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## George Will: Subprime college education

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WASHINGTON

Many parents and the children they send to college are paying rapidly rising prices for something of declining quality. This is because "quality" is not synonymous with "value."

Glenn Harlan Reynolds, University of Tennessee law professor, believes college has become, for many, merely a "status marker" signaling membership in the educated caste, and a place to meet spouses of similar status -- "associative mating." Since 1961, the time students spend reading, writing and otherwise studying has fallen from 24 hours a week to about 15 -- enough for a degree often desired only as an expensive signifier of rudimentary qualities (e.g., the ability to follow instructions).

Employers value this signifier as an alternative to aptitude tests when evaluating potential employees because such tests can provoke lawsuits by having a "disparate impact" on this or that racial or ethnic group.

In his Encounter Books Broadside "The Higher Education Bubble," Reynolds says this bubble exists for the same reasons the housing bubble did. The government decided that too few people owned homes/went to college, so government money was poured into subsidized and sometimes subprime mortgages/student loans, with the predictable result that housing prices/college tuitions soared and many borrowers went bust. Tuitions and fees have risen more than 440 percent in 30 years as schools happily raised prices -- and lowered standards -- to siphon up federal money. A recent Wall Street Journal headline: "Student Debt Rises by 8% as College Tuitions Climb."

Richard Vedder, an Ohio University economist, writes in the Chronicle of Higher Education that as many people -- perhaps more -- have student loan debts as have college degrees. Have you seen those T-shirts that proclaim "College: The Best Seven Years of My Life"? Twenty-nine percent of borrowers never graduate, and many who do graduate take decades to repay their loans.

In 2010, The New York Times reported on Courtney Munna, then 26, a New York University graduate with almost \$100,000 in debt. If her repayments were not then being deferred because she was enrolled in night school, she would have been paying \$700 monthly from her \$2,300 monthly after-tax income as a photographer's assistant. She says she is toiling "to pay for an education I got for four years and would happily give back." Her degree is in religious and women's studies.

The budgets of California's universities are being cut, so recently Cal State Northridge students conducted an almost-hunger strike (sustained by a blend of kale, apple and celery juices) to protest, as usual, tuition increases and, unusually and properly, administrators' salaries. For example, in 2009 the base salary of UC Berkeley's Vice Chancellor for Equity and Inclusion was \$194,000, almost four times that of starting assistant professors. And by 2006, academic administrators outnumbered faculty.

The Manhattan Institute's Heather Mac Donald notes that sinecures in academia's diversity industry are expanding as academic offerings contract. UC San Diego, while eliminating master's programs in electrical and computer engineering and comparative literature, and eliminating courses

in French, German, Spanish and English literature, added a diversity requirement for graduation to cultivate "a student's understanding of her or his identity." So, rather than study computer science and Cervantes, students can study their identities -- themselves. Says Mac Donald, "'Diversity,' it turns out, is simply a code word for narcissism."

She reports that UCSD lost three cancer researchers to Rice University, which offered them 40 percent pay increases. But UCSD found money to create a Vice Chancellorship for Equity, Diversity and Inclusion. UC Davis has a Diversity Trainers Institute under an Administrator of Diversity Education, who presumably coordinates with the Cross-Cultural Center. It also has: a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Resource Center; a Sexual Harassment Education Program; a Diversity Program Coordinator; an Early Resolution Discrimination Coordinator; a Diversity Education Series that awards Understanding Diversity Certificates in "Unpacking Oppression"; and Cross-Cultural Competency Certificates in "Understanding Diversity and Social Justice." California's budget crisis has not prevented UC San Francisco from creating a new Vice Chancellor for Diversity and Outreach to supplement UCSF's Office of Affirmative Action, Equal Opportunity and Diversity, and the Diversity Learning Center (which teaches how to become "a Diversity Change Agent"), and the Center for LGBT Health and Equity, and the Office of Sexual Harassment Prevention & Resolution, and the Chancellor's Advisory Committees on Diversity, and on Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Issues, and on the Status of Women.

So taxpayers should pay more and parents and students should borrow more to fund administrative sprawl in the service of stale political agendas? Perhaps they will, until "pop!" goes the bubble.

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