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# Our Universities: Luxuries and Necessities

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## Our Universities: Luxuries and Necessities

There is real work associated with the purpose of the university. Work focused on changing the way people think, and changing the way a society operates. Work building a productive economy. Work that creates enlightened action. It is never about a guaranteed success story. Some of the best success stories come from people who only infrequently visited a university campus.

*"A society that thinks the choice between ways of living is just a choice between equally eligible "lifestyles" turns universities into academic cafeterias offering junk food for the mind."*

George F. Will

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Universities have been presented as a necessity in modern society. This has had many consequences, not all of which have been positive. There's not necessarily a villain, though there have been opportunists, and a few players who could have been more farsighted, or more willing to buck the system earlier. But most of what's wrong today happened because people reacted to a changing environment using rules that were out of context or out of date.

Originally, higher education was the provenance of a select few. Getting in was difficult, and staying in required constantly proving that you were up to a rigorous set of academic demands. Because opportunities for college were rare, they were highly valued.

In the twentieth century, the American educational culture went through several major transitions. The G.I. Bill opened the doors of the universities to many. "The Greatest Generation" built their collective self-concept around heroism, and related heroism to hard work. Servicemen worked in the fields with tools provided by our industrial complex, designed by our scientific minds, and defeated evil, true evil. This first generation of new "college men" was determined to succeed. They had seen the result of hard work, perseverance and applied scholarship. They moved from being warriors to what were seen as the equally heroic ranks of scientists, businessmen, lawyers and doctors, continuing to serve their country as citizens.

A necessity.

This great tide of college graduates changed our view of what it meant to be qualified for a job. Having a college degree came to be expected. Job training gave way to academic credentialing. Since a college education allowed a laborer to move into the middle class, it represented a quantifiable value that could be borrowed against. Money flowed and the business of education grew rampantly. A bubble formed. As early investments paid off, more players wanted in on the

game, and the only way to take in more money, was to lower the standards required of students, just a little.

As often happens, “just a little” compounded over time. Universities responded to their increasing fortunes by doubling down, admitting more students, and expanding programs and facilities to attract them. Students borrowed in order to study. Financiers reacted to high demand the way financiers do. Politicians reacted to financiers the way politicians do. And a Bachelor’s degree went from being an opportunity for students to become more than they were, to being just a reward for attending high school.

No one was looking ahead to see what the economy would need or could bear. People forgot that education should be of some purpose, a skill that someone will pay for. Companies forgot that they needed to contract for the labor of people who could produce something, not just fill their offices with diploma holders. Since education was no longer the point, just the credential of a degree, students began applying who had shown no proclivity for learning. Things kept humming along, as they do in bubble economies, until . . .

. . . somebody blinked. Somebody noticed the emperor had no clothes, and that degreed young adults weren’t producing value commensurate with the salaries they had been told they could expect. The house of cards collapsed.

Now we have to give difficult explanations to hopeful students who are unaware that the rules of the game have changed. Life is often not fair. Some students come from a difficult home life, a weak high school, or experience irresistible peer pressure. Many have been told that they could succeed at college, and that college would make everything else okay.

A luxury.

It is difficult, at times, but universities must teach lessons that help people to succeed. Success is more than a job, but without a job, little “success” can be expected. Sometimes the lesson most needed is a hard one about the critical importance of preparation, judgment and follow-through: a necessity, not a luxury. We can regret the fact that the life student’s had been expecting represents responsibilities for which they are not currently prepared, but we can’t change that fact for them.

And ignoring it is no longer an option.