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Reimagining Higher Education

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Abstract

The higher education system in America has taken on a different role over the course of the last two centuries. The shift from an institution only available to young men to a means of economic mobility for everyone has resulted in strain on the system leading to soaring prices, burdened students, and an unprepared economy. After a thorough review of the data, the cost of education along with a confusing marketplace has led students to feel wary about four-year institutions. Furthermore, the change in the very purpose of higher education has led to small universities fighting larger ones on the merits of classical education. Where some schools continue to push for education as a merit, bigger state schools tend to see education as a means to achieving a high-paying job and a diverse network. The divide in understanding the reason for higher education's existence has only furthered confusion about the merits of attending college. To prevent further apprehension regarding the university system, to decrease rising costs, to remove government intervention, and to foster student success above all else, state governments must place an emphasis and education on trade schools and dual-enrollment programs in high schools across the nation.

Keywords: Higher education, economic mobility, trade school, apprenticeships, tuition, universities, student loans, grants

Reimagining Higher Education

Throughout American history, the size, purpose, and influence of “higher education” has varied dramatically. From the founding to the modern day, the very nature of a college or university has garnered a new meaning and purpose. Higher education specifically refers to formal education voluntarily taken beyond the high school level. Alongside the purpose of the higher education system, the economic and social value of a higher degree has fluctuated. As the country has developed, the move from specialized universities to state schools has changed the nature of education. In response, smaller universities dedicated to the intellectual pursuit of wisdom have arisen to fill the gap left by public universities.

The history of higher education reveals a socially complex yet logical line from the conception of higher education institutions, as places exclusively made for men to learn to be part of the clergy, to now being accessible to all as a means of participating in the economy (Pangle & Pangle, 2021). Education has long been tied to economic opportunity and accessibility. While education used to be limited to white males, its accessibility has widened to any who are wishing to partake in the greater economic sphere (Hopkins, 2017). The shift in the purpose of education from an end in and of itself to a means to an end can be seen alongside the shift in the type of economic product of the nation (Carmichael, 1951). As technological advancements paved the way for people to participate in the economy, people desired education to learn about hands-on labor for more than just intellectual curiosity’s sake. Due to the increased demand for manual labor classes, colleges and universities started to offer more diverse classes and appealed to broader audiences. This led to more people wanting to go to university and, as a

result, college attendance began to rise. This would eventually grow into the university system seen today.

With changes in the demographics of people pursuing higher education, and as accessibility to minorities became more plausible, a bachelor's degree has inevitably become economically necessary. For anyone wishing to earn more than the minimum wage, a bachelor's degree is often now a requirement. From an economic standpoint, increases in educational abilities account for 10-25% of all the growth that occurs annually (Rosenstone, 2005, p. 55). The number of students enrolled in colleges across the country has skyrocketed since the mid-1900s. Between 1980 and 1992, college enrollment of 16-24 year-olds who had graduated from high school in the last year increased from 25% to 61.7% and has remained relatively constant since (Karen, 202, p. 195). This data reveals that though the country may remain unsure of the benefits of an education students continue to do so at incredibly high rates. Furthermore, students are attending university without the ability to comprehend or accurately assess the economic ramifications of doing so. Regardless of these two factors, college enrollment rates are not decreasing.

In recent years we have seen the value of a degree continue to fluctuate. Over the same time, the price of a degree has only continued to increase. Meanwhile, the very purpose of higher education continues to be conflicting at best between public and private universities. Because of so many moving parts, not to mention the economic confusion of the value of a degree, it is unclear what the future holds for education. Though more people than ever before are enrolled in colleges, they are also taking on debt and paying for a degree that may not yield as high a return as they had been promised. This paper will seek to further dive into the more specific changes in the system, how the purpose of higher education has changed the economic value of a degree,

and what that effect is on students. Ultimately, the decreasing value placed on education for its own sake and the shift to education being seen only as a means to obtaining a job has had insurmountably negative effects on the higher education system in America. A solution to this problem includes promoting trade schools, apprenticeships, and internships, which would be more beneficial to the general populace and to the American economy than traditional four-year college degrees.

Literature Review

Education has long been considered an essential and instrumental element of American life. Martin Trow, an American academic and prominent education scholar, claimed that college in America has long been intrinsically tied to the American dream. He believes that higher education in most countries focuses on “educating the ruling strata,” while in America it gives “substance to the idea that anything is possible to those with talent, energy, and motivation” (Trow, 1999, p. 312). Another author, W. H. Cowley, who dedicated his life to studying higher education, said that colleges and universities “are the centers and symbols of man’s higher yearning” (1955, p. 31). In examining the history of higher education, it is impossible to avoid looking at the nation’s first universities in Harvard, Yale, and William and Mary (Pangle & Pangle, 2021). William Brickman (1972) described the purpose of these universities to be the education of ministers. Early universities educated those who would become political and cultural leaders. From there, colonial universities then began to expand that mission to include professions and include “general education.” Colonial universities became the American introduction to the liberal arts (Brickman, 1972, p. 40). It is important to acknowledge that these universities were not the first to establish the concept of liberal arts but were the first to bring the ideas of Plato and Aristotle to America. The very first understandings of universities come from

Plato and Aristotle's understanding of the Socratic dialogue, in which knowledge is refined through conversation and literature (Schult, 2008). Soon after the founding, education grew from a focus on clergy to an institution providing general knowledge. Education would remain this way for some time.

For a century, education's purpose remained rooted in the missional direction. Then, in the late 1800s, after the Civil War had concluded, colleges began to appear more like the elite institutions seen today (Trow, 1999). Where higher education used to be deemed "classical and static" it was now becoming slowly more accessible and refined (Britton, 1956, p. 256). One of the biggest changes to the higher education system came from the Morrill Land Grant College Act of 1862 (Carmichael, 1951). This act set aside federal lands for universities for the purposes of mechanical and agricultural and mechanical arts. This allowed a way for universities to begin teaching practical sciences (Pangle & Pangle, 2021). The act accounts for a fundamental shift in the general thought process behind education. College was no longer for just the "well-to-do," but had expanded to include farmers and agricultural workers (Carmichael, 1951). Through the late 1800s, "utility was emphasized, not mental discipline" (Carmichael, 1951, p. 146). This dramatic change altered not only the way that universities saw themselves but also the types of students they were attracting. Not only did access to education expand, but the desire for it grew as well since individuals could be educated in fields applicable to their desired careers.

Soon after this fundamental change, the president of Harvard in 1869, Charles E. Eliot, altered the way universities functioned by promoting the "elective system." Eliot suggested liberal education was the enemy of progress (Cowley, 1955, p. 29). He urged the use of the elective system, as opposed to liberal arts or general education, because he believed that traditional courses did not embrace useful knowledge (Carmichael, 1951). With this shift at

Harvard, classical education was replaced with the elective system in many American universities. Many students were in favor of this freedom because it meant they got to craft an education entirely of their own making. Furthermore, they continued to demand more “practical subject matter” in the classroom (Carmichael, 1951, p. 147). The fight between classical education and the elective curriculum system lasted decades. It was not until post-World War I that Honors courses, school reform, and Great Books programs emerged to try to shift the university back to classical education. The ultimate price of this has been, according to Martin Trow, that smaller schools continue to become more refined in their unity and are focused on post-graduate degrees while larger universities continue to expand to serve the largest number of students (Trow, 1962).

This demand for more practical education, accompanied by changes in technology and increased enrollment, has continued to alter university demographics. From 1970 to 1996 enrollment increased over 66%, enrollment of males dropped from 15%, and students enrolled in two-year universities increased 11% (Karen, 2002, p. 194). This increase in enrollment, which brings an increase in funding, encourages universities to standardize their offerings in order to attract more students. As studies continue to show, these graduates account for 10-25% of all economic growth, the education system is positively reinforced to continue to educate students in more practical manners (Rosenstone, 2005, p. 55). Unfortunately, this has led to college becoming more of an experience than an education, as schools design curriculum to provide employees with students that are trainable, according to Steven Brint and Charles Clotfelter (2016). The increasing population and decreasing value of a degree challenges the purpose of education. As the professional middle class grows, it seems more appealing for college to provide useful skills. The problem arises, as colleges become more fragmented, they attract too

many students which leads to an excessive number of students with college degrees relative to the number of attractive jobs available (Muller, 1974). Since many students have already been attracted and the colleges need the money, a feedback loop is created as colleges wrestle with how to provide quality education to a high quantity of students.

The back and forth between classical and practical education continues to plague the university system. As the American economy becomes increasingly dependent on those with higher education degrees, universities are financially incentivized to attract and produce students with a degree of any kind regardless of its utility or lack thereof. To account for this, the education gap differs between those who attend public and private universities. Smaller universities are increasingly likely to provide a more classical education while larger universities continue to grow and provide a more fragmented education. This literature reveals how the American economy has dramatically shifted the purpose of education from a means of acquiring knowledge to one of acquiring career skills. Technological advancements, agriculture, and changes in professional demands have all influenced the university system. After centuries of discussion, the university system is at an impasse regarding whether to provide what is morally beneficial as opposed to what is economically useful. As the American public strays from a universal concept of morality, the concept of practical education continues to take precedence. This reveals that on a large scale, the purpose of higher education is focused on utility and practicality rather than classical liberal training in the pursuit of knowledge.

Issues Surrounding Higher Education

There are a variety of means for addressing the issues pertaining to higher education and its purpose in society. First, it is important to consider the return on investment when looking at higher education. The specific issue regarding the cost of college is whether or not people see a

worthwhile return on their investment (Blundell, Dearden, Meghir, & Sianesi, 1999). As the costs of college rise, it becomes difficult to assign a value to a college degree. Additionally, the costs bring up the question of what role federal and state governments should play in providing financial aid to students (Hahn, 2023). These questions then spark concerns over whether higher education should even be pursued, or if there are other means by which to decrease demand and decrease the price of higher education.

While considering the individual costs and benefits of a college education is necessary, it is also important to focus on what the economic benefit of a degree is to the general public. One issue that arises when discussing higher education is the topic of whether the government should subsidize degrees that are not seen as significantly beneficial to society. For example, if the government offers student aid should it focus that aid on doctors and nurses or to gender studies majors? Is that kind of discrimination beneficial for society, or problematic? Similarly, since the economic return on the degrees is also numerically inflated, there is a question as to why public policy encourages all individuals to go to college regardless of interests. Furthermore, those who study the economy continue to raise questions surrounding what industries are continuing to grow and whether they will require a college degree to enter (Burke, 2018). The issues surrounding higher education revolve around costs and whether the economic return for both the individual and society continue to be worth it, even as tuition prices continue to soar.

The Economy for Higher Education

Understanding the return on investment on a degree of higher education to the individual is a complex matter. Most studies find that, on average, there is a positive correlation between holding a higher education degree and economic success. In the United Kingdom, one study found that for an additional year of education men saw a 5.5% rate of return and women saw a

9.3% increase in wages (Blundell, Dearden, Meghir, & Sianesi, 1999). However, these numbers depend on what field one is going into. For example, those in biology or chemistry received higher rates of return. Another study investigated the empirical data comparing men and women's earnings with and without different higher educational degrees. They looked at twenty-year cumulative earnings comparing men, women, different races, and what kind of higher education they received. The results showed that for men with some college or no degree the median cumulative earnings was \$664, 248, which was 15% higher than those who were just high school graduates (Kim, Changhwan, & Tamborini, 2019). That number jumps to 48% higher cumulative earnings for men with a bachelor's degree as opposed to a high school diploma (Kim, Changhwan, & Tamborini, 2019). Furthermore, these numbers are dramatically different for men and women, with women's cumulative earnings after 20 years with an associate's degree nearly 40% lower than a man's (Kim, Changhwan, & Tamborini, 2019). For both genders, however, the median earnings did increase alongside education.

Another study done during the same period found similar results. For men, the return on investment tends to be significantly higher, but the return seems to exist for both genders. The median earnings for a man aged 45 to 49 with a high school degree in 2015 had a median earning of \$45,000 while those with a college degree had a median earning of \$81,000 (Krueger, Dehry, & Chang, 2019, p. 58). For women in the same age range, the respective annual wages were \$33,000 and \$55,000 (Krueger, Dehry, & Chang, 2019, p. 58). Overall, this study found that the additional lifetime earnings for a baccalaureate degree was \$628,000 for men and \$459,000 for women (Krueger, Dehry, & Chang, 2019, p. 63). Taken together, this data reveals that even with a discrepancy in how much they are making, education levels do affect average earnings for everyone.

What is more still is that the benefits of a college degree do not stop at the basic wage benefits. Research has consistently shown that while college graduates earn more than high school graduates, they are also more likely to have a position with “greater nonwage compensation” (Burke, 2018, p. 350). Some say (who says) the return on a college degree is enough to repay the degree multiple times over, estimating that the lifetime earnings of those with a four-year degree is over \$1.5 million times higher than those without. (Burke, 2018, p. 350) Further still, those with higher levels of education also tend to remain employed, are promoted, and receive raises at a higher rate. The Federal Reserve reveals that those with a college degree experience the lowest unemployment rates (Burke, 2018, p. 351). The National Center for Education (May 2022) confirms these statistics once again, proving without a doubt that there are economic benefits not only by way of wage but also through additional social benefits.

One important economic consideration is the cost of higher education. Increasing prices of education has affected and continues to affect the ability for many to attend college. If education is a benefit to all in the earnings sector, everyone should take the opportunity to further their education. Though a net good, the cost of education in America has risen dramatically over the last few decades. There are a few theories as to why this is the case. One theory is that colleges are only able to offer higher levels of education if they are willing to spend more per unit (Archibald & Feldman, 2008). These costs include providing new technology and software to classrooms. The theory also suggests that colleges are constrained by their budgets, so if tuition does not increase, they are not able to continue to provide better goods or education to attract new students.

As costs for education rise, students are increasingly unable to pay for degrees to benefit their future careers and the question becomes like the chicken or the egg: is education becoming more expensive because more people can access it due to government intervention, or is the government getting involved because the demand for education is real and the costs are merely increasing? One study revealed that from 1990 to 2000 the percentage of students receiving aid rose from 56% to 72% in just one decade (Burke, 2018, p. 362). In 2012, this means that full-time undergraduate students who received aid were receiving an average of \$11,170 in aid (Burke, 2018, p. 362). These numbers look small when compared to the fact that there is over \$1.7 trillion in total debt in America (Hahn, 2023). Studies from the Federal Reserve have also found that for every dollar that was given out by a Pell Grant tuition rose 40 cents and for every dollar given in federal student aid it increased 63 cents (Burke, 2018, p. 365). The question remains unanswered regarding the relationship between federal aid and tuition rates. Since the Higher Education Act was passed, it has been an agreed upon fact that increasing costs should not bar someone from college (Burke, 2018). That, however, has not answered how that tuition should be paid for, and what effect it has on other tuition rates.

Understanding the value of a higher education degree is further complicated by understanding what kind of jobs the economy is seeking. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics only seven of the fastest 30 growing jobs will require a bachelor's degree within the next decade (Burke, 2018). Smaller still, only accountants and college professors, will require a college degree (Burke, 2018). Meanwhile, the need for registered nurses, aids, customer service representatives, and clerks also are increasing (Burke, 2018). Some are sounding the alarm for the fact that while economically a college education is unequivocally beneficial, the question remains if it is what the economy is going to be demanding. Within the next decade the fastest

growing occupations according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics are going to be nurse practitioners, wind turbine service technicians, ushers and lobby attendants, motion picture projectionists, cooks, data scientists, athletes, and 13 other jobs that do not absolutely require a college degree (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). If this data proves true, then it is unclear how a college degree will pay a valuable return on investment. Though there is artificial demand for college educated workers, the economic demand may not reflect that. This continues to raise the question of why everyone should be forced to obtain a degree in a field that may be obsolete or harmful to their future work prospects.

Continuing the thread of different sectors, the level of benefit a college degree will add to someone's earnings are strongly dependent on what they are getting a degree in. Those in business, health, and STEM fields see overwhelmingly more benefits than those in other fields (Kim, Changhwan, & Tamborini, 2019). In comparison, those in education do not see as high of a return on their investment. Overall, this serves to demonstrate that where a college degree is not necessary, a college degree should not be required of an employer. By forcing individuals to put themselves in debt where they will not see a return on investment, the American economy continues to perpetuate the unhealthy belief that everyone must attend college. While it may be a worthwhile investment to some, the fact remains that not every job will yield better results if the employee has a higher degree. Therefore, while it is important to admit that some job markets should fairly demand, and incentivize, individuals getting degrees, others must forgo the requirement entirely.

Possible Policies

This paper recommends three possible solutions to improve life after secondary school in America and remove apprehension regarding the university system.

Encourage Trade School/Dual Enrollment in High School

The first policy proposal deals with addressing the demand side of college. Since the purpose of college has changed over the years, it is no longer necessary for everyone to attend a four-year university – especially when this leads to increased debt. This proposal would mandate a new national standard for high schools in which students can take classes at a trade school of their choice as an elective for the final two years of school. There would be a partnership on the side of the trade schools, but the programs could be government funded. The main aim would be to expose students to a new, more fiscally responsible, option for a post-high school future.

In exposing students to a variety of options, many who might receive government aid to receive a degree they were not intentional about could go into an industry where they may find their passion. The indirect benefits of drawing demand away from universities would be that it could also drive down the costs of the college experience. Unfortunately, even if these programs were offered and highly encouraged by counselors, there are few means to ensure that students would partake in them. Furthermore, trade schools would have to agree to participate in these programs with local high schools.

Targeting Government Aid

Another option for dealing with the high demand for education would be for the government to only provide aid for those that are receiving certain types of degrees. For example, the federal government might only provide aid to those seeking an MD or JD. In this case, only those with sincere ambitions of receiving an education would obtain anything other than those two degrees. This would continue to ensure that demand is not artificially high, as the government is not backfilling the funding for economically disadvantageous degrees.

On the negative side of this legislation, people who truly want to attend college would be left out of receiving government aid. Furthermore, someone would have to be on the deciding end of which degrees would receive financial assistance and which would not. Those decisions, if made based on economic calculations alone, could prove to be advantageous to society. Once again, there is no guarantee this would decrease college attendance, but it would ensure that the government is spending only money that it believes it will see a return on investment on.

Two Free Years of Community College

To address both the cost of college and the desire of so many to attend, another option is to enact what localities around the nation have adopted on a much smaller scale. The federal government could provide two free years of a college education to every student. This could also address the change in education that has occurred over the centuries by ensuring that part of this education represents a return to a classical education while the rest is pragmatic and related to hand-on applicable experience. After college, this would provide those wanting to attend college with the opportunity to attend their first two years while also giving them a chance to learn about other possible options.

A potential downside of this could follow students attending two-years of college, creating an environment where holding an AA is the equivalent of a high school diploma. If this were to occur, the benefits of providing this would economically diminish. Furthermore, students may treat this as additional years of high school and while they may take advantage of it, it may not be taken as seriously as a four-year university would encourage. Also, there could be ramifications to the concept of a four-year university if students only needed additional college for two years after attending community college.

Final Policy Recommendation

The policy recommendation that would see the most benefit on implementation is providing states with ample funds for students attending trade schools while still in high school. Practically, this would be legislation by Congress and carve out funding for each state to support new faculty and programming for students to be educated on opportunities that are not just college for their post-graduation plans. Furthermore, it would be earmarked specifically for this purpose, so schools would be required to show proof of working with trade schools and local community colleges for dual enrollment credits. By creating state systems and stable communities of students that are exposed to a variety of other fields. This only further addresses the potential economic gap that may occur where there is going to be an expanse of jobs in the future left unattended. If students are encouraged to explore these interests without a cost to them, their time and energy could be devoted to something they are passionate about before they have the chance to add to the growing amounts of debt that already exists in the country. The final two years of high school represents an ideal time for students to be offered opportunities for educational and career advancement. By taking these students out of the four-year system there will also be less demand for college in general and costs could see a decrease.

This policy also addresses the question of the purpose of a college education by ensuring that only students who intend to pursue economically viable degrees are spending their money on institutions. Those who wish to attend specific schools for their educational aims, such as Great Books programs, or those who wish to enter the professional world of doctors and lawyers will be the ones encouraged to attend four-year universities. By encouraging students before they get into the system, both students and the universities will benefit. While students will save money and find their passion, university costs will decrease, and their mission will re-focus. By focusing on students before they get to college and taking them out of the hands of college guidance

counselors, universities will be able to reexamine what their missional purpose is, as opposed to trying to appeal to the broadest audience possible. This will also decrease their costs as funding will follow what they choose to specialize in. While this policy requires intervention from both the state and students, it also represents the clearest way to encourage student involvement with the economy and community while also still giving them a say in their own future and additionally lessening the strain on the university system.

Conclusion

College is not for everyone; there are no statistics or economic models that can predict accurately whether someone will greatly benefit from going to college. It is clear from the data and research that those who choose to attend college, and pursue degrees that will benefit them, do end up making more than those who do not. Therefore, it should be the job of any government or society to encourage individuals to go to college only when they can professionally benefit from it.

Since its conception college has shifted from an institution that began with the purpose of holding Socratic discussions and training young men for the political world, to now where college has taken on a new role following the industrial development of the nation. Though it once had been a place for classical study, it is important to also acknowledge its significance for what it has become. While trade schools and smaller liberal arts colleges have a negligible effect on the general economy, what matters to the economic prospects of the nation regarding research, development, and international competition are larger universities. As those universities have continued to expand and generalize their studies it is important to consider what they are lacking. Just because they add advancements to society does not mean that every high school student should attend college. It is with this desire in mind that a proposal for federal aid

to support high school programs encouraging attendance at trade schools or local community colleges is supported. If high school students are allowed to explore their interests without the threat of debt, they will be better equipped to serve the economy.

As the economy continues to shift and develop, and college continues to take on an economic sector of its own, it will be necessary to ensure high school graduates possess all the information they need to make informed decisions. While a college degree can almost guarantee a higher income, that is not reason enough to take on debt and pursue a degree in something one may not wish to do for a living. Ultimately, in a healthy society that recognizes that earning money is not the sole purpose of individuals, students will be supported in pursuing their passions. Encouraging students to follow their interests might lead universities to reconsider their purpose and rededicate themselves to training students who need to study under professionals to become one themselves. If higher education does not soon meet reform, skyrocketing costs for minimum wage jobs threaten to either bankrupt the next generation or lock them out of the workforce entirely. Students and universities alike need relief, and money alone will not solve the problem but an institutional shift away from the idea that everyone must go to college to succeed could help the problem.

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