

Views

The University vs. Liberal Education

October 14, 2010

By [Dan Edelstein](#)

It has by now become received wisdom: college students today are less interested in traditional subjects, and have become more professionally oriented. They've voted with their feet, choosing business, pre-med, and engineering majors over German, art history, or comparative literature. Clearly, it's in the zeitgeist. Unfortunately for humanities professors, however, lower enrollment can translate into the elimination of entire departments: just ask [German professors at the University of Southern California](#). But what's to be done? The client is king, and students are our clients in higher education. The only problem with this logic is that universities in fact bear a considerable responsibility for the brain drain away from the humanities. By raising the cost of education to stratospheric levels, we oblige students to seek a higher return on their investment. It is this sort of economic calculation, I suggest, and not some alleged generational change, that is driving students in droves towards preprofessional degrees.

The rising cost of undergraduate education, especially at elite private institutions, has understandably become in these unforgiving economic times a target of much angst. Particularly jarring, for critics, is the increase in expenses related to administrative support: the percentage of [staff who do not teach](#) at Williams College – 70! – is routinely portrayed as thick layer of glut, ready-made for the chopping block.

I happen to disagree with most of these critics. Having gone to a public university in Europe, I am incessantly amazed by the advising, counseling, curricular opportunities, and overall support that students receive at Stanford University, where I teach. I remain profoundly jealous of their education, which I believe is second to none. At the same time, I am not blind to the source of this charmed life. It's frightfully expensive to employ the staff needed to run the overseas programs, writing centers, freshman seminars, extracurricular activities, summer school, etc., that help make Stanford the university it is. I do not doubt administrators when they say that the average cost per student exceeds the already obscene tuition fees charged.

While the skyrocketing cost of college education is no doubt inexplicable from the outside (why should tuitions increase at a pace far faster than inflation?), the answer, from the inside, appears fairly humdrum. Put simply, universities are engaged in an arms race: they compete to bring the best-armed students to their campuses. This means incessantly inventing new programs. Stanford offers freshman seminars? Harvard will too! Yale has highly rated residential education? Penn must improve! Top schools similarly compete for faculty [academostars](#), luring them not only with high salaries and other perks, but also a reduced teaching load. The price for such celebrity academics, of course, gets passed on to the student. This arms race at the top – and liberal arts colleges seem to suffer from the same educational-industrial complex – thus drives the cost of attending the Ivies way up. And when students have to pay 40 grand to attend Cornell, other colleges and universities must raise their tuitions as well, to stay in competition.

The exponential rise of tuition costs is not, therefore, the result of some nefarious plot. Most professors (alas) are not lining their pockets, and the salaries of top administrators are still dwarfed by those of CEOs in the private sector. The money raised by higher tuitions does actually provide students with more services and opportunities. To repeat: I am unceasingly jealous of my students at Stanford. But there is a hidden cost: once students (or their parents) are called upon to deliver their pound of flesh, they fall under a huge amount of pressure to make that investment pay.

I cannot help contrasting this situation with my own experience as a student, at a public university in Switzerland. I paid the equivalent of \$35 a semester in tuition; halfway through my studies, the price was raised, after much protest, to \$300. It was a fairly bare-bones experience: our professors were world class, but there was zero support for students. We had no advisers, no writing center, no extracurricular activities, no dorm – we didn't even have a graduation ceremony. Because the cost was so low, however, we had

remarkable freedom – freedom to take as many seminars as we wanted, to space out our exams, to try out new subjects, and more generally, to take as long as we wanted. I spent six years as an undergraduate, the norm at the time (although you could technically graduate in four).

European universities are now in a different sort of financial crisis, and I doubt we have many administrative or curricular lessons to learn from them. But they do remind us that the cost of an education can act as a filter for intellectual choices. Students will be far less willing to take risks when they're paying a fortune to enroll. It's not the zeitgeist: it's common sense.

The irony, of course, is that a B.A. in French or classics provides students with many of the qualities that employers most commonly request, such as critical thinking, cultural proficiency, and good writing and communication skills. A solid liberal education is just as beneficial for the vast majority of professions; in addition, it prepares for a life well-lived, and not just for a career. But if universities continue to charge as much as they do, they will progressively steer students away from the very subjects that, until recently, constituted the very core of the university.

There is no easy or obvious remedy for this situation. It is hard to imagine an incoming university president at a leading institution, say, pledging to halve tuition. Of course, at institutions with large enough endowments to offer generous financial aid packages, a considerable percentage of students do not even pay full tuition. But these institutions can probably be counted on two hands; the vast majority of colleges and universities depend heavily on tuition to fund instructors and staff, sustain campus buildings, pay heating bills, etc. Some have suggested cutting back on athletic facilities or other extracurricular programs, yet in many cases the funding for these expenditures comes from targeted donations.

Until the tuition imbalance stabilizes – and eventually Congress may well intervene to ensure that it does – humanities departments need to act more aggressively to ensure their survival. Increasing the turnout of majors may be beyond our reach, but we perhaps need to rethink the relationship between research and teaching. Do highly specialized courses offered by individual departments provide the best kind of background in the humanities for students headed for careers in law, engineering, finance, or science? Or do we need to offer more cross-disciplinary courses, ideally team-taught by faculty from different departments, on core questions and topics in the humanities? The bulk of our teaching is geared toward majors and graduate students. If we do not want to be the victims of the next recession (or, if it lasts long enough, the current one), we also need to target those students who feel they do no longer have the luxury of specializing in a humanistic subject.

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