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Walter V. Wendler

Southern Illinois University Carbondale, wendler@siu.edu

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Our Universities: Everyone Must Have a B.A. or B.S.?

We have begun to hold a readily visible evidence of education, the degree or certification, as valuable in and of itself. But these are emblems too often having little to do with knowing something or having the ability to do anything.

No man who worships education has got the best out of education... Without a gentle contempt for education no man's education is complete.

- Gilbert K. Chesterton

On Tuesday, February 12, 2013, President Barack Obama presented his State of the Union address. In it he proposed a concept called the "college scorecard." It's a nice idea and it addresses issues of value as people make choices about college attendance. The five topics on the college scorecard include: cost, graduation rate, loan default rates, borrowing rates, and postgraduate employment for college goers. Who could argue the importance of considering any of these issues individually or collectively?

However, the White House website that supports the college scorecard reveals issues that give me pause, as it touts a number of specious concepts about college that drive the cost up and the value down.

At the top of the list, *"Earning a post-secondary degree or credential is no longer just a pathway to opportunity for a talented few; rather, it is a prerequisite for the growing jobs of the new economy."* Young people and families get the idea that a degree is necessary for a good job and a happy life. It is not true for all. And the fear of being left behind coerces otherwise thoughtful people into poor decisions.

When students are driven to "easy" degrees that far too many universities, public, private and for profit dispense like jelly beans, in a misbegotten form of profiteering, a charade is at work for non-existent jobs and insidious debt.

President Obama offered the political goal, *"...that by 2020, America would once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world."* A noble target, moving the U.S. back to number one in the world from our current standing of 16; however, if the degrees themselves are valued as tokens or emblems, they may represent and advance neither learning nor earning for the holder.

But this goal comes with a price tag. The White House website points out that, *"In 2010, graduates who took out loans left college owing an average of more than \$26,000. Student loan debt has now surpassed credit card debt for the first time ever."* Who is left holding the bag? Students, families and all taxpayers.

And construction on the house of cards continues. President Obama wants to double the investment in Pell Grants. This could be a good idea if the grants were only allocated to demonstrably capable students pursuing degrees in areas where national need and employability exist. Tax dollars supporting the mirage of personal growth, absent any cost/value understanding or truthfulness, is not good public policy, although

it sounds good on the stump. But, how many people with low value degrees are needed to support the “*new economy*?”

According to a recent Georgetown University study, students graduating from architecture school post the highest unemployment rate in the nation at 13.9%, behind disciplines such as fine arts, philosophy and religious studies, anthropology, and history, to identify just a few. As an architect this grieves me as I earnestly explain the current employment projections to prospective students and families. By the time a new freshman graduates, those projections will likely be different and I tell them that too. If they are genuinely good at what they do, they will always find work. They can fight the odds if they want to, but should do so armed with legitimate hesitation, not abject fear.

Universities in concert with state and national government could make constructive suggestions about how to address the demands of “*growing jobs for the new economy*.” BTW, I wish somebody would explain to me what the *new economy* is. I still own stock in the old economy. A person with intellectual insight, skill, and creativity, whether ritualized in formal education, scavenged off the internet, or accumulated through “hard knocks” will have value in the marketplace. Whatever happened to capability as the measure of worth?

To ameliorate the damage of the egalitarian idea that utopia will be reached when everyone has a formal education, the idea itself, fueled by the fear of poverty and/or ignorance, must be put aside.

A few decades ago, presumably well-intended legislators devastated the economy by steering our nation towards pervasive home ownership with undeserved loans for unaffordable houses. A different kind of utopia but utopia nonetheless. Together these desires have driven our nation and citizenry into a mountain of debt, and achieved little in alleviating the burden of ignorance, or inability to innovate and produce, to our economy.

Our universities need to do better. We need to put the student's needs and aspirations first and tell them the truth about the value of a degree in a chosen field: then the student, institution, and nation will prosper. We expect rhetoric from the elected classes, but our universities should be transparent.