



The “Education” Mantra

One of the sad and dangerous signs of our times is how many people are enthralled by words, without bothering to look at the realities behind those words.

One of those words that many people seldom look behind is “education.” But education can cover anything from courses on nuclear physics to courses on baton twirling.

Unfortunately, an increasing proportion of American education, whether in the schools or in the colleges and universities, is closer to the baton twirling end of the spectrum than toward the nuclear physics end. Even reputable colleges are increasingly teaching things that students should have learned in high school.



We don’t have a backlog of serious students trying to take serious courses. If you look at the fields in which American students specialize in colleges and universities, those fields are heavily weighted toward the soft end of the spectrum.

When it comes to postgraduate study in tough fields like math and science, you often find foreign students at American universities receiving more of such degrees than do Americans.

A recent headline in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* said: “Master’s in English: Will Mow Lawns.” It featured a man with that degree who has gone into the landscaping business because there is no great demand for people with Master’s degrees in English.

Too many of the people coming out of even our most prestigious academic institutions graduate with neither the skills to be economically productive nor the intellectual development to make them discerning citizens and voters.

Students can graduate from some of the most prestigious institutions in the country, without ever learning anything about science, mathematics, economics or anything else that would make them either a productive contributor to the economy or an informed voter who can see through political rhetoric.

On the contrary, people with such “education” are often more susceptible to demagoguery than the population at large. Nor is this a situation peculiar to America. In countries around the world, people with degrees in soft subjects have been sources of political unrest, instability and even mass violence.

Nor is this a new phenomenon. A scholarly history of 19th century Prague referred to “the well-educated but underemployed” Czech young men who promoted ethnic polarization there — a polarization that not only continued, but escalated, in the 20th century to produce bitter tragedies for both Czechs and Germans.

In other central European countries, between the two World Wars a rising class of newly educated young people bitterly resented having to compete with better qualified Jews in the universities and with



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Jews already established in business and the professions. Anti-Semitic policies and violence were the result.

It was much the same story in Asia, where successful minorities like the Chinese in Malaysia were resented by newly educated Malays without either the educational or business skills to compete with them. These Malaysians demanded — and got — heavily discriminatory laws and policies against the Chinese.

Similar situations developed at various times in Nigeria, Romania, Sri Lanka, Hungary and India, among other places.

Many Third World countries have turned out so many people with diplomas, but without meaningful skills, that “the educated unemployed” became a cliché among people who study such countries. This has not only become a personal problem for those individuals who have been educated, or half-educated, without acquiring any ability to fulfill their rising expectations, it has become a major economic and political problem for these countries.

Such people have proven to be ideal targets for demagogues promoting polarization and strife. We in the United States are still in the early stages of that process. But you need only visit campuses where whole departments feature soft courses preaching a sense of victimhood and resentment, and see the consequences in racial and ethnic polarization on campus.

There are too many other soft courses that allow students to spend years in college without becoming educated in any real sense.

We don't need more government “investment” to produce more of such “education.” Lofty words like “investment” should not blind us to the ugly reality of political porkbarrel spending.

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