



Diploma Disaster?

When Joshua Baron works delivering food for a local delicatessen, the customers wouldn't guess that the man handing them their delectable fare is a law-school graduate. But neither the New York City resident's undergraduate degree in International Affairs nor his law degree has translated into a career. And while he hasn't yet passed the bar exam — and hasn't tried in recent years — he still is qualified to work as a paralegal or in compliance. But not only are employers reluctant to hire attorneys for paralegal positions (they worry that they'll become licensed and resign), says Baron, "There's a glut of lawyers."



While Baron is now pursuing entrepreneurial endeavors and thus no longer pounds the pavement for work as some might, his story is not unique. As the Center for College Affordability and Productivity (CCAP) tells us in "From Wall Street to Wal-Mart: Why College Graduates Are Not Getting Good Jobs,"

Colleges and universities are turning out graduates faster than America's labor markets are creating jobs that traditionally have been reserved for those with degrees. More than one-third of current working graduates are in jobs that do not require a degree, and the proportion appears to be rising rapidly. Many of them are better described as "underemployed" rather than "gainfully employed." Indeed, 60 percent of the increased college graduate population between 1992 and 2008 ended up in these lower skill jobs, raising real questions about the desirability of pushing to increase the proportion of Americans attending and graduating from four year colleges and universities. This, along with other evidence on the negative relationship between government higher education spending and economic growth, suggests we may have significantly "over invested" public funds in colleges and universities.

Ticket to the Good Life?

Clearly, a college degree is no longer the surefire ticket to a high-paying job it once was thought to be, and there are many reasons for this. The listing economy is an obvious one, but then there is the law of supply and demand. That is to say, college degrees are far more common than a couple of generations ago and thus don't hold the cachet they once did. Note here that people in the job market don't simply compete against some theoretical standard for education, but also against each other. And if, for argument's sake, 70 percent of people had high-school diplomas and 30 percent college degrees years ago but now 70 percent have college degrees and 30 percent a higher one (this is just a simplified example), the 70 percent is still in the exact same position on paper relative to its competition. So just as they say 60 is the new 40, we have to ask: Is a college degree the new high-school diploma?

This is especially relevant since it has been said that today's college degree is the educational equivalent of only a 1947 high-school diploma, although with studies evidencing the ignorance of college graduates, rating it even that highly is questionable. The point is, however, that employers can



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no longer view a college degree as a guarantor of basic knowledge. As Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa write in their 2011 book *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*:

Growing numbers of students are sent to college at increasingly higher costs, but for a large proportion of them the gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and written communication are either exceedingly small or empirically nonexistent. At least 45 percent of students in our sample [of the study they conducted] did not demonstrate any statistically significant improvement in Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) performance during the first two years of college. (Further study has indicated that 36 percent of students did not show any significant improvement over four years.) While these students may have developed subject-specific skills that were not tested for by the CLA, in terms of general analytical competencies assessed, large numbers of U.S. college students can be accurately described as academically adrift. They might graduate, but they are failing to develop the higher-order cognitive skills that it is widely assumed college students should master.

This explains why a master's degree is now sometimes required where an undergraduate degree once sufficed: In a dumbed-down system where today's college equals yesterday's high school, graduate school is the new college. The result? Americans are paying far more — and attending school far longer — for no better than the same education.

Among the reasons for this cited by Arum and Roksa include the fact that “existing [college] organizational cultures and practices too often do not put a high priority on undergraduate learning,” that students “spend increasing numbers of hours on nonacademic activities,” and “define and understand their college experiences as being focused more on social than on academic development” (that's an egghead way of saying they want to party hardy). But the reality is that these explanations are the lesser part of the equation.

It's well known that schools at all levels are currently adrift not just in ignorance but also permissiveness. Where chewing gum and running in the halls were the biggest problems in the 1950s, schools today may have metal detectors and school-shooting protocols, and there is a rash of violence against teachers. Why, New York City has surrendered to the point where it now no longer suspends students who cut class, smoke, or curse — even if they direct their foul tongue at teachers. Even more outrageously, the Obama administration is pressuring localities to administer school punishment based on racial quota for the purposes of equalizing the suspension rates between white and black/Hispanic students. Does any of this serve to cultivate an environment conducive to learning?

Pointing to the Problems

This brings us to a point universally missed when analyzing educational woes, despite it being the most important factor: the lack of discipline and obedience in modern schools. These two qualities are prerequisites for learning for the simple reason that for someone to learn from you, he must first be willing to *listen* to you. This is why tolerating student disrespect is so destructive. After all, how amenable are you to learning from someone whom you don't respect? This is, mind you, why society traditionally enjoined youth to respect their elders and everyone to respect God. It's not that God needs us to bow down to Him or that older folks should have their egos massaged; it's that man generally won't take divine law very seriously if he doesn't show deference to the deity — and, likewise, children won't take adults' teaching very seriously if disrespect defines their attitude.

Yet what is witnessed in schools today? To varying degrees they have become babysitting centers,



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where accountability is lacking and teachers spend a high percentage of their time trying to maintain order and cajole students into listening, leaving instructional time greatly reduced. And how does this relate to college? First, the early-years permissiveness carries over into higher education, with college professors also lacking authority and students having become accustomed to laxity. And this “As the twig is bent, so grows the tree” phenomenon also has another consequence: Just as with language, people learn discipline best when young. If they don’t develop good study habits and a work ethic during their formative years, we shouldn’t be surprised when they’re malformed in college.

Worse still, much of this already narrow instructional window is today devoted to politically correct indoctrination. As the Young America’s Foundation pointed out in “The Dirty Dozen: America’s Most Bizarre and Politically Correct College Courses” (12/9/2006), academia has descended into course offerings such as “The Phallus,” “Queer Musicology,” “Border Crossings, Borderlands: Transnational Feminist Perspectives on Immigration,” “Whiteness: The Other Side of Racism,” “Native American Feminisms,” “Sex Change City: Theorizing History in Genderqueer San Francisco,” and “Lesbian Pulp Fiction,” just to name a handful. So maybe Johnny can’t read, but he’s fine with that. He knows that language is a white male homophobic social construct, anyway. (By the way, some of the bizarre courses are offered at Ivy League schools — all for just \$55,000 a year.)

And while the above are the most extreme examples, they represent a longstanding problem in education, one that worsens over time. In fact, it’s so longstanding that G.K. Chesterton addressed it in 1910, oh-so-picturesquely putting down the phenomenon in *What’s Wrong With the World*, writing, “Obviously, it ought to be the oldest things that are taught to the youngest people; the assured and experienced truths that are put first to the baby. But in a school today the baby has to submit to a system that is younger than himself. The flopping infant of four actually has more experience, and has weathered the world longer, than the dogma to which he is made to submit. Many a school boasts of having the last ideas in education, when it has not even the first idea.” And this is so because it is not just that modern curricula comprise the latest fashions, but the latest passions.

Since we can’t teach a student everything there is to know in the world, we must pick and choose. But what criteria will we apply? Obviously, we should build curricula on what is most important. Yet this presupposes that there is a yardstick that can be used to judge importance — namely Truth. And this is where the relativism sweeping the West enters the equation. If there is no Truth and everything is relative, we can’t really say that anything is more or less important than anything else. But how then can we choose what to teach from a universe of options? Well, applying reason won’t help us because its role is to determine answers, and we have already concluded that there are no answers to be found (no Truth); thus, with the obviation of reason’s realm — the intellect — there is only one thing left to use as a yardstick: emotion. So you then embrace afrocentrism to make blacks *feel* better, Latino studies to make Hispanics *feel* better, and women’s studies to make women *feel* better. It’s all boiled down to taste, and every taste will be accommodated as long as being sensitive to it makes the thought police *feel* better (which is why you probably shouldn’t hold your breath waiting for offerings in white studies or men’s studies).

Unfortunately for the hapless students in our effluent-rich educational system, reality doesn’t feel; it dishes out its verdicts without compromise. And one young woman who found this out the hard way is New York University graduate Cortney Munna. After accumulating almost \$100,000 in student-loan debt in just four years, she found that her interdisciplinary degree in religious and women’s studies wasn’t exactly the stuff of six-figure salaries. Wrote the *New York Times* in 2010, “She recently received



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a raise and now makes \$22 an hour working for a photographer. It's the highest salary she's earned since graduating.... After taxes, she takes home about \$2,300 a month. Rent runs \$750, and the full monthly payments on her student loans would be about \$700 if they weren't being deferred, which would not leave a lot left over."

Munna's case raises some serious questions. First, where were the adults — a guidance counselor, advisor, relative, or someone else — to warn her that an undergraduate women's studies degree only qualifies one to mount a soapbox? Of course, the college wouldn't say anything; if it told the truth about its propaganda courses, no one would take them. And businesses — and make no mistake, college is a business — don't make money by badmouthing their products and turning customers away. Nonetheless, NYU was guilty of academic malpractice not just for having intellectually corrosive courses such as women's studies, but also for selling students a 100-grand clunker that wouldn't even get them out of poverty row's driveway.

But the problem isn't just caricatured college unsuited to good students; it's also students unsuited to college. As George Mason University economics Professor Walter Williams wrote last year:

[American Enterprise Institute (AEI) scholar Professor Richard Vedder] says: "The number [of students] 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." Up to 45 percent of incoming freshmen require remedial courses in math, writing or reading. That's despite the fact that colleges have dumbed down courses so that the students they admit can pass them. Let's face it; as [fellow AEI scholar Charles] Murray argues, only a modest proportion of our population has the cognitive skills, work discipline, drive, maturity and integrity to master truly higher education.

Of course, this sounds like heresy to modern egalitarian ears. But we do young people no favors by selling them on the "necessity" of a college education — and often saddling them with insurmountable debt — if it serves no legitimate purpose. And speaking of purpose, we can gain more perspective here by understanding that the modern academy long ago strayed from its foundational one.

Attending a university originally had nothing to do with getting a piece of paper that supposedly translated into high-paying job opportunities; it was about expanding your intellectual horizons and learning Truth (in fact, most American universities were founded as explicitly Christian institutions). But how many students today attend school driven merely by a thirst for knowledge or a desire for spiritual growth, as opposed to a lust for money? The problem here isn't that there is anything wrong with making money per se, but that a place you go to gain job-oriented skills isn't supposed to be called college but something else: vocational school.

And universities today have become outrageously expensive, window-dressing-replete vocational schools that often teach well only what students need not — and often should not — know. Of course, it's a great deal for academia. Where their "market" was once confined to the elite, now their business is a "must" for everyone; what the young once got from a high-school education, which doesn't require a direct, out-of-pocket expenditure from a student's family, he now can acquire only if he dishes out tens of thousands of dollars for the new "higher" high-school education. Some would call this a racket. But there is a better way.

Alternative Tracks

In saner times, a person who needed a profession would become an apprentice and learn on the job,



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through practical experience and tutelage. And this system could be applied to white collar fields just as it has been to the trades. How would it work? Simple: A corporation would provide a young person on-the-job training and a small salary, which would increase upon the training's completion and be commensurate with demonstrated competence. In return, the individual would have agreed to work for the company for a certain number of years. This system would be far more efficient. No more digging a hole of debt with degree ambitions. And if AT&T or IBM provided the employee's education, would they be as likely to waste time and money on "Gay and Lesbian Studies," "Ethnic Studies," afrocentrism, or courses in pornography? The reality is also that if you removed the hamburger helper (and poison pill) and distilled the educational process down to the truly job-relevant, the necessary knowledge and training for many vocations could be provided in six months. The downside? Students would miss what only college can provide: drunken frat parties, hazing, sexual-escapade opportunities, and indoctrination with the dogma of the day.

So given all the ins and outs of education and the difficult job market, how should a high-school junior or senior proceed? Here are some guidelines that may help parents and students make better decisions:

First ask, "What are my goals?" If you aspire only to make a good living, this will narrow down your choices. Determine where your gifts lie and how they can best be monetized, and understand that you may have to sacrifice doing what you like in favor of what's realistic. And discover what job prospects come with a given undergraduate degree; note here that corporations generally don't advertise for philosophers or urban studies majors (money can only be made in such fields teaching at a college, and usually a Ph.D. is required). Then find out what the competition is like. As to this, Reuters reports, "25 percent of students hope to work in a career with computers or the Internet. The next most popular fields of interest include business (16 percent); engineering (15 percent); healthcare, defined as doctors, nurses, assistants and technicians (15 percent); and the entertainment/arts field, defined as actor, musician, TV anchor, reporter and producer (15 percent)."

Of course, you may, to paraphrase the old saying, want to find a job you love so that you'll never work a day in your life. This is fine, but, again, be realistic. If the prospects for making money are slim to none, you won't want to take on debt that'll make you a microcosm of the federal government. Remember here that if something really is a labor of love, you can study it to your heart's content on the Internet. Sure, it will perhaps just be an avocation, but if the field isn't very marketable, that's what it may end up being even with a degree. And don't end up paying \$100,000 for an avocation.

Consider the skilled trades. Okay, they don't sound as cool as video-game developer, but the pay and benefits are quite good; becoming qualified in them doesn't require four years extra schooling and a large investment of money; and, quite significantly, skilled tradesmen are in demand. As Reuters also reports, "According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, by 2014 the U.S. will need 29 percent more HVACR [Heating, Ventilating, Air Conditioning, and Refrigeration] and 21 percent more plumbing technicians, a total of more than 100,000 skilled workers in the job pool. Among the 500,000 plumbers in the United States alone, the demand is expected to grow 10 percent by 2016, [sic] however, due to an aging generation of skilled professionals, more than a third of all plumbers — or approximately 167,000 workers — will be exiting the workforce." Moreover, note that the aforementioned trades-targeted apprenticeship programs available are widespread and offer paid on-the-job training, so you can be compensated as you become qualified for a guaranteed job, as opposed to paying a college for what may be pipe-dream promises. And while the skilled trades don't seem romantic, they don't offer the romance of poverty, either. Don't forget the old joke about the attorney who, after receiving a \$200



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bill for 25 minutes plumbing work and complaining that he was a famous trial lawyer and didn't make that much, was told by the plumber, "Neither did I when I was a lawyer."

If you do attend college, don't marry the idea of the "peerless" Ivy League education and pay for unfounded reputation. Many schools offer equivalent programs at lower costs. There even are still some colleges that provide highly rigorous educations without the politically correct orthodoxy, such as the Franciscan University of Steubenville.

Lastly, think outside the box. College has become a rite of passage and, insofar as it has betrayed its original purpose, should be read its last rites. And it may or may not be for you. If it isn't, you don't want to attend and then end up like the cable technician whom CCAP writer Christopher Matgouranis spoke with during cable installation at his sister's college apartment. As Matgouranis wrote, "This individual had graduated with a bachelor's degree several years prior but was now just setting up cable television for college students."

There is a somewhat apocryphal saying that goes, "Never let your schooling interfere with your education." Don't let it interfere with your prospects for a life unfettered by insurmountable debt, either. The financial future you save may be your own.

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