment and transformation, and a professor can conduct specialized research while teaching with commitment. The rhetoric succeeds because it generates productive discomfort, not because every description functions as balanced empirical sociology (Edmundson, "Who Are You").

Strengths of the Article

The first major strength is moral clarity. Edmundson refuses to equate academic achievement with education and asks readers to identify the values hidden inside ordinary choices. The second is his willingness to distribute responsibility. Universities, professors, parents, administrators, and students all contribute to the credential culture; no single villain explains it. Third, the essay respects intellectual risk. It portrays college as a rare period in which people can examine their identities before occupational and family structures become harder to change. Finally, the article communicates directly with the audience it hopes to influence. Instead of offering abstract reform proposals for committees, Edmundson gives students practical authority: choose teachers carefully, seek difficult ideas, and do not surrender the purpose of college to the easiest institutional script. These qualities explain why the essay remains valuable beyond the specific conditions of 2011 (Edmundson, "Who Are You"; Edmundson, Why Teach?).

Limitations and Necessary Qualifications

The article's greatest limitation is its tendency to universalize the residential liberal-arts experience. Many students commute, work long hours, care for family members, attend community colleges, study online, or enter highly structured professional programs. They may not possess the time or financial freedom implied by Edmundson's model. His criticism of administrators and faculty also

relies heavily on anecdote and broad characterization. Institutional caution about discipline, disability, mental health, and harassment can reflect legal and ethical obligations rather than consumer fear alone. Moreover, the language of discovering one "true" self may overlook identities that remain multiple and relational. These limitations do not invalidate the argument. They suggest that Soul-making must be adapted to diverse institutions and lives. Transformative education may occur through nursing, engineering, accounting, literature, or vocational study when students investigate purpose as well as technique (Edmundson, "Who Are You").

Continuing Relevance

The essay is arguably more relevant in an era of algorithmic career advice, rising education costs, generative artificial intelligence, and intense pressure to prove the economic return of a degree. Students can now outsource summaries and assignments more easily, which makes the distinction between completing work and undergoing education even sharper. At the same time, universities face legitimate demands to improve affordability and employment outcomes. Edmundson's challenge should not be used to shame students for needing jobs. It should be used to insist that employability and intellectual agency belong together. A graduate who possesses technical competence but has never examined evidence, justice, desire, or responsibility remains vulnerable to manipulation. A graduate who has reflected deeply but cannot support a livelihood faces another form of constraint. The best college education joins capability with self-knowledge (Edmundson, "Who Are You"; Edmundson, Why Teach?).

Conclusion

"Who Are You and What Are You Doing Here?" is more than a complaint about lenient colleges or poorly chosen majors. It is an argument that education must be actively claimed against the tendency of institutions and individuals to reduce learning to credentials, prestige, and future income. Edmundson's father supplies the essay's democratic principle: students without wealth deserve access to intellectual exploration, not merely training for economic survival. The article's anecdotes and exaggerations should be read critically, especially because students and institutions are more diverse than its model suggests. Even with those limitations, its central question remains powerful. College is valuable when it gives learners the knowledge, courage, and disciplined freedom to reconsider who they have been told to become and to choose a life with greater awareness (Edmundson, "Who Are You"; Edmundson, Why Teach?).

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