Contemporary Social Issues in Higher Education

Higher education, once a pursuit afforded to only a small portion of the population, has exploded as an institution over the past century and secured a place as a mainstay upon which society has come to rely. Particularly in first-world countries, an advanced degree has come to be seen as a necessary ingredient in economic and social mobility, accompanied with the promise of higher earning potential and job security. However, this idyllic picture does not tell the whole story, and the portion that it does tell falls slightly short of the truth. In this paper, we will critically examine the promise of higher education, including its purported role in society, as well as the contradictions surrounding the institution that have proved to be problematic.

It is first worth noting what exactly the promises of a higher education entail - it is, after all, a resource that costs money, and so it is natural to ask who is paying and what value they are deriving from it. Many nations take the stance that the purpose of higher education in society is to serve the public good. In China, for example, reforms from the past several decades often explicitly state what they believe the intended purpose of higher education to be: to improve the quality of labor forces within their country, to cultivate human talents, to support economic, political, and scientific progress, and to serve an overall goal of striving towards modernization in a global economy that requires not only skills but knowledge. It is also stated that they expect such reforms and progress in education to correspondingly expand their economy, making those on the receiving end of such an education competitive in the global workforce.

On the other hand, consider Zimbabwe, which in the wake of apartheid established its independence and, among other things, declared education a basic human right that was necessary for not only economic but also social growth. They recognized many of the non-tangible, long-term payoffs of education, particularly for a developing society, and despite their relative lack of resources declared all education to be free of charge to its citizens. Although it has struggled with this model for many reasons, including the instability of its government and its struggle to attract the necessary funding, this highlights a core function of education that is common to many societies - to raise up their people, to provide them opportunities for learning and growth, and to produce a society in which discourse can be carried out freely and thoughtfully.

Looking instead at individuals instead of nations, it is worth examining how higher degrees are portrayed in society. In the United States, for example, the introduction of the GI Bill in 1944 lead to a boom in higher education following World War 2. This subsidized the cost of education for veterans, a portion of whom went on to achieve stable middle-class lives in the booming post-war economy. Coupled with the burgeoning Cold War, which pressured the US government to increase their investments in science and technology, enrollment in universities continued to increase. The role of an advanced degree prior to this had several distinct purposes - it either served as a form of teaching credential, or was a social signifier of intelligence or work ethic. During the post-war period, advanced degrees continued to serve this role, but as they became more commonplace they were increasingly used by private companies to benchmark and filter candidates for the burgeoning "white collar" jobs. These provided an alternative to the early-century industries of manual labor, usually centered around coal, steel, railroad, or factories. In turn, holding a college degree became increasingly associated with higher paying, less physically demanding careers, creating the first indications of the promise of social and economic mobility.

This leads us to today's world, nearly 60 years later. After several generations of these associations, the story linking a degree to economic success has become engrained in American culture, and in the ensuing years there has been an "exodus from the liberal arts into professional degrees". In a 2014 poll, a cross-section of students were asked to indicate the reason(s) why they enrolled in college: 91% said it was primarily to increase "post-graduate employment opportunities", 90% said it was to "make more money or increase (their) earning potential", and 89% said it was "to get a good job". Meanwhile, the cost of attending college has increased nearly 3-fold since 1990, and while about 25% of the average university's funds came from student tuition and fees at that time, it is now closer to 50%.

It is not only the fees that have increased, though - in 1960, government spending comprised about 1% of the national budget, while it now hovers around 3%, or nearly 200 billion USD. This funding goes towards things such as grants to support basic research, as well as funds paid directly to students in the form of aid such as the Pell grant. It also includes "appropriations" for publicly run institutions, which includes the purchase of land, real estate, and infrastructure, and is also a source of funding for other business activities that are meant to help public universities recoup some of their costs.

However, it is not clear that there has been a corresponding increase in the "return" on the investments made the state or taxpayers, or by the students themselves, in the form of increased employability. More than half of the college students in the US attend a school in which tuition and fees are over $9,000 per year on average. Once costs such as required books, fees for student services, and room and board are included, this puts the average cost at around $17,000 per year. At many US schools, these fees are partially offset by grants or aid provided by the university itself, covering anywhere between %20 and %70 of this cost. Other sources of aid include federal grants, but it is often the case that these are offset by increasing administrative costs year-to-year, and so are simply absorbed by an increase in university fees or inflated tuition rates.

But despite these huge increases in costs, there has not been a corresponding increase in results and output, nor has there been any serious governmental effort to hold universities accountable for their output in the first place. In the US, on average only 36% of the number of enrolled students graduate within the usual 4 years. Meanwhile, nearly 40% of students do not graduate within 6 years. If one tries to measure a university's success by simply looking at how well it adheres to its goal of providing students with a standard 4 year degree, this would indicate a serious failure in reaching that goal. Meanwhile, even those that do manage to finish a degree within the standard time frame, there is not as much correlation between having obtaining a degree and securing a job as one might hope - it is becoming increasingly common for graduates to take on entry level, unskilled positions that do not require an advanced degree, or to alternatively take on skilled positions that are unrelated to the area of their degree, as indicated in studies from 2003 to 2004 of graduating cohorts, in which all but one out of 32 interviewees remained unemployed nearly a year after graduation. [3]

Similarly, although accessibility has increased along racial and ethnic lines, the economic stratification has remained pronounced - among the top 10 universities in the US, nearly 74% of the student population come from the top 1/4 wealthiest households in the nation, while less than 3% come from the poorest 1/4. This issue is compounded by the fact that increasing demand for degrees has led to what many authors term the "massification" of higher education. The referenced case studies examine the progression of higher education in various countries, and classify their progress into three categories. These are based on "participation rates", which measure the proportion of the university-age population in a country to the number of admitted students to universities nationwide; anything below 15% is classified as "elite" education, between %15 and %50 is classified as "mass" education, and anything above %50 is considered "universal" education. US universities were in the elite category until the aforementioned wartime boom, at which point it transitioned to mass education, and as of 2008 was at 69%, putting it in the universal range.