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### The Downward Push in American Higher Education

March 21, 2011, 7:12 pm

By [Frank Donoghue](#)

This thread of posts follows from my last, in which I looked at the new conservative critique of higher education, as articulated by Jackson Toby and Richard Vedder. Their argument focuses on whether a college education, like K-12 schooling, should be a social entitlement, funded in one way or another by the government. Both Toby and Vedder conclude that it can't be: that the government—state or federal—can't afford it, and that, in any case, not everyone belongs in college.

I then looked at the traditional liberal defense of the college-for-everyone idea, and found that even the staunchest defenders of broad access to public higher education, such as former University of Michigan president James Duderstadt, have the same worries about finances as Vedder does—worries that are only being exacerbated in the current economic climate.

Today I would like to resume that discussion in a somewhat oblique way: I'll start by revisiting the ideas that 1) college may or may not be for everyone, and 2) that college costs too much—but I'll end up, as my title indicates, reflecting on for-profit colleges.

First, some basics. The U.S. currently lags behind other developed nations in college-graduation rates. This is now a well known fact. We're currently 12th in the percentage of 25-34 year olds who possess at least an associates degree. Numbers one through six are: 6. Ireland, 5. New Zealand, 4. Japan, 3. Russia, 2. South Korea, and 1. Canada. We also lag behind Norway, Britain, the Netherlands and Belgium. The Obama administration has chosen to see these rankings as a national embarrassment. In February, 2009, Obama set out a plan to graduate 5 million additional community-college students (the American Graduation Initiative) and for the U.S. to retake the lead in college graduation rates by the year 2020.

From my perspective, there are serious conceptual problems with this plan. First, it presupposes that college should be a social entitlement, and Toby and Vedder have made me skeptical about that notion. Second, it presupposes that formal higher education is the single biggest factor in professional and social success. That's just not true: my plumber, my electrician, and any contractor I've ever hired make more money than I do as an associate professor of English at Ohio State; were I more vain I'm sure I could find a hair stylist who would also fit into that category of high earners.

The fetishization of formal education reminds me of the assumptions, fashionable among social scientists at the turn of the 20th century, that intelligence, as measured by IQ, is the single most important factor in determining whether a person would succeed in life. So I question whether the uncritical support of higher education, and of the Obama administration's notion that we should participate in an international "college race" (much like the space race of the 1960s) is even a reasonable idea.

I'm also fascinated by the fact that Obama sets the bar where he does: the associates degree. That signals a huge and significant concession: The administration is essentially abandoning the idea that the federal government could fund four-year degrees for everyone. It is right do so. So long as four-year tuition prices continue to skyrocket, it's simply not feasible that the government should foot that bill. So Obama has thus settled for a push to enroll 5 million more people in community colleges, which have over the last two decades remained relatively affordable, and which require only a two-year investment of time.

So it's possible to discern a downward push in American higher education. Increasingly, only the affluent can afford four-year degrees. Those who can't are increasingly opting to attend community colleges, with the federal government's blessing. But community colleges are being stretched to the breaking point when it comes to enrollment. A remarkable development in Ohio is that Columbus' biggest two-year college, Columbus State Community College, last year ran out of physical space, and had to lease classrooms from nearby Franklin University. Where are the additional 5 million students supposed to go? More and more they are choosing to enroll at for-profit universities.

According to a report by the Education Trust, between 1998 and 2009, enrollment at all non-profit institutions (including two-year colleges) increased by 20 percent, while enrollment at for-profit colleges and universities increased by 236 percent. More facts and figures next time, and from there a look inside these new but robust institutions.

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**grward** 12 hours ago

Yes, Canada is first among nations in college graduation rates. As an undergrad instructor in a science program in a Canadian University (a large one with a rather good reputation), let me tell you how that's working out for us. My particular program used to be somewhat exclusive, graduating about 30 students a year, of which 20-25 were exceptionally strong. Over the past 10 years we've expanded (mostly due to government initiatives—brought in by both conservative and liberal governments—that encouraged or compelled all university programs to increase enrollment) so that we now graduate over a hundred students a year, of which—drum roll please— 20-25 are exceptionally strong. The rest are receiving their degrees but can't really be called university graduates in any meaningful sense. Their communication skills, both written and spoken, are poor, their knowledge of the discipline is weak, their ability to think critically and analytically is probably equivalent to that of the average high school graduate 30 years ago. Canadian universities are places now where two worlds exist side-by-side. Senior administrators and faculty members preen and strut in self-congratulatory oblivion, dreaming up new ways to expand undergraduate enrollment for the financial rewards while touting "innovative" ways to educate masses of students with fewer resources. On the other side, low-level contract employees who do the actual teaching gather in offices and hallways and fret over the fact that, once again, they are expected to "push through" students who simply don't have the inclination (I don't know what else to call it—they certainly aren't unintelligent) to spend the time required to actually master the course content and related skills. We dare not actually fail them: such an act would raise the possibility that the emperor of universal higher education would be shown to be truly naked, and who knows what vengeance would be brought upon the poor casual employee who dared to commit such an act of sedition.

Some of us joke that Canada is part of a secret conspiracy to render university degrees worthless and return our society to a class system where the elite take care of their own (remember that Canada still recognizes the Queen's representative as its head of state). After all, once everyone has university degrees, those degrees will become meaningless, and employers can feel free to simply go ahead and hire anyone they like for whatever reason they like.

There's probably an optimal percentage of young people in any modern society who have the inclination and ability to succeed in higher education, especially when it is not directly focused upon specific employment skills. Who's to say that the optimal number is that of the "number one" country on the list? Who's to say that the optimal percentage isn't closer to that of the U.S.?

1 person liked this. Like Reply



**richardtaborgreene** 1 hour ago

Look, if God comes down to some of us, and blesses the ideas we picked up growing up where we grew up, telling us "thou art right and all others be they friend or foe are wrong---thou shalt smite all dis-agreers and smirk haughtily at their error and blindness---thou shalt worship thine own rightness over all else". Who needs college? We are already declared by God right along with all the happenstance beliefs our moms, and judges, newspapers and local bigots put into us growing up. Who needs college when we are already righter than all others from birth?

Being RIGHTER than all others is the entitlement; college is a waste of time when you are already righter than all others in principle.

Like Reply

