

11-6-2012

Our Universities: The Morality of Cost and Value

Walter V. Wendler

Southern Illinois University Carbondale, wendler@siu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/arch_hepc

Recommended Citation

Wendler, Walter V., "Our Universities: The Morality of Cost and Value" (2012). *Higher Education Policy Commentary*. Paper 174.
http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/arch_hepc/174

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Architecture at OpenSIUC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Higher Education Policy Commentary by an authorized administrator of OpenSIUC. For more information, please contact opensiuc@lib.siu.edu.

Our Universities: The Morality of Cost and Value

Universities systematically misrepresent the value of a degree. All degrees may have some value, but how much, to whom? University leadership should help students decide what works for them and why. The idea that any degree under any circumstances has good value is a lie.

“Whereas students’ minds used to be the chief concern of colleges and universities, it is now more their bank accounts (more accurately, that of their parents and of the taxpayers). If students happen to learn anything useful while enrolled, that’s good, but if not, as long as they’ve paid their bills, that’s not the university’s problem.”

George C. Leef

High cost, low value degrees drive students into lifelong debt through specious promises. Even low cost, low value degrees are a sham. The seemingly good intentions of providing everyone a college degree yield little individual or social benefit if the degree is of poor quality, given not earned, in a field of limited or no opportunity.

Political expediency maybe -- long term value -- I think not.

Degrees seen as meal tickets, gateways to happiness, or guarantees of good jobs, create a misbegotten sense of a secure investment for many families and students – and anything that even looks like a degree will do.

Consider this clip (name changed): “**Instant U** has been a provider of quality adult education for over 100 years. Our online bachelor degree completion programs are ideal for men and women seeking a more rewarding future with greater earning potential and job security.”

Even publics are at it. GetEducated.com lists the cheapest degrees available. Not just profiteering privates, but high-minded publics. Trust is evaporating. People expect more.

A degree in literature earned by an intelligent and motivated student with an A- average, providing a means to prepare for graduate or professional study, may have great value. The same degree earned by a student with a C- average, and no intention of graduate or professional study, may provide little or no value in the market place, further aggravating poor return on investment and lost opportunity cost.

The intention and ability of the student makes the same degree simultaneously valuable, or nearly worthless. And if the student and family swallowed specious advertisement and marketing campaigns, they might be choking on high-debt from a low-return investment: An economic ball and chain considerably more confining than ignorance of Chaucer or calculus. Evanescent leadership stands by, watching -- counting heads, hoping to balance the books.

A university that espouses the value of an education without assessment of fit is practicing a form of immorality. If a manufacturer jimmied up the Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) standards at the auto dealership, it would be in court battling a class action law suit. Universities jimmy up faith in outcome while peddling loans to students for degrees that won't get two miles to the gallon while parading as opportunity in Sunday clothes.

We need truth-telling leadership lest the public trust in universities diminish even further.

If truth drives down enrollments, so be it. If universities are seen as employment palaces stimulating local economies, regardless of outcome, students are starved, and communities destroyed. Benefit, public and individual, is short lived when naively proud graduates are left holding a bag marked "The National Interest" has a jester's bauble inside.

Institutions focused on anything other than the intellectual, emotional, physical, and fiscal well-being of the students are on a path of deceit and deception leading to devastating impacts on higher education, a national point of pride for over two centuries.

The value of any degree, if marketed as a warranty for the American dream, is a most miserable mendacity.

Because universities covet tuition and fee dollars, they toy with the emotions and aspirations of students and families. A poor degree with low utility, and all too frequently, high debt, is about what you would expect...nearly useless.

The marketplace relentlessly ferrets out deception but it takes years, while admission decisions are turned around in 24 hours. Open-admission, low/no-standard degree programs, public or private, for profit or not, on-line or on-campus, participate in a criminal boondoggle diluting what should be one of life's great investments.

If our universities reduce the time to degree attainment, and/or the cost of the process, and maintain quality and fit, everybody wins. However, if quality is lowered, standards dismissed, and costs increase, nobody wins: not the borrowers, lenders or institutions – no matter what marketers trumpet, current cash flow indicates or leadership claims.