
WORKING PAPER SERIES

**COMMENTARY:
HIGHER EDUCATION—WHICH
WAY IS IT HEADING?**

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COMMENTARY: HIGHER EDUCATION—WHICH WAY IS IT HEADING?

As record numbers of students make the pilgrimage to campuses across the nation to begin a new academic year, it's worthwhile to reflect on the two competing visions that are likely to shape the future course of higher education in the United States.

As a favorite poet of mine used to say—Imagine. Imagine universal access to education from kindergarten through college. Imagine a world where everyone has the opportunity to learn, to grow, and to realize their full potential; a world in which educational progress is reported daily on the news, as the Dow Jones average is today.

That's one vision. It's based on the value of an individual's growth and development. It assumes that education will not only benefit educated individuals personally, but will also benefit the larger community in an age where knowledge has replaced manufacturing as the bedrock of economic growth and a high standard of living.

But there's another vision.

Think about a Brave New World in which only the elite enjoy privileged lives, where free thinking is squelched, while a massive workforce is bred to a life of monotony and servitude.

Three trends suggest this second vision is where we are heading.

We all know about the first trend, the old refrain that we need to do more with less. It's part of the political assumption that government is the problem. There is no dearth of examples of higher education institutions doing more with less. Bad budgets, intermittent attacks on tenure, and reliance on part-time faculty to replace the vanishing professor are the most obvious examples.

Students are the big losers in this “do more with less” scenario. They pay more as tuition dollars replace tax dollars and get less, as class sizes grow, fewer sections of required courses are offered, and programs are cut.

The second trend, rooted in right-wing think tanks such as the Hudson and Manhattan Institutes, puts on a utilitarian face for popular consumption by playing on the question of cost versus return for the dollar: Is the cost to the individual worth the return in terms of income? Does the amount of money pumped into the economy justify the funds spent on higher education?

Critics of spending on public higher education

The vision of human development and its relationship to the larger public good is being replaced by a mean-spirited, elitist approach that will close the doors of opportunity to many and diminish the quality of education to those who are fortunate enough to get through the doors.

argue that since the hottest growing jobs are in the low paying sectors, why spend so much? As for the embarrassing and contradictory fact that college graduates earn 69 percent more than non graduates, critics of spending claim the differences are a function of IQ and credentialing. Colleges, they claim, have promoted credentialing as a way to fill empty classrooms. In short, they want to return to the good old days of the little red schoolhouse when only the elite went to college and everyone else stayed on the farm, got a job in the factory, or cooked, cleaned, and raised the kids. A reality check tells us that the farms and factories are gone and, thanks in part to higher education, women have other options beside cleaning, cooking and raising children.

The third trend is manifested in the so-called Academic Bill of Rights (ABR), a brainchild of the extreme political right. It's based on the assumption—

and I emphasize the word assumption because proponents fail to offer proof to back their assertion—that liberals rule higher education and allow no voice to conservatives. Supporters of the ABR want to replace the search for truth with a principle they call academic diversity. For every so-called liberal pro-

fessor they want a conservative in the classroom too. Forget the nightmare administrators would have in implementing this proposal or how much it would end up costing colleges and universities to enforce; more importantly this approach directly contradicts the principle of ideological neutrality in the classroom, the very bedrock of the Academic Bill of Rights. If professors should keep their politics out of the classroom, why should a dearth of conservatives in the classroom matter? It only matters if you're a conservative who wants to use the classroom as a platform for broadcasting your conservative ideology, which is precisely what they want to do. And here we get to the distinction between academic freedom and the Academic Bill of Rights. Academic freedom is all about an autonomous faculty engaged in the pursuit of truth, a process of questioning and searching for answers. Compare that to the goal of preaching doctrine as truth.

Higher education is under the gun. The vision of human development and its relationship to the larger public good is being replaced by a mean-spirited, elitist approach that will close the doors of opportunity to many and diminish the quality of education to those who are fortunate enough to get through the doors. The renewal of the Higher Education Act, which funds much of public higher education, is coming up for a vote in Congress. The House Committee on Education has already accepted a modified version of the Academic Bill of Rights which implicitly invites government into the classroom. Overall funding will take an \$11 billion hit. More importantly, many individuals who imagined that higher education would be their road to achieving the American Dream will rudely awaken to another day of flipping burgers in a dead end job.

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