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COLLEGE EDUCATION: IS IT A "RIGHT," OR JUST A "GOOD THING"?

By Steve Bakke  July 7, 2019



We're confused about something here in America. We can't decide whether certain things are "rights" or not – as in Constitutional rights. For example, is college education something that we citizens should be guaranteed, and should it be free to the consumer? Or, is it enough for it to be available for us to pursue? I would argue that it's something we should want to work hard for but which is within our reach, economically. There's the rub. Are skyrocketing costs a measure of value, or does it point to something else?

The cost of a college education has been escalating significantly, well beyond the level of other goods and services. According to a Forbes headline last year, college costs in the U.S. have increased almost eight times faster than wages. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the average for all four-year post-secondary institutions is almost \$105,000 for 4 years. That includes tuition, fees, room, and board. There are many reasons for this, with administrative costs a major contributor. The ratio of college administrators to instructors has doubled over the period 1987 through 2012. It now stands at 2:1.

With college costs high and rising, inevitably student loan debt has skyrocketed, now exceeding \$1.5 trillion. That's nearly as much as auto loans and credit card debt combined, according to American Thinker. Adding confusion to the situation are democrat presidential "wannabes" with their suggestion that free college is a "Constitutional Right." It's generally understood that the Founders had no intention of including free education as an unalienable right. Unalienable rights aren't something you buy. They simply exist. Introducing this assertion to the education debate, already burdened with too many difficult problems, is unhelpful. It makes solving problems in our education system more challenging.

Let's agree that quality education is, quite simply, a very good thing and something to be sought after. Let's also agree that finding quality and affordable education deserves great effort and ultimately isn't cheap. It seems that these progressives believe that declaring free college as a "right" somehow lessens the pain or even solves the problem. But the reality is far different. Attempting to make it free not only avoids the reality that nothing is free, it also creates a problem that feeds on itself. To see why that is, let's look closer at some of the recent dialogue.

This noisy progressive movement to establish college education as an unalienable right first led to a campaign promise of providing free college education. Then they apparently reacted

to rumblings from those carrying huge college debt. Those folks were undoubtedly asking, "What about me?" The always pander-ready Senator Bernie Sanders and Rep. Ilhan Omar reacted by proclaiming: "Let's also forgive existing education loans." And that's where we are now.

Setting aside many philosophical, practical, and Constitutional arguments against such giveaways, let me focus on just one concern, i.e. the effect of this policy on future direction of already high college costs. These freebie education policies would remove any semblance of free market competition for post-secondary education.

You might suggest that there isn't a free marketplace right now, and I agree that's at least partially correct. With government loan underwriting standards more generous than commercially available loans, government student loans represent "easy money" for colleges and universities. These suggestions of forgiving loans and providing free college in the future would remove any remaining motivation for colleges and universities to hold down costs. And Uncle Sam, backed by taxpayer guarantees, will be seen sitting here with a seemingly unlimited stash of education funds.

With relatively little expectation of push-back, there would actually be an incentive for colleges to keep increasing what they charge. Trevor Thomas was spot on when he stated in *American Thinker*, "If you think a college education is expensive now, just wait until it's 'free.'" Skyrocketing costs will remain, and someone will have to pay the bills.

We all know that competition helps control costs, but this only happens if markets are free. Free markets for anything can't exist without the ultimate consumer having some interest in, and influence over, what is being paid for that product. And that only happens if government stays out of it.