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Our Universities: Open Letter to High School Graduates

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Dear Graduating Senior,

I must beg your pardon for a somber reflection amidst the joy of your accomplishment: not to be a wet rag on the festivities of graduation, but to shine a light on the realities of post-secondary education.

If you are going on to a state university, your GPA is a 3.5 or better, your ACT or SAT score is at the 70th percentile - placing you in the top 30% of current test takers - and you enter the University this year, about 56% of students with similar qualifications will graduate in 4 years. What's surprising about this number is that it's not higher, closer to 85 or 90%. But college is tough. That is what you pay for.

On the other hand, if you're going to a university with a more typical 2.8 GPA and are at the 45th percentile on the ACT or SAT, the likelihood of finishing in 6 years drops to well below 50%. These are not great odds. These aren't like the odds that you had in high school, when graduation was nearly guaranteed. Success takes more than showing up. Access does not automatically equal success.

It's not surprising that if you are well-prepared for college study – a good GPA, ACT/SAT score, and class rank in the top 50% - you are more likely to succeed.

Nearly 2 out of 3 students on the way to a baccalaureate degree borrow money. This has not always been the case, and this new norm is troubling. While the high school experience is funded by the community, the university experience is not. Furthermore, the drop-out rate for those who take loans is nearly 23%. Imagine taking out a loan for a car, only to find out on delivery that the price include the engine. Now imagine you were still on the hook for monthly payments.

If you haven't achieved solid academic performance in high school, don't believe a university, its leadership, advertisements, or admissions officers when they tell you not to worry about going into debt for your degree. They have no responsibility for making the payments, and they have different interests than you.

They need paying students.

Stoking a deceitful dream of a life of middle-class ease - an over-financed, media-hyped charade - is the real deception, and the weight will fall on your back, not theirs.

It's a shameful, elaborate sham, when 1 out of 2 college graduates this year are unemployable in their chosen field.

Look carefully at the costs and benefits of university education.

University officials may not tell you the truth: enrollments could drop.

Bankers will not tell you the truth: interest income will fall off.

Gorvernment officials will not tell you the truth: elections will be lost.

Talk to family, friends, and educators for counsel, and listen to those who are really concerned for you carefully.

If you choose to attend a “second best” university, you may be lulled into thinking that your chances for graduation will improve significantly. Not true. You will find, at good mid-major institutions and many teachers colleges, that high-quality faculty demand energy, interest, intellectual acuity and classroom performance; and, if you haven't exhibited these in high school, the likelihood that you will spontaneously develop them amid the distractions of university life is nearly nil. There are very few curve breakers.

Maybe you can find a low stress major and get through on little work. You probably won't find a job - remember half don't. Econ 101 tells it like it is –YGWYPF. And if you're borrowing, you'll be paying for a long time.

A degree with a major in a low-demand field, with salary prospects near minimum wage and \$25,000 to \$50,000 in debt - is less valuable than a good high school diploma with four years of experience.

Unenlightened? Call me a caveman. Cruel? I think of it as honest.

Here is the substance of my advice as you graduate.

One: If you have to borrow money to enter a university straight away, don't. Go to a community college. Pick rigorous courses that you know will transfer and get them at an 80% discount off the cost of state university prices. Prove yourself and become eligible for scholarships and grants. Don't borrow a dime.

If you need a boost to finish after demonstrating ability at a community college, borrow sparingly in the last two years, but never in the first two.

Never.

Two: If your life circumstance requires you to work and study simultaneously, do it. There is no law of the universe that says a college education must take four years. If it takes more, and you can do it for cash, do it. Don't borrow money.

Three: Consider carefully with your family, and counselors you trust, the dollar value of your career path choice. Find a way to graduate from college in a chosen career option with little or no debt. I applaud volunteers and humanitarians. I support your desire to do noble work. Just don't go into ignoble debt to do it.

Four: If you are taking out loans so that you can walk to class in C-note Nikes, checking a Diesel watch to see if you're late, you are acting foolishly. Sorry for my insensitive straightforwardness. When every friend you have heads to Acapulco on spring break, don't go. Go do something noble, create capital, work, study. But, don't spend and don't export borrowed capital.

Five: Lastly, if you think you worked hard in high school, know that any university worth its salt will have you working at levels 4 to 5 times more challenging for a good GPA.

If you think this sounds crazy, please, just show this to someone unbiased that you respect and ask them.

When you find your path, study hard, work diligently, and challenge yourself intellectually.

All the best in your future.

Sincerely,

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