

THE MORAL LIBERAL

What is a BA Degree Worth Today?

BY Alan Caruba February 22, 2013

While my high school graduating class of 1955 went off to a variety of prestigious Ivy League colleges and universities, I chose the University of Miami in Florida. I spent four of the happiest years of my life there. The weather was sublime, the girls were pretty, and the Royal Palm trees lined the walk to the library. I eventually became the student governor of the College of Arts and Sciences, wrote for the university newspaper, and received an excellent education thanks to professors who really seemed to enjoy teaching.

I do not know what it cost my parents to send me there, but I do know that the cost of sending a young man or woman to college these days is daunting. For the many students who take loans it can leave them with so much debt that they will spend the next twenty years paying it off.

A recent Rasmussen poll revealed that “Voters don’t think much of the skills acquired by high school graduates attempting to go to college or enter the work force.” Imagine the problems faced by those who drop out of high school?

However, even the current recession has not impacted the decision to send a child to college. In a 2011 article in New York magazine by Daniel H. Smith, “The University Has No Clothes”, he noted that “Fifty years ago, 48 percent of recent high school graduates enrolled in a college or university. In 2009, that number was more than 70 percent.”

How much has the cost increased? “In the past 30 years,” wrote Smith, “college tuition and fees have increased, in constant 2010 dollars, from \$9,500 a year to more than \$27,000. Public college tuition has increased from \$2,100 to \$7,600. Fifteen years ago, the average student debt at graduation was around \$12,700; in 2009, it was \$24,000. Over the past quarter-century, the total cost of higher education has grown by 440 percent.”

Something is very wrong with this inflation of college costs and, in the winter 2013 edition of Cato's Letter, a quarterly newsletter from the Cato Institute, Charles Murray, a noted scholar and author, warned of "The Coming Collapse of the BA Bubble."

"The Bachelor of Arts degree," wrote Murray "wreaks harm on a majority of young people. It is grotesquely inefficient as a source of information for employers. And, perhaps most importantly, it's implicated in the emergence of a class-riven America."

"I am not complaining that too many young people are getting an education after high school," wrote Murray. "On the contrary, I am in favor of education after high school for almost all young people. I am not denying that the possession of a BA is statistically associated with higher income across the life span..." Murray noted that when I graduated in 1959 "an employer...could make some reasonable assumptions about what a BA signified in an applicant." Only about ten percent of the adult population had BA's at that time. Now about one third of all adults have a BA.

The key to Murray's disenchantment with today's BA degree is that "schools have every incentive to produce as many graduates as possible, but no incentives to improve their product...for the vast majority of undergraduate colleges and universities you don't even know if that person can write a coherent sentence. You certainly know nothing about the kinds of skills that they bring to the job—skills that you could have been assumed were there some years before."

This is especially important insofar as almost sixty percent of all jobs in the U.S. require a higher education and the emerging trend is that jobs in the past that only required a BA, now often require a Masters. As one critic put it, "It's only a matter of time until you'll need a bachelor's degree and a certification to mow lawns."

A 2012 study from Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce, titled "Hard Times: Not All College Majors are Created Equal", noted that bachelor degree grads have an unemployment rate of 8.9 percent, comparable or higher than the overall unemployment rates, no matter what kind of job is involved. Those graduates leave school with an average debt of \$22,000 after their parents have spent 40 percent of their income to put them through college, giving a whole new meaning to "higher" education.

Smith noted that "little more than half of those millions who haul their laptops to campus each fall actually end up with a bachelor's degree. The United States now has the highest college dropout rate in the industrialized world."

It gets worse, a 2005 study by sociologists Richard arum and Josip Roksa, using the Collegiate Learning Assessment, concluded that “Nearly half of all students demonstrated...exceedingly small or empirically non-existent gains in the skills, even after two years of full-time schooling.”

Graduates are often unaware that their faculty graded them on a curve so they couldn't possibly fail and the curriculum they studied had not changed much to reflect changes in the workplace or new technologies that require very specific skills they may not have acquired or even wanted to study.

Increasingly, the cost and end-result of a bachelor's degree is receiving harsh criticism despite calculations that assert that a degree today is worth \$1.3 million in additional lifetime earnings.

Murray believes that “Employers will rely more on direct evidence about what the job candidate knows, and less on where it was learned or how long it took. Our obsession with the BA has created a two-tiered entry to adulthood, anointing some for admission to the club and labeling the rest as second-best.”

What is evident is that the degree I acquired more than a half century ago opened doors for me that today's BA opens. It certainly did not cost as much, nor did it leave me saddled with debt. The best thing it taught me was how to think more clearly, plus an appreciation for history, the arts and the sciences. It imbued me with a lifelong enjoyment of learning.

It is surely much harder for today's BA graduates. The job market has shrunk. Depending on their major, they may have useful skills or they may not. They may find themselves “under employed” for years. The mismanagement of the economy by those who graduated after me in the 70s and 80s, has left it in tatters and left today's graduates believing that the Earth is doomed unless we abandon capitalism and stop using traditional energy sources. That's a definition of stupidity.