



## Taking a hard look at the state and quality of a college education

Roger Ruvolo

May 17, 2019

The recent lament by collegians that graduation won't necessarily mean a ticket into the middle class is a big swing in how people value a university education. It raises an important question: What is a college degree worth?

A prospective collegian has at least three big issues to consider: debt, buying power and educational content. A "collaborative analysis" by The Associated Press, General Social Survey and the University of Chicago's NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found that 35 percent of grads in 2018 felt they didn't belong "to the middle or upper class." In 1983, 20 percent felt that way. The analysis came out early this month.

The analysis didn't define "middle class," and AP, as it often does, tries to write it up as a class-warfare story. But cutting through the rhetorical haze, we do have some substance: College debt loads and home prices relative to wages are factors in this dimmer view.

The authors of the analysis use the term "middle class" but never define it; they likely mean "middle income." In the United States, household income is broken down into 20 percent chunks. This is from a Congressional Budget Office average-annual-income household breakdown for 2015, the latest available. After adjusting for transfer payments and taxes: top: \$215,000; upper: \$91,000; middle: \$65,000; lower: \$47,000; bottom: \$33,000.

PayScale and the National Association of Colleges and Employers put out studies saying recent grads will earn around \$50,000 annually. Few stay in income quintiles forever, so grads can expect to earn more later. But with high debt loads and housing costs, one can see why grads would feel grim entering the work world.

Now let's check out factors that might lead to this opinion.

The analysis mentions housing prices and in our Inland area, that's an extremely significant factor. Median home prices are about \$385,000 in Riverside County and \$360,000 in San Bernardino County. A recent graduate will need to pull down a chunky paycheck to afford the mortgage on a local median-priced home. Imagine if you lived in Orange or Los Angeles counties, where the medians are about twice that high.

How about student loan debt? The analysts note that total student debt has more than quintupled since 2004 to \$1.5 trillion. Since 1980, inflation-adjusted tuition and college fees are up 226 percent, according to the Cato Institute — coinciding nicely with federal efforts to make college more “affordable” with aid programs. Student debt loads shot up right along with the tuition increases. Average debt varies by state but generally grads can expect to owe just under \$30,000, Forbes says; more than 2.5 million grads owe more than \$100,000.

The high cost of housing, coupled with high student loan debts, can certainly be a barrier to feeling a part of the middle class. And if reduced buying power and debt load aren't enough to make you wonder what a degree is worth, how about educational content?

In the lecture hall you are likely to hear regular anti-capitalist rants, delivered by (well-paid and -pensioned) faculty members who have long identified as left or far left.

Outside class, campus speech is no longer free. Faculty senates demand disinvitations for any speaker outside the orthodoxy. A few who made it as far as campus have been physically attacked. Identity politics isn't just popular, it's practically required; ideology dominates on matters like abortion, immigration, taxes, even our political system. While on campus, a student can reasonably wonder why for all this financial burden, they're supporting a university that is increasingly partisan and hostile to the free exchange of ideas, undercutting the quality of their education.

What fixes this?

Government aid and loans have tended to inflate college costs and the poorest Americans — the intended beneficiaries — haven't been greatly helped. Phasing out those programs would eventually lower prices for everyone, benefiting those least able to pay high tuition. A phase-out of government aid would cause student to seek content they believe best prepares them for a career, which would help cut down on some of the more egregious partisan material, and restore the value of a college education.

These are deconstructions that could take a generation to achieve, but there's no better time to start than now.