

The Real World of College

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Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe, through Paris and London, through New York and Boston and Concord, through Church and State, through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call reality, and say, This is, and no mistake; and then begin, having a point d'appui, below freshet and frost and fire, a place where you might found a wall or a state, or set a lamp-post safely, or perhaps a gauge, not a Nilometer, but a Realometer, that future ages might know how deep a freshet of shams and appearances had gathered from time to time. If you stand right fronting and face to face to a fact, you will see the sun glimmer on both its surfaces, as if it were a cimeter, and feel its sweet edge dividing you through the heart and marrow, and so you will happily conclude your mortal career. Be it life or death, we crave only reality.

Henry David Thoreau

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ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES, students often speak about the difference between college and “the real world.” The student speaker at the 2003 St. Olaf College commencement told her classmates that their graduation confirmed their status as “real adults.” Our students are told that they need to work hard to get ready for “the real world.” They know that some majors—in science and computers, economics and business—have “real-world” payoffs, but other majors—History and English and the arts—are relatively impractical. Parents and professors warn students that they’ll need to behave differently—more seriously—in “the real world.” They’re advised to take internships to get “real-world experience.” Conventionally, college is understood as a counterpoint to “the real world.” In general, the academic world of inquiry and imagination, of trust and thoughtfulness, is defined as unreal. Once, I even heard a group of my students describe the difference between professors and real people.

Innumerable books and essays reinforce the distinction between college and the real world. An advice column at the job-search website Monster.com begins with the assertion that “the ‘real world’ starts once you’re out of college and on the job.” Maria Shriver writes about *Ten Things I Wish I’d Known Before I Went Out into the Real World*. Chad Foster advises *Teenagers: Preparing for the Real World*. Homer E. Moyer, Jr., describes *The RAT: The Real World Aptitude Test: Preparing Yourself for Leaving Home*. And Stacy Kravetz offers graduates a *Welcome to the Real World*.

Critics of academia (and even some friends) also describe colleges as “the ivory tower.” E.D. Hirsch’s *The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* says that “living in an ivory tower” means “an impractical existence removed from the pressures and troubles of everyday life.” As an example, Hirsch offers this sentence: “Like most college professors, Clark lives in an ivory tower.” According to critics, this ivory tower is both a place and a state of mind where people grapple with intellectual or idealistic considerations rather than practical everyday life. In the bubble, in the ivory tower, in college, we seem remote from “the real world.”

At St. Olaf, students also talk about the “St. Olaf bubble,” the safe space of college, the place where they’re freed of many practical responsibilities (including food and shelter) to engage in other responsibilities (learning to learn). The image of the bubble connotes a dome that encases the campus, a protective shield against many of the problems of other places. It’s an image of campus that emphasizes students’ separation from the real world, their freedom from practical responsibilities, and their submission to rules that inhibit their full freedom.

But what exactly do we mean by “the real world?” What makes it real, and what makes the rest of the world unreal? What does our characterization of “the real world” tell us about our social construction of common sense? What does the “reality” of that world tell us about the social construction of reality? And how does “the real world” of our imaginations affect the way we live now?

The Reality of the Real World

“The real world” is deeply attractive to college students. Most students believe that college should be, in some way, preparation for “the real world.” They’re eager to graduate and test themselves by “real-world” standards, even though they expect them to be more demanding than college life. And this attraction points to a wider web of American values and cultural patterns.

If you talk to college students, you quickly discover that independence is the main appeal of “the real world.” College students look forward to a time without a syllabus, without homework, without RAs, without the paternalistic advice of professors and administrators. Even though *in loco parentis* is obsolete on most of America’s college campuses, students resent even the vestiges of parental care. It’s a rule on college campuses that you can’t like rules, and you can’t like regulations or restrictions either.

In “the real world” world, according to students, you’re finally on your own. You can’t depend on other people to pay your bills. You have to do it yourself. “The real world” is the world of American individualism where the self-made man or woman makes it—or not. It’s where college students find out if they’ve learned enough to earn enough to survive outside the ivory tower.

This emphasis on independence fits perfectly with broader patterns of American socialization. In America, growing up is growing apart. We socialize our children for autonomy; we take pride in their emerging independence. We congratulate them when they can do things “on their own.” In America, as soon as you’re really self-sufficient, you’re grown up. So “the real world” benefits from its associations with autonomy, adulthood, and Emersonian self-reliance.

In America, unless you’re independently wealthy, your independence depends on your income. So students also look forward to the work of “the real world.” In order to pay your bills, you need to work. And in “the real world” you’re not working for grades—you’re working for a living. So the stakes are high. Failure in “the real world” is worse than a failing grade in physics or philosophy. Your job and your lifestyle both depend on your own ability and industry.¹

For some students, the main attraction of work is the work itself. They feel called to serve people in some capacity—in medicine, in law, in teaching, in nursing, in business, in social work—and they look forward to helping to make people better in a better world. For more and more students, however, the attractions of work are mainly monetary. They look not to the intrinsic rewards of good work but to the extrinsic rewards of good pay—not for the money itself, but for the freedom it seemingly promises. At least from the perspective of college, paying the bills is a sign of freedom and a foundation for family life.

Students anticipating the freedoms of “the real world” often forget that freedom can be quite expensive. Once you’ve signed the lease, you’re not free to skip the rent. Once you’ve purchased the car, you’re not free to skip the “low monthly payment.” Once you’ve charged a purchase with the credit card, you’re no longer free of debt. And once you’ve established a lifestyle, there’s more social pressure to upscale than to downshift. In “the real world”—and even on campus—American commercial culture works by persuading us to spend money that obligates us to spend our time at work. We respond by praying the great American interdenominational prayer “Thank God it’s Friday,” and by celebrating the cultural institution we call the weekend. We often buy entertainment and commodities that have been packaged as “escape” thus expressing our distance and disdain for the job. When we do, of course, we actually buy the signs of freedom with the substance of unfreedom. But that’s not how it looks from a classroom or a dorm room.

When you think about America’s social construction of “reality,” it’s quickly apparent that “the real world” is basically the commercial world, the world of American business. When students talk about “the real world,” they’re not usually thinking about love and relationships or friends and children. They’re not talking about spiritual life or religious community. They’re not talking about their leisure pursuits. They’re not talking about travel or vacations. They’re talking about the work world, in which people toil for a wage to support themselves. It’s the world of

the bottom line, the world of money and the marketplace. This “real world” is Darwinian. It’s a man’s world, although working women can be admitted. It’s a dog-eat-dog world, a world of competition and one-upsmanship. To a great extent, what makes the real world real is its hostility. The real world is—in many of our assumptions about it, if not in fact—unpleasant and alienating.

When students talk about “the real world,” therefore, you don’t hear many images of deep human fulfillment. In fact, anticipating their impending engagement with reality, students seem to take pleasure in its lack of pleasure. They assume it will be hard and tough and challenging. They know it’s not as easy as life in college. Their “real world” is the world of Calvin and Hobbes—and not the comic strip. It’s a world of people who are depraved—or at least untrustworthy—and it’s a world where life is nasty, brutish, and long. Often, talking about “the real world,” students sound like masochists, lusting for pain. They seem to accept uncritically the cliché “No pain, no gain.”²

The Reality of the Unreal World

The “real world” imagined by our college students is one half of an American dualism. Americans love dichotomies, because they reduce the complexity of the real world to a single pair. Mocking this double vision, writer Robert Benchley once said that “there are two kinds of people—those who think there are two kinds of people, and those who don’t.” The problem with dichotomies, however, is that they erase the middle ground, the fertile spaces between the poles. A dichotomous world would have North and South poles, but nothing in between. But the real world isn’t dichotomous, even though we define it that way.

If you look it up in the dictionary, the word *real* means: "1. Being or occurring in fact or actuality; having verifiable existence; 2. True and actual, not illusory or fictitious; 3. Genuine and authentic, not artificial or spurious; 4. (in philosophy) Existing actually and objectively." It comes from the Latin "res" which means "thing." The same root leads to *real estate*, and to *republican* (*res publica*—the public things). In comparing possible synonyms, the dictionary notes that *real* "pertains basically to that which is not imaginary, but is existent and identifiable as a thing, state, or quality."

Colleges are arguably real; they occur in fact or actuality. There are buildings and grounds, roads and parking lots. There are classrooms and dorm rooms, cafeterias and bookstores. Colleges are connected to basic utilities—gas and electricity, water and sewers, telephone and computer cables. Colleges have real income and real expenses. Many people have jobs at colleges; in some towns, the college or university is one of the primary employers. College people eat and drink and shit and copulate. At most colleges in America, you can buy a Coke, and, as we know, Coke is “the real thing.” So why aren’t colleges considered as real as McDonald’s or Microsoft?

College professors are also true and actual, genuine and authentic. Shakespeare realized this in *The Merchant of Venice*: “Hath not a college professor eyes? hath not a college professor hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a middle manager is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison us, do we not die? and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?” We exist actually and objectively. So why aren’t college professors as real as lawyers and doctors and insurance agents?

The social patterns of a college are also verifiable. Real people—including professors and students—interact in institutional patterns that have been established over centuries. Real people enact the social roles of presidents and professors, registrars and deans, students and staff. College cultures include observable patterns of human life: deference and authority, hierarchy and inequality, status and competition, politics and power. A relationship on campus is just as real as one off-campus. A kiss feels just as good in college as in “the real world.” And even the virtues of college—truth and beauty, wisdom and wonder, imagination and freedom of thought—are arguably real, since they’re embodied by faculty and staff and students.

Environmental patterns of college life also have measurable consequences. The campus is not, in fact, a bubble, and college campuses are not cut off from the world. Every day, resources from all over the planet flow in and out of the so-called bubble. Trucks and cars come onto campus, along with parking problems, pavement, and air pollution. Few campuses grow their own food, so each campus creates its own foodshed, importing coffee and bananas, meat and milk, fruits and vegetables, beer and pizza from around the globe. Electricity sizzles onto campus in wires, illuminating our lives without illuminating our connections to the sources of electrical power like coal and uranium. Water pumps through faucets and showers and toilets and hoses. If a college campus *is* a bubble, it’s a bubble as big as the biosphere.

Still we speak about college as if it were unreal. Why? I’m not sure, but I have six suggestions.

First, I think we define colleges as unreal because students aren’t paid for schoolwork, and if work isn’t paid, it isn’t worth much. When I was first married, I was in graduate school, and my father-in-law used to ask me what I was going to do when I grew up. He didn’t want to know if I was going to continue playing pick-up basketball or if I was planning to watch a lot of movies. He didn’t care about my sex life or my sleep patterns. Instead he wanted to know how I was going to make money so that I could support his daughter in the style to which she’d become accustomed. When we define reality this way, of course, we forget that much of the

world’s good work is unpaid—like parenting. We also forget that professors are compensated for their academic work. We forget that many students work to pay their tuition and fees. We forget that some students are, in fact, paid to think, because they receive grants and scholarships that subsidize their education. And we forget that, in the long run, the work of college does pay off: the average college graduate makes around a quarter of a million dollars more than the average high school graduate. But these logical inconsistencies don’t interfere with our constructions of reality. If work’s not paid, we think, it’s not real.

To some extent, secondly, we think colleges are unreal because we define them as places of preparation. You’re not a real lawyer until you’ve completed law school and passed the bar. You’re not a real doctor until you’ve been certified. But preparation for the real world seems to be a real-world activity too. We don’t think that food preparation is less real than eating a meal. We don’t think that music practice is less real than a concert. So why would we think that academic work is less real than paid employment?

We define colleges as unreal because students and faculty deal in theory and abstractions, concepts and method. We consider academics unreal because they use an analytical language that’s not always easy to understand. Americans have a predisposition to prefer action to analysis, and we celebrate cultural heroes—cowboys and cops and Presidents—who don’t think too much. We seem to believe that thinking is less real than action, even though almost all action depends on thinking, either present or previous. We forget that business also deals in theory and abstractions, concepts and method—think of “total quality management” or “just-in-time delivery.” The standard operating procedures of business don’t seem theoretical because the theory is already embedded in routines and practices.

Third, sometimes college seems unreal to students because it’s not the world of the news. College students often feel detached from the world, and from news about the world. If things are newsworthy, they somehow seem more real. And the day-to-day life of college seldom makes the news. Students feel like they don’t know what’s going on in “the real world,” and that they’ll be more in touch after they graduate.

The disconnection of college students is, of course, their own choice. They have time to read a newspaper, although most of them don’t. They could watch the news, or cable news channels, or documentaries, even though they watch videos and DVDs of movies they’ve seen a million times before. They even have time to check the news on-line, and some of them do. But on-line news is so superficial that it seems like no news at all; it’s almost as ephemeral as Instant Messenger, which tends to get more dedicated time anyway.

In the same way, in reality, it’s unlikely that college graduates will be more attentive to news about the real world. Given the patterns of privatization in American life—

private property, private enterprise, and personal privacy—we generally don't get more connected than this. After college, students will be working a job from 8 to 5, and spending time on the necessities of life—food and shelter and clothing—that are provided for them now. In the real world of American culture, people usually narrow their focus to life, lifestyle and livelihood—the 20th century version of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Unlike Jefferson, who understood the pursuit of happiness as both a private and a public matter, we generally define our primary pursuits as private. He believed in citizenship; we believe in “sitizenship,” which mainly entails sitting around bitching about the politics we don't support or participate in. In any case, by looking for “the real world” on TV, we ignore the real world on our side of the television screen.

Fourth, I think college is seen as unreal because it's generally a world of enough. Students generally have enough food and clothing and shelter. They can go to the health service when they're sick. They can see counselors if they're depressed. Even entertainment is provided on campus. But American society is, by design, a system in which some people don't have enough so that other people can have too much. In that world, the prospect of poverty makes life after college seem more real than college life. We define the “real” in terms of privation or the possibility of privation. The danger of “the real world” is a defining element of its reality. The suffering—even if we don't personally experience it—makes our successes sweeter.

This explains why many students like rap and hip-hop and so-called “urban” fashions. For young people growing up in suburban safety and security (even when it's mainly mythical), the life of ghetto kids and gangs looks “edgy, gutsy, risky—all that adolescents crave.” Romanticizing poverty and the ghetto, many students buy the sound and look of the city's gritty realism, and they buy into a social construction of reality that tells them that urban poverty is not just different than their own lives, but more “real”—and therefore, more valuable. Like other constructions of “the real world,” this one is paradoxical. Students don't want to live the “real” life of the ghetto; they just want to use it as a way of criticizing their own lives.³

Fifth, I think college is defined as unreal because it discusses and displays assumptions about human nature that are less pessimistic than people in power prefer. College assumes that people are rational, and that they can be improved. College assumes that people are good—or at least that they have the capacity for being good—and that it's possible to make people and institutions better. College assumes that it's important to ask big questions, even if you can't always find the big answers to match them. It's important to ask “What are people for?” because, if you don't, you might settle for a second-rate existence. It's important to ask “What are *my* deepest values?” because, if you don't, you might live a life you don't really value. It's important to ask “Why do we act the way we do?” because otherwise you might never get wise to the whys of your culture.

College is considered unreal, sixth, because, comparatively speaking, people care about you as a person. Most college students are supported in college by families who care for them. Most college mission statements talk about the development of the whole person. Many college classes put that care on the syllabus in the form of questions about character and vocation. Some college students find that their professors and teachers care for them too, although the economies of education often keep that care at a distance. When we think about the real world as a competitive marketplace, we forget the care and cooperation that characterize the institutions Americans love most—family and friendship, church and school.⁴

Whatever the reasons for our social construction of reality, it definitely performs cultural work for us. When “the real world” is defined as the world of the business bottom line, it affects both our perception and our experience. Instead of hope, we get diminished expectations and a habit of settling for someone else's understanding of reality. Having defined reality unrealistically, we're bound to see the world through distorted lenses. We mock people who see the world through rose-colored glasses, but we implicitly praise people who see it cynically in shades of black.

Even worse, though, our conventional definition of the real world makes us irresponsible by defining us—the people of higher education—as unreal. Defining college as unreal, we deftly define ourselves as unreal. Seeking meaning in the culture's construction of reality, we demean ourselves. In the process, we avoid responsibility for our real lives. If accountability is a feature of “the real world,” and we're still in college, we don't have to be accountable. Some students, in fact, seem to use “the bubble” as an excuse to maintain their disengagement from the world. It's easier to blame it on the bubble than to get involved. These people, says one student, will eventually make a bubble of their lives as well. If the real world is somewhere else, we're not responsible for it. Instead, it's party time!⁵

“Get real!”

America's unreal definition of “the real world” has real consequences. It marginalizes values that don't fit the competitive marketplace. It teaches students to suspect care and cooperation, simplicity and humility. It tells them that “it's a material world,” so it also teaches students that ideas and idealism are illusory and ephemeral. And students are taught to believe that interdependence is a fleeting phase of life, and that comprehensive critical thinking is something we'll grow out of. This is no accident. In America, the institutions that offer an alternative to the values of competitive capitalism are systematically marginalized or commodified. The business of America is business, said Calvin Coolidge, and part of the power of business is the power to define reality.

In America, and even at American colleges, ideas are somewhat suspect. Americans worry about the power of ideas, and so we often try to protect ourselves against them. In high school, the student who loves ideas is often mocked and

marginalized. S/he becomes “the Brain,” the nerd, the geek, the dork. There’s more regard for ideas in college, but students with other substantial talents—a passion for sports or fashion or video games or beer—still occupy many of the popular campus hierarchies. American education may be a meritocracy, but students who merit praise from professors often merit scorn from their peers.

In America, often, idealism is even more suspect than ideas. Idealism is the sense that what should be could be. Realism is often the sense that what should be can’t be. So the social construction of “the real world” is a way of hobbling our hope. The conventional image of “the real world” helps us to adjust to the banality and evils of our time. Instead of learning hoping mechanisms, we content ourselves with coping mechanisms. We learn to adapt to the demands of our world instead of demanding that the world adapt to our visions of the good. In the 1960s, critic Paul Goodman advised students to “Think about the kind of world you want to live and work in. What do you need to know to help build that world? Demand that your teachers teach you that.” Much of the time, sadly, today’s students don’t follow his advice. Too often, they prepare themselves to live in “the real world,” instead of the world they really want to live in. Too often, they take courses to fulfill requirements instead of requiring courses to fulfill them and to help them build a better world. And students hardly ever demand enough from their professors or their education.

Americans often remind each other of our social construction of “reality” with the injunction “Get real!” Sometimes this exclamation is just a figure of speech, and it doesn’t mean much. Other times it means so much it’s demeaning. When somebody tells us good news, sometimes we reply by saying “Get real!” We mean “it’s too good to be true.” But we implicitly suggest that goodness is extraordinary, that it’s not in the order of things. We seem to believe that good news is miraculous in a world characterized by bad news. But even though we say it all the time, do we really espouse this pessimistic vision? In America, for example, most of us profess a faith that begins with an affirmation of the goodness of creation and ends with a proclamation of the gospel—the good news. And by almost any standard, this world is amazingly out of the ordinary. After all, we live on the only planet in the solar system that supports life. “If the landscape reveals one certainty,” says Annie Dillard, “it is that the extravagant gesture is the very stuff of creation.”⁶

If “Get real” is a common response to good news, it’s also often a response to statements of hope or idealism. In that case, “Get real” means “It’ll never happen.” When a student says she believes in “practical idealism,” we tell her to “Get real!” When students hope for an environmentally sustainable college community, we tell them it’s not possible. We encourage students to volunteer to help young people or seniors or racial minorities, but if students want to change the structures that disadvantage such people, we tell them it won’t work. In such circumstances, “Get real!” is the voice of practical pessimism. It means “Think like me” or Get hopeless, like me.” It means “Think like the majority” or “Think like all the other people who live lives of quiet desperation.” “Get real!” tells us to stop trying to make our

deepest dreams real. “Get real!” means “Conform to the world, don’t reform or transform the world.”

In this instance, “Get real!” reinforces the standard vision of “the real world,” privileging fatalism over initiative, conformity over creativity, realism over idealism. We can have ideals, we’re told, when other people are paying the bills. We can be idealistic in college, but thankfully we’ll get over it. We, too, can adjust to the cynicism of the real world.

A “reality check” is similar to the injunction to “Get real!” Sometimes a reality check is just an occasion when we tell the truth to ourselves. But in other situations, it’s a way of avoiding the truth about reality. In the first instance, a “reality check” asks us to examine our assumptions, and to identify the illusions that may be causing us grief. We might aspire to be a professional basketball player; a reality check reminds us that we’re not very talented. We might hope to be a straight-A student; a reality check notifies us that we’re not that smart. We may want to be beautiful or buff, and a reality check reminds us that we don’t have the body for it. Usually, a reality check asks us to keep our aspirations in line with our actual abilities, so that we’re not perpetually disappointed. It doesn’t ask us to give up hope; but it keeps us from wishful thinking.

Unfortunately, we seldom perform a second sort of reality check—a check on “reality” itself. In this sort of reality check, people might ask if reality in America adequately addresses the full humanity of human beings, or if our social construction of reality allows for the flourishing of the natural world. In this instance, reality is checked by idealism. In the nineteenth century, for example, slavery was very real; it was one of the primary institutions of American culture. But a reality check showed that it didn’t match American ideals, and so Americans abolished it. In the twentieth century, chlorofluorocarbons made air conditioning a widespread reality. But a reality check showed that they also obliterated the ozone layer, and so international treaties abolished the use of these chemicals.

Sometimes such idealism provides a useful reality check for the so-called “real world.” In fact, one of the primary virtues of today’s impractical idealists is to show the impracticality of the so-called “real world.” In the real world of nineteen major industrial nations, for example, Americans are first in the world in greenhouse gas emissions, and first in contributing to acid rain; first in air pollutants per capita; first in forest depletion; first in paper consumption per capita; first in garbage per capita; first in hazardous waste per capita; first in gasoline consumption per capita, first in oil imports, and first in oil spills affecting our shores; first in TVs per capita; first in cars per capita, and first in use of cars instead of public transportation. Is that practical? Is that realistic over the long haul? How long can we live this reality?

In the real world of industrial nations, the United States is number one in infant mortality, number one in percentage of low birth-weight babies, number one in children

and old people in poverty, number one in inequalities of wealth, number one in big homes and in homelessness, number one in credit cards and in private consumption, and number one in executive salaries and inequalities of pay. We're number one in time devoted to TV, and last in books published per capita. Is this practical? Is this realistic? Is this good?

No. Environmentally, “the real world” is a disaster area. Capitalism has always been a system of “creative destruction,” and it’s been an amazing catalyst for human imagination and inventiveness. But in our time, the destruction seems to be outpacing the creativity. The “realism” of American capitalism is undermining the life systems of the planet. The so-called realists have gotten us into real trouble. And more “realism” is probably not the solution.

In this situation, the actual realists are America’s idealists—people who understand both the needs of human nature (as opposed to their desires) and the needs of the planet. David Orr, author of *Ecological Literacy*, *Earth in Mind*, and *The Nature of Design*, contends that we’re living in a time when altruism and necessity coincide—when the impractical idealists are the consummate practical realists. And these new realists are telling the architects of “the real world” to “Get real!”

Conclusion

All our talk about “the real world” is just that—talk. It’s words and ideas. But these words and ideas can affect our worlds and ideals. They in-form our hearts and minds, our beliefs and behavior. So it’s a good idea to understand the implications of this construction of “the real world.”

If we performed a reality check on “the real world,” we’d realize that it’s not as real as we thought—nor does it really encompass the whole world. Our conventional definition of “the real world” omits too much reality. As we’ve seen, our conventional definition of the real world omits many of the real wonders and pleasures of the people and places that surround us.

Another unreality of “the real world” is that it only includes the human world. By any sensible standard, the real world is much bigger than human games or gains. The real world is the biosphere, a delicate balance of organisms, fluids, solids, and gases that supports life. And if the real-world activities of human beings threaten the web of life, then—quite simply—they’re not realistic. While we’re at college, we may have minimal effects on the bottom line of business, but we have environmental impacts that are real and substantial. And paying attention to campus ecology can remind us of that crucial reality. “The real world,” as it happens, is just part of the world, and it’s manufactured every day by people like us. So if we realized all the implications of our social construction of “the real world,” we might begin to *realize* alternative visions of reality.

One meaning of the word “realize” is “to comprehend completely or correctly.” Comprehending “the real world” of American culture, we can see that it’s not reality, but a social construction of reality. The predominant image of “the real world” is, happily, just a half-truth. It’s true to some of our experience, but not to all of it. It’s like *Catch-22*. In Joseph Heller’s novel, Captain Yossarian is threatened by *Catch-22*, the simple proposition that “specified that a concern for one’s safety . . . was the process of a rational mind. Orr was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask, and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions.” Ultimately, Yossarian discovers that “*Catch-22* did not exist . . . but it made no difference. What did matter is that everyone thought it existed, and that was much worse, for there was no object or text to ridicule or refute, to accuse, criticize, attack, amend, hate, revile, spit at, rip to shreds, trample upon or burn up.” When something as arbitrary or unreasonable as *Catch-22* or “the real world” becomes a part of the social construction of common sense, only uncommon sense can guide us back to reality. When “the real world” results in real problems, sometimes the lofty perspectives of the ivory tower can offer a corrective to practical everyday life.

A second meaning of “realize” is “to make real or actualize,” and the example given is “to realize an ideal.” In the first definition, we get our thoughts in line with reality. In the second instance, we get reality in line with our thoughts and ideals. It’s this sort of realization that I’m most interested in. It’s this sort of realization that’s possible on America’s college campuses. Sometimes the practices of the ivory tower can offer important alternatives to practical everyday life.

This essay makes the radical claim that we don’t just go into a real world that’s already made, but that we *make* the real world in our everyday lives. We make it by our beliefs and behavior, by the way we act and the way we talk. So we need to be careful what we do or say. If we continue to talk about “the real world” as if it were somewhere else, we’re likely to miss the real world all around us. If we continue to prepare to go out into “the real world,” we’ll be unprepared to affect the real world we inhabit now. If we act like “Animal House,” the real world will be “animalistic.” If we act like citizens, the real world will include the common good. When we act on our ideals, we make them real. As we learn an ethic of sustainability, and as we enact it, we can make a real world that’s really worth living in.

The real world *is* out there. But it’s also in here, in our hearts and minds and souls. It’s not just there in the business world; it’s in our families and neighborhoods, and it’s right here in our college classes and the cafeteria. If we want real-world experience, we don’t have to get an internship. We don’t have to move off campus. David Orr contends that colleges are for designing minds, and for designing ideas and institutions that make it easier to be good for one another—and the whole creation. He expects colleges to apply the theories they profess and to practice the values they preach right on their own campuses. Orr agrees with John Dewey, who

said that “education is not preparation for life. Education is life itself.” So we can begin to realize our ideals *in the real world*, where we are right now.

¹ Many students, of course, are working already, both on and off campus, so they’re gaining “real-world” experience. But these part-time jobs—or even full-time jobs—don’t seem to affect the way they think about college and the “real world.”

² In fact, we often seem to think that pain necessarily leads to gain. The “spinach principle” of life, for example, suggests that if it tastes bad, it must be good for you, and conversely, if it’s pleasurable, it can’t be substantive.

³ Alex Kotlowitz, “False Connections,” in *Consuming Desires*, pp. 70-71.

⁴ Of course, there’s a lot of care and cooperation in business too, but within a “real world” worldview, you can’t talk about it.

⁵ Thanks to Breanna Peterson for some of the insights in this paragraph.

⁶ Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, p. 9.