



Written by [Sam Blumenfeld](#) on March 27, 2015

“College Degree Is No Ticket to Success”

“College Degree is No Ticket to Success.”

This is a headline on the front page of *Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 5, 2014, a soul-searching article about the idea that many students have come to believe that a college degree automatically provides the graduate with an open door to a good-paying job in the student’s field of study. Student debt now tops \$1 trillion, indicating that students believe that a college education is the best investment they can make for their economic future.



The article is basically a review of a new book by academics Josipa Roksa and Richard Arum, *Aspiring Adults Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (University of Chicago Press). This book is actually a sequel to their 2011 book, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*. The authors surveyed some 1,600 students through their senior year at 25 four-year colleges. According to reviewer Dan Berrett, their aim was to gather data on “employment outcomes, living arrangements, relationships, and levels of civic engagement after college.”

What they found is that half of recent graduates are unemployed or earning low salaries, or are in jobs that don’t require a college degree. The question then becomes: Are colleges selling the idea that higher education is worth its high price because it guarantees a successful economic future?

The idea of a guaranteed job is only possible in a socialist planned economy where government trains its citizens to perform specific jobs needed by the state. But planned economies like the former Soviet Union or present day Cuba are forced to create phony jobs in order to claim full employment. The saying in communist Russia used to be that workers pretended to work and the state pretended to provide productive jobs.

But in the United States we still adhere to a market system where private companies will only pay for workers they need. But that doesn’t stop state and municipal governments from creating jobs for their political hacks.

The authors take the colleges to task. The reviewer states:

Because colleges often emphasize students social development and consumerist desires over academic rigor, these institutions help prolong adolescence instead of molding habits.

Thus, their survey found that more than half the graduates struggled to find jobs and earned less than \$30,000 a year. Many lived with their parents on whom they relied for financial assistance. Many of these graduates performed poorly on the Collegiate Learning Assessment, a test of critical-thinking skills. Indeed, a company may hire a graduate to study its competitors and write a report on their strengths and weaknesses, only to find that the graduate had poor writing and reasoning skills, which the CLA evaluates. But the authors fail to point out that these deficits begin in our elementary public schools where the deliberate dumbing down begins. Neither the high schools nor colleges ever really tackle these deficits, which many students manage to hide, and perhaps are not even aware of



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themselves, as they are passed along from grade to grade. And that is one reason why so many of them are willing to pay through the nose for a college education thinking that a degree will enable them to climb the economic ladder. (Another reason, of course, is that the availability of money via the government student loan program has created a powerful incentive for many students to attend college who otherwise would not have done so, including many students who likely will have no realistic means of satisfying their loan obligations after they graduate.) Reviewer Berrett writes:

A culture of consumerism has infected college, the authors also say. Soon after entering, students realize that they won't have to work very hard. Ms. Roksa, an associate professor of sociology and education at the University of Virginia, said in an interview: "Students come to college with certain attitudes," she said, "but higher education has in some ways embraced them." Greater academic rigor can cure much of what ails higher education. "The habits students leave college with are shaped by the four years colleges spend interacting with them," said Mr. Arum.

But what the colleges fear most is Obama's proposal to rate colleges on the basis of how well their graduates do after they leave campus. In other words, the deficits these students brought with them will have an effect on the college's ratings even though they did not create them.

The trouble is that there is no one in higher education who knows how to fix the public schools. They all agree that the system has to be reformed or restructured, so that when someone comes along offering a Common Core of Standards that will require students and teachers to work harder, many automatically assume that higher standards will solve the problem.

These academic problems begin in kindergarten and the first grade where teachers don't know how to teach children to read, write, or do arithmetic. Many of their students will drop out; half will never go to college. The future for them is bleak as they become permanent members of the underclass. That is why those who do graduate are willing to assume a large debt to get that bachelor's degree which will get them into the middle class.

Then there is another group of freshmen who believe that a bachelor's degree is the new high-school diploma and is not good enough to ensure economic success. According to a report, "The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2014," issued by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA:

Nearly half of freshmen this year said they planned to seek a master's degree, up from about a quarter 40 years ago. A third of students now start college with plans to pursue a doctorate or professional degree (like a Ph.D, Ed.D, M.D., or J.D).... Signals from the labor market may be contributing to higher degree aspirations.... Positions that demand a master's degree are projected to grow fastest.

Another important avenue of economic success at college is belonging to a fraternity or sorority where one makes life-long friends who can be instrumental in opening doors in the future. This is particularly true for members of undergraduate secret societies, such as Skull and Bones at Yale University. Anthony Sutton's study of the Skull and Bones Society reveals how its members have been able to achieve high positions in virtually every aspect of American society. But, of course, these individuals did not come out of public high schools. They were graduates of the elite private schools that cater to the wealthiest of American families.

The great American universities and colleges also rely heavily on their alumni for continued support. That is an important part of college life: the development of life-long school loyalty through alumni reunions, sports events, etc. Community colleges, which are extended high schools, cannot offer such



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social benefits, nor are their indigent students able to afford such middle class indulgences.

Our education system reflects the economic stratification of American society. Beginning with the failing K-12 public schools, and reaching to the heights of Harvard and Yale, every American finds his or her place in our dynamic society. Connections help, but individual ambition and talents still count for much in our way of life.



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