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Our Universities: \$10K–B. A.

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Our Universities: \$10K–B. A.

Those who champion the \$10,000 bachelor's degree want the imitation to equal the real thing. It is not that the imitation is without value, and surely a real B.A. incorporates too much waste, but neither is justification for the equalization of two fundamentally different human experiences.

"The belief that obtaining a college degree is the only way for young people to find good employment and enjoy a prosperous life is widespread, but mistaken. Having a college degree is neither necessary nor sufficient for success."

George C. Leef -- The John William Pope Center for Higher Education Policy

Last week, my friend Alan sent me a note with a referral to a New York Times Op Ed, ***My Valuable, Cheap College Degree***, posted January 31, 2013, by Arthur C. Brooks. He is president of the American Enterprise Institute and provides an interesting portrait of the rising cost of university attendance: up 18 percent in five years in comparison to a 7 percent drop in inflation-adjusted household income over the same five-year period. The cost increase for university attendance is twice that in healthcare costs over the past 25 years, says he.

Federally backed loans to all who come calling, regardless of societal need or individual ability, has escalated the cost of university attendance. Emblematic of a broken marketplace at work, "*cheap degrees*" are supported by a fretwork of manufactured demand, deceptively developed desire, and taxpayer subsidies warped into wicked wizardry creating high demand, high cost -- \$10K is not a paltry sum -- and often, low value results.

Now, I like the American Enterprise Institute. It stirs my soul and my love of free enterprise. In this case however, Mr. Brooks is all wet and Mr. Leef's comment, "*Having a college degree is neither necessary nor sufficient for success.*" is a tall tree.

Brooks argues that his \$10K—B.A. earned from Thomas Edison State College in 1994, "*... was the most important intellectual and career move I ever made.*" And leaps: it is equivalent to a brick and mortar B.A. This is akin to Abraham Lincoln arguing that everyone should study the law by candlelight in a log cabin because he did. It would have been a good idea for Mr. Brooks to take a statistics class on-line or on-campus to better understand the power of inference from a sample of one.

Technological support for learning will positively change the experience for the pervasive access to insight and knowledge at the touch of a button: most of it robotically

managed with human support, and amortized over so many users that the cost approaches zero at the speed of light.

Mr. Brooks' parents recall his "*gap decade*" as a musician, concluded in Spain on a nearly nonexistent bank account. I would argue, and if Mr. Brooks were transparent he would agree, that "*the musician decade*" was a lived experience that changed his life. I would not suggest that this experience could or should be codified at a university. But, writing off the cost of Atlantic passage and 10 years of lost-opportunity-cost into the \$10K—B.A. changes the tab significantly, in time and money nearing or eclipsing the price of a Harvard B.A.

The lived experience is part of the educational process. Can a person become successful with a low-cost, zero-cost bachelor's degree or no bachelor's degree at all? Absolutely! Great innovators and thinkers have made stunning contributions with no formal education. However, it does not follow that a university experience is hollow, although far too many are shallow.

Professional educators in places like Syracuse, where Mr. Brooks worked and earned tenure, would believe a \$10,000 educational investment might have great value. But to equate that with a campus B.A. is creating a straw man. Memorializing the experience with "certification" is perfect. But, "*Is it live, or is it Memorex?*" should never be a question.

The concept that the mirage of an experience is equivalent to the experience itself is antithetical to American capitalism and the free market Mr. Brooks and I cherish, especially when government subsidies are involved -- which is the case in 99% of post-secondary education: public, private, and for-profit.

Yes, our universities need to change. They are archaic in many ways, bastions of patronage, fat administrative structures, bloated union leadership, political correctness, athletics programs that resemble professional franchises, and coffee houses that belong on the upper west side. These accoutrements might not support the university mission. The \$10K—B.A. as the cure-all for of our nation's ills is likewise a contrivance.

I agree wholeheartedly with Mr. Brooks' assertion that "*...the case for the \$10K—BA is primarily moral not financial.*" But the most worrisome immorality lays in equating an online \$10K—B.A. with a B.A. from a time-tested university. That is a mortal sin, not an ill-defined moral imperative.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. showed more wisdom and insight than a legion of contemporary pundits and educational leaders when, as a student, he penned these words in the Morehouse College paper, *The Maroon Tiger*, in 1947: "*Intelligence plus*

character--that is the goal of true education." Encourage education, not mere certification.