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Our Universities: Degree Production

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Our Universities: Degree Production

The number and value of college degrees produced in the U.S. will be a bone of contention for a long time and the marrow of that bone is that the cost of the degree is no longer borne solely by an individual but, increasingly, by taxpayers.

“A \$50,000 degree in art history from Podunk State University is probably a lousy investment. A \$50,000 degree in computer science from UC Berkeley is probably a sensible investment. If taxpayers are funding the degrees, they have every right to be concerned about whether those degrees are worth something. The litmus test is what employers are willing to pay.”

Erik Kenggaard, Huffington Post web commenter

The June 12 headline in the **New York Times** sounds like a marketing pronouncement for higher education: *“Data Reveal A Rise In College Degrees Among Americans,”* opens a story posted by Catherine Rampell. This is not to suggest that the goal of President Obama, and the U.S. university infrastructure, to increase the number of students who hold bachelor’s degrees is a bad idea. It may be a great idea. Rampell points out that 33.5% of the Americans between 25 and 29 had a bachelor’s degree. The National Center for Education Statistics reports it was 24.7% in 1995.

The lack of answers to queries regarding the numbers offer less optimism than the headline implies.

For example, what were the unemployment levels of college graduates in the years of comparison? If people wave college degrees heavenward on the way to the unemployment office, what benefit is accrued?

If universities accept students who are less prepared and willing to pay any price for studying anything on the taxpayer’s trough, of course, degree production, along with heavy borrowing increases. Simple degree production disconnected from national need is meaningless and has little to do with the end justifying the economic means.

Will college degrees fix a broken economy? This is the goal that drives the target and the answer is not obvious.

Are college degrees a means to equitably redistribute wealth in a free society? Does this really trumpet a desired condition where a created equality — everyone has a college degree — promotes a more egalitarian society or simply propagates

unemployable hoards of degree holders with mountains of debt, owed to a nation hobbled by red-ink?

It is easy to kick the can down the road by heralding increases in college degree production. Many elected leaders, appointed university officials, and university boards will be long gone when the markers are called in on university degrees purchased with U.S. tax dollars with no cogent determination of economic or academic value.

A striking similarity exists between degree production and decades of perfunctory pension promises proffered by statehouses across the nation. College degrees won't fix that. As a sad matter-of-fact, most of the people who have installed fly-by-night, fundamentally worthless, pension systems are/were "well educated."

Is it possible that degree production is rising because universities around the nation are pushing people through, accepting students unprepared for college work and inflating grades so graduation becomes a reality while learning is the "shadow on the wall"?

In the *Times* piece, Sandy Baum, a senior fellow at the George Washington University graduate school of education, is quoted, "Think about jobs 15 years ago that didn't need any college education." It is a good point, but doesn't nullify the fact that people with PhDs are driving cabs in New York and people with bachelor's degrees are serving hamburgers. These are dignified occupations but do they require a university degree?

I wonder: How many people with bachelor's degrees earned within the last five years now reside at home with their parents as compared to 1995?

What difference does any of this make if a person chooses to study something that has value, economic or academic, only to them if no subsidies exist? Following a twist on Mr. Kengaard's line of thought, is a \$50,000 degree in art history from UC Berkeley a good investment with tax dollars? How about a \$50,000 degree in computer science from Podunk State University with Grandpa's cash?

Does the source of funds color the problem differently?

No answers today, only questions.