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Shaq, LSU, the Degree v. Education

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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Over the past several days much has been written about the graduation of Shaquille O'Neal from Louisiana State University. Indeed the event has been the butt of many jokes, one of which Shaq generated himself when he told people he was working on his degree at Learn Slow University. He now says that LSU means Love Shaq University.

Two things interest me about this semi-momentous occasion. First, the flap over the fact that LSU and Shaq chose to make his graduation such a public event seems silly. First and foremost if we insist that athletes are role models, then celebrating Shaq going back to school and graduating can not be a bad thing. The message that a college degree is important to a millionaire athlete, so important that he would spend eight years in pursuit of it while playing in the NBA and making movies, is at least a marginally significant one.

What is of more interest is to read one of the threads of commentary being written across the country which exposes what is so distorted about how a college education is valued and perceived in this society. In story after story on Shaquille's graduation there is incredulity expressed at the fact that a millionaire athlete would bother to get a degree? Of what possible use could a degree be to a person with so much money? There were jokes about how Shaq now would be able to get a job after the NBA.

All of these comments and many others in the same vein totally miss the point about a college degree. Indeed if the purpose of a college education was to enable someone to get a job these comments would make sense. However a college degree should not be viewed as a job ticket, but rather a symbolic piece of paper that signifies that someone has moved through an educational process and hopefully learned something during the passage. Alas, it should mean that the person who procures the degree is EDUCATED.

It should be the case, although it generally is not, that students matriculate to college to get an education. Of course many, perhaps even most, do not. They go to get the college degree for employment purposes or they go for, as Murray Sperber would have it, the Bread and Circuses. Indeed the perception of the purpose of the college and university in American society as a job-training site is the prevailing one. Even those who

promote college education as something of value often use a market driven value assessment. Charts and graphs are produced showing how much more money the college grad will make than the high school grad over a lifetime of work. The value of the degree is calculated in dollars, not knowledge or education.

So we should not be surprised at the assessment of Shaq's graduation which stresses the financial paradox of the millionaire bothering to get a degree. What maybe should surprise us is that in offering his own explanation O'Neal shows more wisdom than most of those in sportsworld or in the larger public.

In addition to getting his degree to fulfill a promise to his mother, Shaq tells us that he wanted proof that he is an educated man. Within that comment is the essence of the college education. It is designed to produce educated people, and on occasion it is successful in doing so. That Shaquille O'Neal acknowledged education to be the purpose of the college or university should be celebrated by all. In fact this message needs to be shouted from the rooftops.

The New York Times noted that it is clear O'Neal valued his graduation from LSU as much as he values his NBA title and MVP selection. He spoke of his achievement and proclaimed proudly, "I am an educated man." Unlike the "Rednecks" who attended LSU in Randy Newman's song of the same name, Shaq apparently did not "go in dumb and come out dumb too."

Anyone associated with higher education in America should repeat Shaq's message to any and all across the land. The university is designed to educate people, not to be a degree-granting factory.

I for one want to thank Shaquille O'Neal for reminding the basketball world of that reality. Now if we could only get that point across to all our students, to many of our colleagues, and to the sports-writing fraternity who believe the university exists to create sports entertainment on a grand scale.

Who would have thought that Shaquille O'Neal would become a major spokesperson for Higher Education in the new millennium? We do live in curious times.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau wishing you a Merry Christmas and reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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