

Forbes

Reflections On A Long Academic Life

Richard Vedder

May 5, 2017

Like Caesar's Gaul, my academic life has been divided into three parts, each 15 to 20 years in length. The first period, 1965-81, was during higher education's Golden Age. For many years, I received double digit annual salary increases, time off for research, et cetera. Because of soaring enrollments, faculty were scarce so their clout was pretty substantial. It was a great time to become a professor. Academically, I established myself as an economic historian, writing up to a dozen papers a year in the early 1970s, mainly on labor economics topics, like the positive contributions of internal and international migration and the economics of slavery. Federal involvement in higher education was growing, but from an extremely small base and the cost of college was falling relative to incomes.

The second part of my career was from 1981 to about 2000. This was my public policy phase, starting out with a stint with the Joint Economic Committee of Congress. It was the early stages of the supply side economics revolution, and I put my training in public finance to good advantage. In this period I turned out my most important academic work with my colleague Lowell Gallaway, *Out of Work: Unemployment and Government in Twentieth-Century America*, but also began writing a lot for the popular press, which continues to this day. Lowell and I annoyed the daylights out of Ohio's Governor (as evidenced by him attacking us at a press conference), which made me feel good in a way: more than some obscure academics thought our work had consequences.

The third phase of the career begins about 2001 (when I officially retired from full-time teaching) to the present. I had written a short piece on higher education in the *Wall Street Journal* that escalated into requests for me to write and talk more about colleges. Four big things that came out of that were my book *Going Broke By Degree*, the starting of the Center for College Affordability and Productivity, my appointment to the Spellings Commission on the Future of Higher Education, and the starting of the *Forbes* Best College rankings. I hope a second higher education book will see the light of day soon – a publisher is reviewing it.

My observations about the state of economics have been presented elsewhere (in the *Cato Journal* and, in abridged form, in the *Wall Street Journal*). Looking broadly at academia, we have moved from seemingly too little higher education to too much. In the social sciences and humanities, we have gone from about the right amount of research activity to too many researchers writing too much about things of too little value. We have gone from too few college graduates knowing a fair amount to too many knowing too little. Diminishing returns set into higher education a long time ago.

More generally, our society has been corrupted and weakened by collective excesses – too much entitlement, too many taxes, too little respect for the rule of law, too much moral relativism, and too little respect for external verities that have served us well over the centuries: The Ten

Commandments and the Laws of Demand and Supply. As a nation, we have gone from a country that felt its best years were ahead of it to one where many sense that we are in some form of secular decline. No politician in the 1960's could have successfully argued "Let's make America great again!"

Is this seeming decline, the malaise, the pessimism reversible? Is it even real, or is it the musings of an old man yearning for the good old days of his youth? Certainly, the broader macroeconomic indicators provide some supporting evidence. Writing in the year of America's bicentennial, I suggested that America had a remarkable rate of output growth of about 3.6 percent a year from 1710 to 1970, with some moderate deviations. Already that rate had eroded a bit from 1970 to 2000, but has dramatically fallen (to around 2 percent a year) from 2000 to 2017.

Other evidence of malaise? Mobility is declining, both geographic migration and income mobility between the generations. New business startups are down. We sense our nation is losing unique qualities admired from de Tocqueville onward manifested in a vibrant and successful American Dream. We are a nation that, as arguably our premier social scientist Charles Murray says, is "coming apart." A creeping faux aristocracy is arising, with gated communities not only for living but for learning. The gains from hard work, individual initiative and success are denigrated by political elites, and ignorant rioters on college campuses are attacking the very foundations of America's exceptionalism by trying to suppress free speech. A rampant ignorance of our past leads us to not only to disrespect our past accomplishments but to revile them: witness the attempts to rename buildings on college campuses named after distinguished Americans mounted by students who study little for high grades – who do less for more, and then sneer at those who made their prosperous lives possible.

Is an economic and moral revival possible? Sure, our nation has recovered from dark moments in the past. Is it, however, inevitable? No. God Bless America – it is going to need it.