Education Edits:

The Master of Engineering Management (MEM) program at Northwestern University begins and ends with the gateway and capstone courses. The first exposes how little the students know about the realms of teamwork, communication, leadership, and negotiation when they first enter the program and how far they have come in the quest for engineering management expertise by graduation. In some odd analogy to my undergraduate career, my undergraduate years were capstoned, completely by coincidence, by readings from modern fiction legend George Saunders.

The first time I saw George Saunders read I was a bright-eyed freshman who spotted a flyer on the ground outside of Norris. After simply seeing the words “Creative Writing Festival” and a time and a date I headed to the Hotel Orrington and stumbled upon an ornate room filled with high-backed chairs and a full audience. When George Saunders began to read silence fell upon the vast space and I found myself suddenly terrified as the forty-something year old man in front of my reading words that could very well have been plucked from the head of a fourteen year old girl. Maybe not even just any young woman, but the same slightly arrogant, perhaps over-confident but congenial and enthusiastic youth that I had been at that time. After the reading I wandered from the room lost in thought and may have attended a poetry reading for panel during that first Writers’ Festival but all I remember is George Saunders piece and how I could learn to write like that myself.

Fast forward four-odd years to the McCormick Tribune building and a much smaller venues with many empty seats. George Saunders read the same story that day as he had four years earlier and yet how different the words felt knowing he could write in the same way from the perspective of a young man in a marketing prison camp of sorts, or the nervous uncertain head of a coward walking down a river path, or a young child trying to understand the Polish immigrant woman next door. How different I was sitting amongst fiction major who had attended such talks together and read each others writing and therefore deepest thoughts and drank beers together on the porch and chatted class politics and gossip.

After the reading I saw George Saunders give another talk in the prestigious Harris Hall that had been under construction when I was just a young freshman living next door in the International Studies Residential College despite the fact that I had no interest in international studies and without any knowledge that I would go on to study and then live in Berlin for four months and dedicate myself to becoming fluent in German. Professor Nathan Hedman, a former teacher of mine in the English department, spoke in a so-called guided conversation with George about the merits of secondary education and where our universities should be heading in the future.

Over the past few months I have been thinking a great deal about my education and what it has meant to me. To be honest, attending university has been the single greatest and most challenging experience of my life. I easily could have graduated a happy-go-lucky sorority girl or a jaded writing student with no hope of a career but instead I’m somewhere in-between. Attending Northwestern, a school beyond the scope of my family’s personal financial situation, required me to work while studying and therefore develop not only experience but the satisfaction of being independent and supporting myself. It also gave me a chip in the shoulder to compete against the other kids from wealthier families with parents who were professors or had graduate degrees while even attending Northwestern felt like a big step forward for my own. Looking back a little more realistic and less cocky I understand that applying for and receiving grants to study abroad and travel for research was also a nature of the school I attended that could give me the support to craft perfect essays and prepare for interviews, resources many schools simply do not have, but I also know it made me appreciate how much those opportunities can change your life and how great it feels to achieve them.

Which is why I will not leave Northwestern as bitter about certain aspects of my education as I could be but I also find that effective analysis and feedback from students would benefits not only my university but the college system as a whole in the United States. George Saunders attended a specialized engineering program for his undergraduate degree and ended up re-taking most classes after failing his first time through. He went on to work in southeast Asia and as a technical writer and did eventually end up teaching in an MFA program and Rochester but the experiences in-between are what make him the writer he is today. I have many thoughts on how education could be reformed at the undergraduate level. Seeing how closely the advisory board in graduate programs in the McCormick School of Engineering work with the students and staff to continually improve and address problems in the program is fascinating in its effectiveness and far removal from the Humanities education to which I am accustomed.

In thirty years of the Creative Writing program I am fairly certain the classes and calendar have remained essentially the same. In fact, even after the entire rest of the school moved on to the quarter system the writing program remained staunchly semesters only so students awkwardly shift to a second professor halfway through winter quarter. The writing program has turned out some fantastic and creative writers but that doesn’t mean the needs of the students have remained the same. While a Creative Writing Program does not have the same goals of professional development as a technical graduate degree the similar style of specialization almost demands parameters be set from the get-go.

While I love the beauty of experimentation in college and feel it is essential to an effective education it seems the universities have unknowingly shifted to safe environment that neither create challenges for their students nor give them the skills necessary to succeed in the professional world. The equivalent of the capstone course in the writing program is the second half the year-long sequence in which students write a full-length novella in the scope of about five months. While attempting to churn out twenty to forty pages each week and also read the equivalent for four or five manuscripts and offer feedback, in the end every student always finishes the results are not necessarily pretty. So what is the purpose of being able to say that one has completed a novella? I am not entirely sure other than it looks good on a resume, especially for students applying to graduate programs where they will probably complete the same absurd amounts of work shopping while also writing their own novels and short stories.

So now I am slowly coming full circle to the same complaint that many critics of US culture and the education system which is that our writers are becoming cookie cutters. They go from undergraduate writing programs, to an MFA workshop setting, and emerge with no real experience to speak of in terms of interacting with the real world. Yet, when I think of my favorite writer from this year’s festival, John Jeremiah Sullivan, his life has taken a similar, circuitous route. He lived abroad when college did not suit him for a while, accepted assignments at Christian rock festivals and analyzing legends of MTV reality TV fame, and lived in the basement of one of the South’s most historic writers.

In the MEM program at Northwestern students are required to have at least three years of work experience so that they may learn as much from each other as they do from their professors. As a writer coming from a completely different background than most of the engineers and IT professional I write for I have discovered completely new ways of thinking and perspectives on the world. Many of the engineering managers speak to me with a sense of almost awe at the way they once worked in labs without any sense of how their work was having an impact on the real world. They often enter the program with career goals in mind and the program knows and supports this and students emerge one or three or five years later with amazing prospects and usually a promotion or two under their belts.

When George Saunders spoke about education, he wondered out loud if maybe we should simply be teaching our students to be better people as well. During my time at Northwestern we have experienced our fair share of embarrassing events mostly in terms of racism and cultural insensitivity. We have had students dress up in black face and yell racial slurs and throw eggs of students of color. One group thought it was appropriate to wear white shirts and black shorts to a party and call themselves South Africa, explaining their dress as Apartheid “white on top, black on bottom.” Education is a complicated issue and I have no personal solution for the identity of Northwestern or any institute of higher education but it seems to me that the system has fallen a bit off the wayside.

While I do not think it is necessary to define rigid goals for students, I do think that concepts like efficacy and ethics should play a role. While many engineers will leave Northwestern without a single Humanities class under their belts, many Humanities major will have never interacted with a science students in their undergraduate careers. I experienced an almost serendipitous moment in one of my last classes at Northwestern. The course was entitled “Afrofuturism” and explored the idea of black culture in science fiction literature as well as music, film, and performance. Classes were difficult and incredibly awkward at times, especially because our professor had almost no ability to create a comfortable environment to talk about race. For the last assignment we were charged with forming groups and creating a work in a technical medium that expounded upon or spread the concept of Afrofuturism with an accompanying essay.

My group included three fiction majors, two with dual degrees, a computer scientist, and an English major. It was, without a doubt, the most successful group project I have ever participated in throughout my undergraduate career, if not my life. While several of us did know each other from outside of class, we each immediately assumed roles that took advantage of our strengths while trusting each other to follow through. Nadia, the better writer, took on the essay. I succeed at editing and took over the revision process. Nick, our computer scientist, provided the subject matter which was his own personal interest and created the tumblr account we all contributed to. Another member formed a Twitter and we all tweaked and wrote and formed an incredible project that taught me an incredible amount of information about LA Beats music, social media, working in a group, and what I learned during the class in general.

The more I interact with a wide variety of personalities and backgrounds the more I wonder why our education does not encourage more interdisciplinary interaction. Imagine the possibilities in a class that brings together students of all different interests and backgrounds to collaborate together for the greater good. While we send students halfway around the world to study German literature as I did, most student never venture south of Evanston and almost certainly not past the Loop or Wicker Park. I fully believe that students need to feel safe enough to experiment in college, but sometimes they need to be pushed beyond their bounds in order to do so in a meaningful way. I do not know what form such a class or concept could take but I do know that George Saunders is an engineer who became a fiction writer and I am a writer who ended up working in engineering education and I believe both of our talents have found a meaningful and useful home.