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Income Inequality, the Changing Nature of Work and the Student Loan Crisis: Implications for Higher Education



By Aaron W. Hughey, EdD

According to a recent poll by the Pew Research Center, two-thirds of all Americans see income inequality as more of a concern than race relations or national security; it is quickly becoming the defining issue of the 21st Century. In a nutshell, the United States seems to be careening down the wrong path at an accelerating pace. Part of the problem is that far too many Americans believe our nation is somehow impervious to forces that are literally changing the geopolitical landscape around the globe.

The irrational conviction that what happens in other countries and regions cannot possibly happen here is rooted in an intensely sincere yet profoundly flawed belief that our culture, our political system, our economic philosophy, and even our religious biases are intrinsically superior to everyone else's. But American Exceptionalism is really nothing more than a self-created and self-perpetuated myth. While a healthy sense of national pride unites us to some extent, when taken to extremes it becomes counterproductive and blinds us to self-evident realities that could lead to our eventual downfall.

The basic laws of economics are as applicable to the United States as they are to any government and dubious fiscal policies often precipitate incredibly dire consequences. Today's blue collar workers earn less than they did in 1964 in inflation-adjusted dollars. But it's not just those who lack education who should be concerned. The fundamental nature of work is changing; the chief culprits are technology and globalization, which make it possible to do practically anything anywhere in the world. Unless Americans embrace this reality, our prospects will continue to be in jeopardy. We need to stop acting so self-assured and pay closer attention to what's going on outside our own borders.

Throughout history, people were generally considered either rich or poor. The rich were typically land owners who maintained their status by simply procreating; the poor never questioned their plight or strove to rise above their circumstances. This was simply the way the world was and – until the advent of the Industrial Revolution – everyone knew their place in the cultural hierarchy. In the United States, the middle class did not really exist until after World War II. Some seem nostalgic for that bygone era, but a dichotomous society is not in anyone's best interest – including the rich.

The gap between rich and poor with respect to college graduates has grown more than 50 percent just since the 1990s. Similarly, the gap between standardized test scores for these two groups is 40 percent wider than it was in 1970. While the ever-increasing disparity between the more affluent and the less fortunate obviously impacts all Americans, it holds special significance for college students. They are the ones with the most to lose.

There is more at stake here than most realize. For most of my life, I have been assured that education is the only reliable route available to most Americans who want to enhance their quality of life. And until the last few decades, all the available evidence tended to support that notion. Degrees have historically helped to insure a higher standard of living for those who earned them. Sadly, that may no longer be the case. As inflation continues to push the cost of attending college beyond the reach of many Americans, the social contract that traditionally emphasized the importance of higher education is slowly disintegrating. Changing attitudes about the role of government, an aging population with exploding health care needs, and shifting societal priorities are undermining the value of higher education in unprecedented and profoundly demoralizing ways.

Once upon a time, helping students obtain a college education was seen as an investment in our collective future — as beneficial to society as to the individual receiving the assistance. Unfortunately, as the cost of attending college continues to escalate exponentially, many of our legislators have apparently decided that the financial awards associated with being a college graduate mean that the individual should shoulder more of the expense associated with acquiring the credential. As a result, total student loan debt recently passed the \$1 trillion dollar mark — more than credit card debt in the United States.

This is a national disgrace that affects us all; we desperately need to find a way to deal with the situation before it gets any worse. The issue really is more about societal priorities than

economic theory or political ideology. Conservatives with staunch allegiance to political principles and no empathy for the less fortunate are just as clueless and dangerous as liberals with staunch allegiance to moral imperatives and no budgeting skills. It is past time for our elected officials to put their differences aside and reaffirm the preeminent role that higher education will no doubt play in helping to secure our future.

So does that mean everyone needs to go to college? Of course not, but it is becoming more and more obvious that education must be a central tenet of any viable strategy for sustainable job creation and economic growth. Unfortunately, far too many Americans still have antediluvian notions about its evolving role in their lives. “School” used to be something most of us did during the first couple of decades of our lives. For centuries this was the case. Once you acquired basic knowledge and employable skills, you were pretty much set for life. Today, however, education is more of a cradle to grave proposition.

At the same time, pursuing the wrong credential can make your financial circumstances significantly worse. Charlatans, opportunists and fear mongers are already cashing in on the naïve who believe any job in health services or information technology will precipitate a higher standard of living. As many have found out, this is not necessarily the case even though all work is increasingly information driven. Constant training and retraining are the new norm; today’s proficiency is tomorrow’s obsolescence. In a fast-paced, knowledge-driven global economy, everything can – and often does — change overnight. You either keep up or are left in the dust.

The current generation of taxpayers needs to step up and provide the next generation with the same benefits and opportunities that were afforded them by the preceding generation. Moreover, the call for college students to rise up in defense of a social contract with a proven track record has never been more acute or had greater significance than it does right now. No other investment has the potential to shape our destiny the way higher education does.

American higher education has been the envy of the world for almost 400 years, but we are fast approaching a tipping point. The decisions we make over the next few years will have far-reaching implications. It’s time for everyone who still believes in higher education to stand up and be counted.

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