



Too Much Higher Education

A recent study from The Center for College Affordability and Productivity titled “From Wall Street to Wal-Mart,” by Richard Vedder, Christopher Denhart, Matthew Denhart, Christopher Matgouranis and Jonathan Robe, explains that college education for many is a waste of time and money. More than one-third of currently working college graduates are in jobs that do not require a degree. An essay by Vedder that complements the CCAP study reports that there are “one-third of a million waiters and waitresses with college degrees.” The study says Vedder — distinguished professor of economics at Ohio University, an adjunct scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and director of CCAP — “was startled a year ago when the person he hired to cut down a tree had a master’s degree in history, the fellow who fixed his furnace was a mathematics graduate, and, more recently, a TSA airport inspector (whose job it was to ensure that we took our shoes off while going through security) was a recent college graduate.”



The nation’s college problem is far deeper than the fact that people simply are overqualified for particular jobs. Citing the research of AEI scholar Charles Murray’s book *Real Education* (2008), Vedder says: “The number going to college exceeds the number capable of mastering higher levels of intellectual inquiry. This leads colleges to alter their mission, watering down the intellectual content of what they do.” In other words, colleges dumb down courses so that the students they admit can pass them. Murray argues that only a modest proportion of our population has the cognitive skills, work discipline, drive, maturity and integrity to master truly higher education. He says that educated people should be able to read and understand classic works, such as John Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* or William Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. These works are “insightful in many ways,” he says, but a person of average intelligence “typically lacks both the motivation and ability to do so.” Mastering complex forms of mathematics is challenging but necessary to develop rigorous thinking and is critical in some areas of science and engineering.

Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, authors of *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (2011), report on their analysis of more than 2,300 undergraduates at 24 institutions. Forty-five percent of these students demonstrated no significant improvement in a range of skills — including critical thinking, complex reasoning and writing — during their first two years of college. According to an August 2006 issue brief by the Alliance for Excellent Education, student “lack of preparation is also



Written by [Walter E. Williams](#) on September 14, 2011

apparent in multiple subject areas; of college freshmen taking remedial courses, 35 percent were enrolled in math, 23 percent in writing, and 20 percent in reading.” Declining college admissions standards have contributed to the deterioration of the academic quality of our secondary schools. Colleges show high schools that they do not have to teach much in order for youngsters to be admitted.

According to *Education Next*, an August Harvard University study titled “Globally Challenged: Are U.S. Students Ready to Compete?” found that only 32 percent of U.S. students achieved proficiency in math, compared with “75 percent of students in Shanghai, 58 percent in Korea, and 56 percent in Finland. Countries in which a majority — or near majority — of students performed at or above the proficiency level in math include Switzerland, Japan, Canada, and the Netherlands.” Results from the 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment international test show that U.S. students rank 32nd among industrialized nations in proficiency in math and 17th in reading.

Much of American education is in shambles. Part of a solution is for colleges to refuse to admit students who are unprepared to do real college work. That would help to reveal the shoddy education provided at the primary and secondary school levels. Here I’m whistlin’ “Dixie,” because college administrators are more interested in numbers of students, which equal more money.

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