

Who Gets to Go to College?

By

Larry W. Griffin

December 12, 2014

Who Gets To Go To College?

This question has truly been a challenging quest for knowledge. First of all, it was difficult to write something that did not repeat what everyone already knew or has considered, or that inundated you with statistics, all of which could be challenged in one way or another as well as put you to sleep within minutes. Secondly, higher education is bound up with many educational issues, nationally, in our state and locally. Thirdly, I found myself quickly moving far from the question and into quagmires of economics, political ideology, history, educational theory, American culture, power politics, definitions of success, and idealism vs. reality. This was good, for it stimulated my thinking in other areas as well. As with most quest papers there are twenty other papers to be written related to the question before us today.

Fifty years ago I learned the thesis statement method of expository writing, and at age 72, I cannot (make that will not!) change. Therefore, I added to my frustration, by trying to decide how to organize the paper. Since the topic is a question, should I try to answer it? The word “answer” implies the satisfying of a question. I did not think I could achieve it when I began, and now, after further exploring the question, I know I cannot do that. I did not want to write a response to the question since the word “response” implies a quick or immediate reaction—although I had some. My paper, therefore, is more of a reply to the

question, since the word “reply” implies an attempt to make a return that is commensurate with the original question.

My immediate response to the question was, “Whoever has the money gets to go.” Truthfully, that may be the obvious response, but as Oscar Wilde said in his play, “The Importance of Being Earnest,” the truth is rarely pure and never simple. I felt there must be a more complex reply to the question for otherwise how would I keep this going for thirty minutes. My reply, therefore, is an attempt to address where my thinking has led me. Moreover, my reply is not an original one; it is based on a response a friend of mine gave me when I asked the question. As a matter of fact, there is very little original thinking in this paper at all; others have discussed much of what follows.

After this lengthy preface, filled with caveats (or what you may call excuses!), I have come to the conclusion—at least for the present--that my reply to the question of who gets to go to college is: it depends on the family into which one is born. This seems highly deterministic, but I think it is worth exploring further. Let us examine some of the complexities of this reply.

What is meant by college today? I use the term college to refer to any degree-granting institution, whether it calls itself a college, a university, a school, is accredited or non-accredited, is actual or virtual. I think this is valid since higher education as it is being sold in a highly competitive educational

environment does not make these distinctions as much as it formerly did. Much is made of accreditation for example, but in selling the product accreditation is often stated in fine print, and too often goes unnoticed by the “customers,” as students are thought of in today’s environment. To use a term borrowed from the military, the interoperability of courses is a chronic bone of contention among colleges, legislators and business people. But let’s not stray from the topic and put our hand into that bucket of snakes.

The college experience is not what it was prior to 1945. Before then it was primarily white males in the upper quartile of American families as measured by wealth and income who got to go (Smith, 1). After 1945 higher education entered an extensive period of transformation that continues today. Some of the changes have been positive, but let us focus on some that have had an influence on who gets to go to college today and in the years to come. One of the major changes over the years has been the shift from a primary focus on teaching to one on research. Research leads to grants that in turn bring money to the institution. The big grants are for science, for professional programs, and for innovative ideas that will bring in more money; moreover, the really big grants bring in lots of “miscellaneous” overhead estimations of costs making them lucrative to get. And they bring prestige to the institution that adds to its selling points. Another significant change: government became increasingly involved after 1945 and reached its high point in the mid-to-late sixties; by the seventies it began pulling back on support and continues to chip away at support whenever it can. This

was about the time that Americans decided that government was America's problem, and we needed to get rid of as much government as possible in all areas of American life and gradually replace it with business models wherever possible. As President Coolidge said "The chief business of the American people is business." The essence of the business model is to provide a quality product, at the lowest possible cost, and at the same time to make as large a profit as possible. This model works well for widgets, but one might question how well it works for moving human beings along the assembly line. (There is currently an attempt to use robots to teach college courses! If we can bring this one off, we can eliminate a lot of those pesky teachers—sarcasm intended!) Public schools had to begin operating like a business, and they as well as colleges are doing that, although not without significant blood being spilled; however, the result has been mixed from the point of view of many. Given educational research on how people learn, when they learn, what they learn, types of intelligence, some question if the business model for education really is the best thing since bottled water. For example, educational research indicates that there is something about a readiness to learn; yet, if the student does not meet the statistically accepted norm for readiness, we fire the teacher. Since 1945 there has also been a significant expansion of college programs beyond the traditional liberal arts curriculum to an increasing number of professional programs that are more expensive to support. Humanities professors are a dime a dozen, especially if part-time adjunct faculty who are paid less and receive no benefits, are hired. On the other hand an engineering professor or business professor costs much more

based on the fact that he can do better in the free market environment. In the past, professional school faculty gave up dollars for the security of tenure and an ivory tower working environment, but as those rewards are gradually being removed, they have begun to rethink where they can make more money, so to retain strong faculty it is necessary for colleges to pay them more. These are only a few of the major changes since 1945. The changes I noted began at the same time, or soon after, a period of retrenchment was occurring and colleges were forced to become lean, mean machines treating higher education as a product to be bought and sold in a free market economy. To summarize, taxpayers told education it had to run itself like a business, and that is what it has done. Colleges should not be criticized for doing what the American people said they wanted them to do. Perhaps we made a wrong turn somewhere or perhaps not, but any student of history is aware that each generation has to deal with the decisions, right or wrong, of the previous one.

In 1960 I attended a small, Methodist, private college for a tuition of \$540 per academic year; today tuition at that same institution costs \$31,776 per academic year, and this is one of the schools listed among ratings as one of the "50 great affordable colleges in the Midwest." It is not affordable for those in the lower middle class, which is the class into which I was born.

As I have already noted the cost of going to college has increased for many legitimate reasons. Some say it has increased as much as 1,000% since

1980. For years inflation contributed to the rising costs. Moreover, it costs much more to maintain a physical plant of fifty buildings than ten buildings. Construction costs are up, and today's buildings have more stringent building codes and requirements for safety and accessibility. This is good, but it does mean higher costs. Salaries have increased in higher education. Although full-time faculty may be decreasing, the number of administrators is increasing—and for logical reasons-- yet, this is another bucket of snakes to keep our hands out of today. It was reported in a CNN documentary that the President of Cooper Union University in New York City, a university that was tuition free until 2012, earns \$750,000 in addition to a free home. Other university presidents make much more. Some question the high salaries of administrators, but isn't this the business model that universities are expected to follow? CEOs get big bucks for making poor decisions as well as good ones. They get bonuses. Why not those in education as well? Cooper Union University borrowed 175 million dollars for a new facility that was needed, but then invested some of what it borrowed in Hedge Funds and lost ("Ivory Tower"). Thus, an institution that historically was established as a free university as of 2014 now charges "half-tuition" (an interesting euphemism) of \$39,600 per academic year. It is ironic that Cooper Union was founded as a free university by a wealthy industrialist during the heyday of capitalism in America. Presumably, like Carnegie, he decided he had made enough and it was time to share some of his profits. As philanthropist, Brooke Astor said, "Money is like manure; it should be spread around." The 175 million loan that Cooper Union received has to be paid back, and the business

model is to pass the cost on to the consumer, a.k.a. the student. Auburn University spent 72 million for a new recreation and wellness center (“Ivory Tower”). To survive higher education must be competitive and keep adding more programs and services in order to stay in the game; and of course, more programs and services means higher costs, more administrators, administrative assistants, secretaries, liaison officers, etc, etc. . It is a tough game to continue to play. The result is a tension between education as a business and education as a public good which has, or soon will, reach the point at which more people will begin to question whether it is sustainable.

Some are saying perhaps the product has become too expensive. Since it is clear that one must have money, or access to it, to go to college, the economic class into which one is born plays a large part in determining whether or not one gets to go. Immediately some of us might bristle at that thought and say, “But I came from a poor family and I went to college. I did without a car, designer clothes, worked while carrying a full academic load, and walked barefoot two miles each way through snow, up hill both ways.” Yes, you did. And I did as well. But that was in the past, and as L.P. Hartley said, “the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.”

Some of you are familiar with Ruby Payne’s analysis of poverty. She points out that there are different kinds of poverty. My parents, as perhaps with

some of yours, were financially poor, but our family was rich in many other ways. We were rich in having mental abilities and acquired skills to deal with daily life: i.e., good reading writing and math ability. We were rich in terms of emotional health and intelligence, particularly our ability to deal with negative situations without engaging in self-destructive behavior. We were rich in our spiritual life, which is probably why we were able to see life as not hopeless or useless, but life as something positive that we could change. We had good physical health. We had friends, family and back-up resources in times of need. We had a supportive family and living environment. When one part of the family was going through a bad patch, economically, emotionally or in terms of health, others in the family were there to help. We had access to small family loans and credit if needed. We were extremely fortunate to have relationships and role models who nurtured our abilities and interests in a positive manner within and outside the family. We had ambition. We had a feeling of security. We had coping strategies. We did not feel that we were just among the unlucky (Payne, 11) and that our only hope was to win the lottery. We were endowed with a feeling that we could make our own luck. Our families may have been poor financially, but we were rich in so many other ways. Being financially poor was an inconvenience. We were taught what Abigail Adams told her son, John Quincy Adams: "Learning is not attained by chance, it must be sought for with ardour and attended to with diligence."

For each of these resources, which is what Payne calls them, that is missing in the family into which one is born, the likelihood of getting to go to college decreases.

A person born into a family that cannot read well or has difficulty with basic arithmetic, or parents who for some reason are unable to motivate children to learn these skills, has its first strike against him in terms of getting to go to college. One born into a family in which the parents are operating a meth lab has another strike against his chances. Being a foster child shunted throughout several homes during the first sixteen years of one's life, physical and verbal abuse in the family add more obstacles. Thus, if too many of these non-financial resources are present in one's life the chances are close to nil that one will get into college. These, though, are only a few of the resources needed. What if there are no good role models for the person, no training or learning of adaptive behavior that will enable the person growing up to deal with adverse situations in a way that is not self-destructive? Enough said; you get the idea that there are many social factors that affect one's chances of going to college that have nothing to do with finances. Ways of financing college can be found; but they are not likely to be sought or achieved if too many of the other resources are missing.

If we arbitrarily divide American society into four economic classes which I do, we can see which classes are most likely to have persons in it that get to go to college. I have divided them into the wealthy class, the upper middle class, the

lower middle class, and the lower class. The wealthy class may lack one or two of Ruby Payne's social resources, but it has the money, which is the primary requirement for getting to go to college. The wealthy also have "connections," which can help tremendously if one is trying to get into one of the more prestigious universities or "strings" need to be pulled for some reason. The upper middle class is the most fertile ground for college attendance and success, for it tends to have a strong mix of all the resources needed. The lower middle class does not have the money, but if the person in the lower middle class has enough of the other resources -- as my family did --one is likely to make it to college. The lower middle class, however, is fighting a losing battle in today's economy simply trying to avoid slipping into the lowest class where a small percentage will make it to college. This class falls into what United Way terms the ALICE families: Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed." I think of them as the working poor. Too many of the lower middle class, the working poor, are in danger of slipping down into first generation poverty that leads to the circle of generational poverty from which an infinitesimal number are able to escape. Unless America can keep most of the lower middle class from becoming a first generation poverty family, America is in for problems ahead. Let us examine this in more detail.

We Americans are professedly egalitarian, but equality to us does not mean a living income for all. It means equality for all to become as unequal with others as they financially can (Sinclair, 16). I do not need to cite for you statistics

on income distribution today. We daily are inundated with a barrage of them, all pointing to the fact that the income gap is widening. This is happening world wide, not just in America. The lowest incomes are declining substantially; the middle class is about the same on the average; only those at the top of the pyramid saw large gains of 20-30% or much more. It appears then, that the wealthy and the upper middle class have a good chance of getting to go to college. Yet, if we continue to push an increasing number of the lower middle class working poor into the lowest class the overall numbers getting to go to college will decrease. If America truly believes in an educated population—and in my more cynical moments I think it does not,—then it needs to do more than just talk about the problems of education; it must ACT in a way that assures that education is made available to all on equal terms.

There are many forms of financial aid. Grandparents are one form of financial aid! It has been noted that over 50% of today's grandparents help with educational expenses (AARP Bulletin, 12). I have five grandchildren and fully expect to subsidize in some way their education. On its website my undergraduate *alma mater* states that over 95% of its students receive some form of financial aid. Only 1.25% of U.S. colleges are still able to offer full-need scholarships to all qualifying students ("Ivory Tower"). Obviously competition for these packages is out of the realm of possibility for 99% of the students seeking or needing a college education. A full financial aid package is not going to be

available for most; loans, part-time or full-time jobs will be needed. Loans are risky and jobs are not plentiful.

Regardless of one's economic class one has to make a decision as to whether or not to take on a loan the size of a home mortgage for the rest of one's life in a job market that is highly competitive and weak in terms of a large number of well-paying jobs. One isn't going to pay back a large loan waiting tables. A fifty-seven-year-old woman calculated that she could be eighty-one when she pays off her loans. In 2010 among Americans ages 65-74, four percent carried federal student loan debt according to the Government Accountability Office (JG, Sept. 11, 2014, 1+).

Nani Aspinwall on Facebook said, "It is unfortunate that one has to go thousands of dollars into debt. I chose not to go to nursing school this year because I don't want to be \$60,000 in debt (Quoted in USA Today, July 1, 2014, 7). " It has been estimated that America has in its economy one trillion dollars in college loans. CNN reported that "184 billion dollars has been made off student loans ("Ivory Tower")." On November 26 of this year the Fort Wayne Journal Gazette reported that the rise in loans in general, more Americans borrowing more money instead of saving, signals growth in the Economy ("Rise in Loans Signals Growth, 9B). Growth for whom one may ask. The student loan industry has grown significantly, and one might argue that this has actually helped in providing a few jobs for graduates in the student loan industry. Recently there

have been advertisements by college debt counselors much like bankruptcy advisors and counselors, again perhaps a few more jobs for college graduates. Is saddling our future generations with debt penalizing those with no other access to money who want a college education? What incentive is there? Why go into debt to live off tips from waiting tables while one waits for a “possible” future increase in well-paying jobs? Why not join the ranks of the lumpenproletariat and go on the dole? What message are we sending to those who do want to work—and I believe most Americans would rather work for living wage than go on the dole—to achieve a better life? Does it seem odd that we bemoan a national debt that our children will have to bear, a debt which in theory at least should benefit everyone equally, at the same time that we extol personal debt for our children as a boon to the national economy? (I always liked the joke that a banker is one who lends you his umbrella until it begins raining, and then he wants it back.)

I have been told that many scholarships go begging which is probably true. In most instances though some kind of high-school achievement is expected to receive a scholarship. Achievement levels among the lower class are not high. Even in the middle and upper classes not everyone can graduate in the top percent. Someone has to be below the top percent even with grade inflation.

An important factor, true for all classes to some degree but more so in the lower and lower middle class, most are not ambitious enough, willing to sacrifice

what it takes, or in some cases astute enough to even consider talking to a college financial counselor.

When using the term ambition I am using it with a positive connotation, rather than the negative sense of climbing over other people to get ahead. I like Renee Fleming's, definition of ambition: "not seeing how high up one can vault but how deeply one can explore one's potential (Fleming, 155). "

Many of us, as I noted previously, worked our way through school. I earned 75 cents an hour and over the year earned an average of about \$1,000 a year. Since I lived at home and my parents fed and watered me. I had only to cover \$40 of my tuition (for I had a \$500 scholarship each year), books, supplies (primarily notebooks, paper and pens since this was an era before computers and even copy machines!), lunch money, a few pieces of clothing, and gas for an old 1953 Pontiac which I could not keep running. What little was left was for my social life. It was not the traditional college experience of being away from home, fraternities, parties, and good times. It was tough, but I made it, and I was not facing a debt when I graduated.

Today if someone tried to do what I did--work my way through college,-- I don't think he could accomplish it without a sizeable loan. Working full-time 52 weeks out of the year at a minimum wage job he would earn a little less than \$15,000 which would cover half a year of tuition at the same college I attended.

This means another \$15,000 would be needed for tuition, in addition to laptops, ipads, whatever new technology is required, and books that cost \$150 each now in some subject areas. A lot more money has to be found now than then. And when teaching I had first-hand experience with students who tried to work full-time and take a full course load; it can be done, but requires more than most have the capacity to do successfully.

A few of my peers in college were able to “get through” by working night shift on an assembly line for a manufacturer that has since moved to Monterey, Mexico. I also remembered these students often dozed through classes or cut class because they were tired. Others worked on highway construction that was going on during the sixties and made enough during the summer to get through the following academic year. Today we have decided we do not want to pay the taxes to support infrastructure improvements, so those jobs are gone as well. A few were hired by businesses that trained them in the business as they were working their way through college and then gave them full-time jobs after they graduated. Co-op education is going on today, but not enough of it in fields outside of engineering, technology and business. There are not enough cooperative education opportunities today that would cover the increase in numbers wanting to attend college. More co-op programs in all academic areas are needed.

If we look at Payne's "Hidden Rules of Class" it may also help us to understand why the accident of birth can be a dominant factor in determining who gets to go to college (Payne, 44-45). For the lower economic class time is the present. Decisions are made for the present based on feelings or survival. For the lower middle class there is a sense of frustration and concern for the future; they want their families to be educated, and they want them to pursue the American myth of each generation moving up a notch economically, but they can do little more than worry about how "rob Peter to pay Paul," to accomplish it. For the upper middle class the future is most important, making it the most likely for college potential. For the wealthy class decisions are likely to be made on the basis of tradition and decorum.

Related to the concept of time is a sense of destiny. For the lower economic class one is lucky or unlucky and there isn't much one can do to mitigate chance. For the lower and upper middle classes there is a belief in choice—a belief that one can change the future by making good choices and sacrifices now. There is not a sense of hopelessness. The only difference is that the lower middle class faces more obstacles in the way of getting to go to college than the upper middle class. The wealthy class also believes in a sense of being in control of their destiny, their concern being to maintain the destiny that they have earned or inherited.

With regard to the idea of education, the lower class see it as a value to be revered and desired, but it has no connection with reality for them due to a sense of time that is immediate coupled with their sense of fate. As a result, by the time one is ready to go to college too much negative baggage can stand in the way. Thus, we need to examine whether or not our world may be pushing even more into that circle, how it is happening, and what that might lead to in the future.

The cost of attending college will not decrease in the immediate future. As it increases, and as the income disparity widens, it will become more difficult for more people to get to go to college. What is truly disturbing is that America may be on the road to creating a much larger, less educated lower class. It is questionable whether or not that is healthy for our nation either morally or economically. Dr. Prescott in the novel, The Rector of Justin said, "The moral tone of the business community...sets the moral tone of the nation, (Auchincloss, 321)." I fear that not just the business community but Americans in general are being short-sighted with regard to education at all levels. Even in America's gilded age when a capitalist economy was at its zenith, education was seen as a public good. In the 21st century's gilded age, education is viewed as a private good for those who can afford it.

It may be that America's best hope for an educated population is in the changes we are already observing in higher education. Most of these changes

are occurring in virtual education that allows students to take courses online—much like the old correspondence courses advertised on the back of matchbooks. It allows one to work and pay-as-you-go, and to proceed through the curriculum as one can afford to do so and at a learning readiness, a level of motivation, and a time frame that is appropriate for each individual. This approach is consistent with what we have learned from educational research. It also, I believe, reinforces the concept of life-long learning, perhaps even more so than the traditional four-year college experience in which one often sees education as being over once the diploma is in hand. Should individuals, who are human beings and not widgets, learn when they are ready and motivated to learn, or when statistics indicate it is time for them to do so? It could be technology that will provide many students with the only education they can afford, and it is too early in the game to assess whether it will actually succeed or not. In the film aired by CNN, “Ivory Tower,” it indicated that early studies of some of the new ideas being put forth have not worked that well. (I refer to the artificial intelligence approach of being taught by a robot computer.) It is difficult for a cranky, old, curmudgeon like myself to put much confidence in technology’s ability to totally rescue education from its ills. The most successful panaceas seem to be those that involve human interaction such as the one at Deep Springs College in Death Valley, California where students are involved in a work/study type of program in which they work on a ranch and receive what appears to be a quality education of both practical and critical thinking. Again,

the results are not in on this one yet. Their graduates, too, may end up waiting tables for tips—but at least with no lifetime of debt.

For the foreseeable future it appears to me that the answer to the question, “Who gets to go to college?” is those who are born into a family with a strong combination of emotional, mental, spiritual, and physical health, support systems, good relationships and role models. And, as always, having money will make it easier and more convenient.

Dr. Prescott in the The Rector of Justin, also said “...it’s an old man’s privilege to oversimplify (Auchincloss, 320).” Perhaps that is what I have done today.

List of Works Consulted

“Aging Americans steadily beset by student loan debt,” Fort Wayne Journal Gazette, September 11, 2014, 1.

Bartels, Larry M. “Economic Inequality and Political Representation.” www.princeton.edu/~bartels/economic.pdf (Rev. August 2005)

“Ivory Tower,” a documentary film by the Cable News Network, 2014.

Maynard, W. Barksdale. Woodrow Wilson: Princeton to the Presidency. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008.

Payne, Ruby K., DeVol, Philip, & Dreussi Smith, Terie. Bridges Out of Poverty: Strategies for Professionals and Communities. Aha Press, 2001, Revised 2005, 2006.

“Real Possibilities,” AARP Bulletin (September 2014), 12.

Sachs, Jeffrey D. The Price of Civilization: Reawakening American Virtue and Prosperity. New York: Random House, 2011.

“Rise in Loans Signals Growth,” associated press article in Fort Wayne Journal Gazette, 9B.

Sinclair, Andrew. The Available Man: Warren Gamaliel Harding. New York: Macmillan, 1965.

Smith, Wilson and Thomas Bender, editors. American Higher Education Transformed, 1940-2005: Documenting the National Discourse. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2008.

Webley, Kayla. "We're Doing a Lousy Job of Getting Poor Kids to College."
www.nation.time.com/2013/05/09.

Will, George, "Self-control is a struggle in 'age of excess'" in column in unknown issue of Fort Wayne Journal Gazette clipped from the newspaper.

<http://www.evansville.edu/tuitionandaid/>