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THE RIGHT TAKE ON HIGHER ED

Friday, July 17, 2009

Posing a False Dilemma on Higher-Ed Costs [George Leef]

The Pope Center recently released a paper on the seemingly endless upward spiral of higher-ed spending and resulting tuition jolts for students and their families. We convened a group of higher-ed specialists in Washington last month to hear author Robert Martin explain his analysis and then discuss it. Among those present was Kevin Carey of Education Sector, who readily admitted that his politics were "well to the left of everyone else's." I have no problem with that, since our efforts to get higher education to deliver more true education at less expense shouldn't be a left-right dispute.



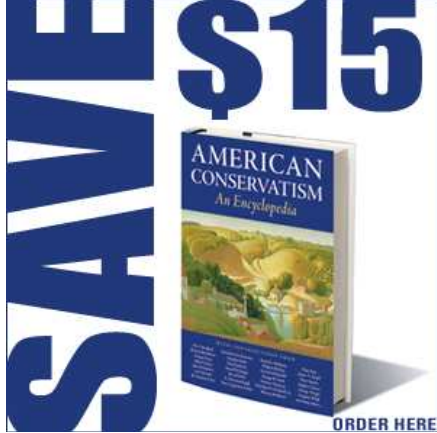

I don't understand Carey to be opposed to the objective of reducing higher-ed spending, or at least getting more benefit from it, but he has written that we educational libertarians are trapped. How so? Allegedly, we can only accomplish the objective of lower spending by resorting to something we oppose, namely increased federal regulation. Cato's Neal McCluskey [here](#) links to Carey's piece and gives his rejoinder.

I think that Neal mops up and will add only a few additional thoughts.

A favorite device of many writers and speakers, left and right, is to pose a false dilemma. Obama does it all the time. (Oh, how I'd love to see a reporter say, "But Mr. President, you've just tried to sell your X Agenda by posing a false dilemma: Either adopt my plan or watch civilization end. Those aren't the only possibilities.") Carey has done the same thing. We either accept skyrocketing college costs or we resort to government regulation to bring them under control. The trouble is that government regulation is not the only — and in fact is a highly unreliable — method for controlling college costs. The most effective means of slowing the spiral would be to ratchet down federal subsidies for higher education and for the government to stop broadcasting the ridiculous notion that anyone who doesn't go to college has "let the country down" (as Obama has said). College costs keep rising mainly because, as in health care, much of the money comes from third parties, and because there is wildly excessive demand for educational credentials.

Carey's belief that government regulation in the form of mandatory spending reports will work to stop the higher-ed spending spiral strikes me as a good example of what economist David Henderson calls "government fundamentalism." He writes about that disastrous phenomenon [here](#).

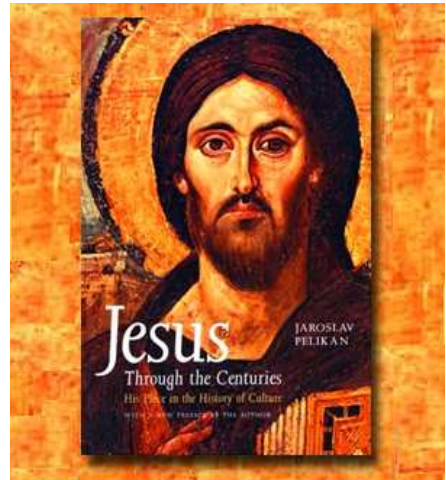
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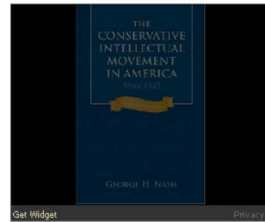
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