

2-8-2012

Our Universities: Certification

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Recommended Citation

Wendler, Walter V., "Our Universities: Certification" (2012). *Higher Education Policy Commentary*. Paper 137.
http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/arch_hepc/137

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Our Universities: Certification

In many cases, a college diploma has come to represent exposure to certain experiences rather than individual learning and accomplishment. Absent gross misconduct, everybody passes. The degree is simply a totem of club membership rather than an indication of a developed ability to think and reason. In time, this will bring about the demise of American higher education.

"All greatness of character is dependent on individuality. The man who has no other existence than that which he partakes in common with all around him, will never have any other than an existence of mediocrity."

James Fennimore Cooper

The least valuable thing that a University can give a student is a diploma. A bachelor's degree used to be an identification badge that indicated membership in the professional class. It indicated that the holder was competent to commence the work of whatever discipline he or she studied. Over time, it became seen as the *"admission ticket to the middle class,"* or according to John Lennon, *"a ticket to ride."* I even heard a university president refer to a diploma as a *"meal ticket."*

A hurtful collection of unfortunate metaphors.

Anyone can buy a ticket. It says nothing more about the person who holds it other than how much money of theirs or someone else's they were willing to trade for it. Intelligence, skill and hard work create opportunity and upward mobility. A degree is no longer a reliable indicator that any of these have been exhibited.

A number of forces at work in the environment have led to this predicament.

Grade inflation, essentially providing students grades that are unearned, delegitimizes the grades for those students who have earned recognition. Giving a student an A, when in fact his or her work has been only passable, makes all grades irrelevant. Employers barely look at student GPAs when making hiring decisions. They know the grades are disingenuous.

High costs for tuition and fees contribute to this problem. Often, faculty members - the vast majority of whom are also parents - empathize with the plight of the parents of their students. They fully appreciate the dear cost of a University education, and knowing that employers have come to expect stellar, if unrealistic, grade point averages, they hesitate to saddle a student with the burden of explaining a "C" in a world where an "A" has become the standard.

In this new paradigm, apparently "A" stands for "adequate."

University leaders rely on increasing revenues but fear repercussions from students and parents over low grades. In an effort to keep their customers happy, administrators side with students and their families in disagreements over grades. Instructors, who know that sticking to principles will lead to confrontation from within and without, may feel compelled to acquiesce.

The civil right to fair consideration in admissions has devolved into a perceived right to the successful completion of a degree. Compounding this, particularly during the current economic downturn, the short-term financial needs of many universities may induce them to “provide an opportunity” to any student who can cover the cost of a seat in the classroom, in order for the institution to meet its monthly expenses. The perversion of the concept of what constitutes a civil right further reinforces the commoditization of the degree.

More and more often, I see students whose expectations of academic and career opportunities are divorced from any calculation involving their own efforts, let alone their innate skill levels.

Knowledgeable parents are beginning to ask questions about the ever-rising value proposition of a diploma, if it is little more than a certificate of attendance. Universities and financial aid providers, whose near-term survival depends on high enrollment rather than the successful education of students, make arguments based on historical trends that may no longer be relevant.

Getting a degree is not the same thing as getting an education. If a diploma is merely a purchased good, a trinket that leaves inordinate debt in its shadow in return for a certification with negligible value, universities will have justified the opinion of those who are suspicious of the academic “elite.” These universities will be guilty of dimming one of the principal lights that has guided our country to its greatest attainment: the belief that taking responsibility for our own self-improvement benefits us both individually and collectively.