

## The Face of Ambition: A Harvard Grad Reviews *The Social Network*

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Mark Zuckerberg was an undergraduate at Harvard University when he created Facebook, the online social network. Accordingly, this well-made film about his rise, *The Social Network*, directed by David Fincher and released in 2010, has multiple shots of Harvard's campus yet few scenes of Zuckerberg actually learning. This discrepancy is significant. In truth, Zuckerberg's education had little effect on his character and thus little effect on his career. What drove him was a more primal force: sheer, naked, overweening ambition. *The Social Network* inadvertently reveals the fundamental weakness of contemporary higher education in combating or moderating this force. More damningly, the film exposes an

even deeper fault line in modern education—for the university not only fails to combat such ambition, it celebrates it.

The film opens with an awkward conversation between Zuckerberg (played by Jesse Eisenberg) and his girlfriend, Erica Albright (Rooney Mara), at the Thirsty Scholar Pub in Somerville, Massachusetts, in the fall of 2003. Zuckerberg whines that at Harvard it's almost impossible to stand out. Albright weakly offers her sympathy before Zuckerberg thinks of an answer to his problem: the final clubs. Part-Sigma Phi Epsilon, part-Skull and Bones, they are Harvard's all-male secret societies, and they are highly exclusive. If Zuckerberg gets into one of them, his distinction will be guaranteed.

"Dating you is like dating a Stairmaster," Albright retorts. In response, Zuckerberg condescendingly instructs Albright to support his endeavor. She will benefit from his connections—connections that she, a Boston University gal, has no hopes of making on her own. The comment severs Zuckerberg's relationship with Albright, and she storms out of the pub in protest. Before she leaves, Albright warns Zuckerberg that he thinks girls rebuff him because he's a nerd. The

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real reason they rebuff him, however, is that he's an "a——."

Zuckerberg stomps back to his dormitory, Kirkland House, in Cambridge, where he exacts his revenge on Albright. On LiveJournal.com, he calls Albright a "b——," engraving his epithet into the Web for the world to see. His thirst for vengeance unslaked and at a roommate's drunken suggestion, Zuckerberg creates a new website, Facemash, on which viewers can rate the relative hotness of Harvard's female students—a harbinger of things to come. The site is a blockbuster, getting 22,000 views in two hours and crashing Harvard's server. Zuckerberg earns distinction all right—a nefarious one.

Observing Zuckerberg's social travails and computing skills from afar are the highly accomplished—and monied—Winklevoss twins, Cameron and Tyler (Armie Hammer). One afternoon, they ask Zuckerberg to do the coding for a new website they're planning: Harvard Connect, an online social network accessible only to Harvard students. In other words, an online final club. Echoing Zuckerberg's earlier condescension, they argue that his participation in the project will rehabilitate his image on campus. Disdainful of the twins but intrigued by the idea, Zuckerberg

promises his cooperation. Then he strings the twins along for a month and a half as he builds his own, better version, The Facebook.

Helping Zuckerberg is his best friend, Eduardo Saverin (Andrew Garfield). Saverin buys Zuckerberg's failsafe servers—the key to the site's success—and they launch the website before the twins get wise. After the network becomes popular, they expand it to schools across the country and thereby attract the attention of Sean Parker (Justin Timberlake), the currently broke founder of Napster. Hungering for a slice of this increasingly large pie, Parker has a meeting with Zuckerberg and Saverin, where he beguiles Zuckerberg with his on-the-mark advice (such as dropping "The" from Facebook's title).

Eventually, Parker turns Zuckerberg against Saverin. For months, Zuckerberg resists Saverin's push to put advertisements on the site to make money. Ads aren't cool, Zuckerberg contends. Parker agrees and arranges a meeting with investor Peter Thiel, who later injects a massive amount of capital into the company. Flush with cash—and suspicious of Saverin—Zuckerberg tricks his only true friend into signing a contract that dilutes his share of the company from 30 to 0.03 percent. Always the

cad, Parker eventually gets arrested for drug use and carted off the film.

Afterward, Saverin and the twins, still smarting over Zuckerberg's betrayal, sue. They get hefty compensation for their loss, but for Zuckerberg, the lawsuits are drops in the bucket: he's the youngest billionaire in the world. Yet the boy genius, abandoned by Saverin and Albright, feels a twinge of loneliness. He finds his ex's profile on Facebook, sends a friend request, and refreshes his browser—each time hoping to get her acceptance—as the credits begin to roll. Zuckerberg has gained fame and fortune. Happiness, however, has proved more elusive.

Nowhere in the film do academics appear. The movie takes place on the Harvard campus, but Zuckerberg's classes are just excuses for him to bump into plot-advancing characters. The education, particularly the clipped one Zuckerberg received at Harvard (he dropped out in 2004), left little imprint on his character. Harvard merely provided an environment in which he could let his ambition run wild. And unfortunately, as currently constituted, that's all it's really meant to do.

The scene that best illustrates this point occurs between the Winklevoss twins and then-university president Larry Summers. Using their father's connections, the twins schedule a meeting with Summers to demand

Zuckerberg's punishment for stealing their idea. During the meeting, Summers ridicules the twins' request (he asks his assistant to "punch me in the face" after he hears their opening pitch) and chides them for taking advantage of their family's ties. Eventually, the twins yield in their demands and decide to take legal action against Zuckerberg.

Summers's ridicule, apart from its comedic effect, is significant. He pooh-poohs the twins' accusation of intellectual theft. "Yes, everyone at Harvard is inventing something," he says. "Harvard undergraduates believe that inventing a job is better than finding one, so I'll suggest again that the two of you come up with a *new new* project." The twins may or may not deserve sympathy (Zuckerberg never tells them what he's up to after he takes hold of their idea; on the other hand, as he says at another point in the film, "If you had invented Facebook, then you would have invented Facebook"), but Summers's reasoning is instructive: Everyone at Harvard is inventing something. That's what they do. That's what you should do, too.

Invention is the film's underlying theme. Although he achieves them both, Zuckerberg isn't driven by fame or fortune. He's driven by the belief that creation is man's highest act. For instance, he tells the

Winklevoss twins about a popular MP3 application he once developed and posted online for free. When the twins, puzzled, ask why he didn't sell the program, Zuckerberg merely shrugs his shoulders. Money is nothing to him. Zuckerberg also reveals this belief when he vigorously defends Facebook against Saverin's advertising designs. Facebook is cool because it has no ads, Zuckerberg argues. Anything that diminishes its coolness is anathema to him. Again, his invention's coolness is more important than cool, hard cash.

In a way, this conviction makes Zuckerberg appear admirable. He isn't a sellout. Yet the film reveals the limits to his philosophy. By creating Facebook, Zuckerberg destroys his most precious friendship.

It would be a stretch to say that the film endorses the worth of friendship and loyalty over creativity and ambition. At best the message is ambiguous. But, you might ask, why couldn't Harvard have done so? Why don't all our universities? As Summers's speech indicates, the modern university tacitly endorses Zuckerberg's philosophy. Doubtful that it can transfer truth to the younger generation—doubtful that truth even exists—the modern university encourages students to construct their own truths, their own “values.” It's

the living up to your values that marks a strong person, not in thoughtfully examining or revising them.

Granted, a proper college education might not have given Zuckerberg a much sharper sense of moral compunction. By that point, his ambition, like that of his classmates, was too strong. And the film, based on Ben Mezrich's 2009 book *The Accidental Billionaires: The Founding of Facebook, A Tale of Sex, Money, Genius, and Betrayal*, takes liberties with the facts. Zuckerberg the man is less devious than Zuckerberg the character. Yet the film, if not faithful in letter, is faithful in spirit to the state of the modern university. It is a collection of many intelligent, hard-working people who are unsure of what matters in life, so they construct the things in which to believe.

It's not a terrible way to live, but it's not necessarily the best way either. Zuckerberg—any student really—would have benefited from an education that forced him to wonder about the good life. Perhaps if he had, he would have salvaged his friendship; he would have tempered his ambition. Yes, it's unrealistic to believe that a college education can on its own counteract such a surging force as ambition. But at the very least the university should stand athwart rather than bow to it.