



## Higher Ed Problems “God’s Will Or Somebody Else’s Fault”

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Aficionados of the movie – not the TV show — M\*A\*S\*H might recall what Captain Augustus “Duke” Forrest says about overbearing, incompetent surgeon Major Frank Burns: “Frank Burns is a menace! Every time a patient croaks on him, he says it’s God’s will or somebody else’s fault.” That line pops into my head whenever I hear federal politicians explain why the higher ed patient is dying, and it’s in my noggin again with new attacks on accreditation.

Back in the George W. Bush era, the scapegoating was often of rich colleges with big endowments. In particular, Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-IA) castigated endowment-hoarders like Harvard and Yale, and with Sen. Max Baucus (D-MT) sent letters requesting information on endowment growth and student aid to every college with a stash of \$500 million or above.

That really put heat on the Ivory Tower, right? Nope. Only 136 schools out of 4,300 had endowments of that size.

More recently, the big bad guys have been for-profit colleges, which have been targeted by the Obama administration and senators such as Tom Harkin (D-IA) and Dick Durbin (D-IL). While students at for-profits account for a large percentage of loan defaults, when you put everything into context for-profits are not the problem. They work with by far the most challenging student bodies, don’t get direct taxpayer subsidies like public institutions, actually pay taxes, and you can’t get tax deductions for donating to them unlike, say, those colleges with the huge endowments. And schools’ outcomes appear to be much more influenced by the backgrounds of their students than what the schools do. So for-profits may do great jobs relative to other schools, but they have by far the toughest challenge.

Today, for-profits are still high on the blame list, but accreditors seem to be rising to meet them, with Education Secretary Arne Duncan talking up how awful they are for not punishing schools with low completion rates and other poor outcomes. And it’s not just Duncan – there seems to be bipartisan support for blaming accreditors. Bad outcomes must be their fault because they don’t somehow make schools get everyone – no matter how unsuited for college – to graduation, good jobs, and on-time loan repayment.

But it's not their fault. It is the federal government's fault, because it gives almost any amount of money to almost any person to go to college, regardless of their demonstrated desire or ability to do college-level work. The federal government, for all intents and purposes, begs colleges to take such people and charge great sums.

Ultimately, the huge waste and failure in higher education is primarily the fault of Washington politicians who love to hand out money and be the "good guys" even when they know they are setting millions of unprepared people up for failure. It is the fault of federal politicians who are, essentially, Frank Burns, blaming everyone else – endowments, schools, accreditors – when their patients fail.

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