

Taylor Overbey

EDLD 857

Dr. Robert McKinney

Ivory Tower Deliberation

Reflection on the film *The Ivory Tower*

“FREE” EDUCATION

The idea of free education is alluring in all of its egalitarian glory. The possibility of allowing the poor, the disenfranchised, and the marginalized access to education, and thus uplift them from the grip of poverty, is an intoxicating concept. However, no matter how glorious a desire, it may be an unachievable goal.

The European Model of Free Education

Oft cited, and held up as a model for the world, is Europe. However, according to Marcus (2019), “being unable to charge tuition means universities are overcrowded and thinly stretched, and those hard-pressed taxpayers are unfairly forced to fill the void.” Tuition is free at public higher education institutions in many European countries, but this free tuition does not include living expenses. In Germany, students can get additional monies to cover living expenses (Marcus, 2019), but students there contend that the money is not enough, and many still have to work. An anecdotal example came up in the United States when discussing the subject of free education. Students who argue for free education also want things like rent, food, health care, and transportation included. Marcus (2019) argues that the more of the free things that are included in the list of free education, the more of these burdens then fall on the taxpayer. These people may or may not have children that would benefit from free education, so they might not be so inclined to support it. Additionally, Marcus (2019) claims that with ever-increasing taxes,

students with degrees tend to move to locales with a lower tax base after graduation, leaving a shrinking number of taxpayers and a higher percentage of responsibility.

The Pell Grant

An argument can be made that community college attendance in the United States is already “free,” with the availability of Pell grants. Pell grants are available to low income students whose family makes \$45,000 a year, or less, and they are up to, approximately \$5,000 per year. These grants cover tuition and books, and with most community college students already living in “the community,” this is an ideal choice for them.

Community colleges, like SLCC, offer training for skills that are in demand, like welders, electricians, auto mechanics, and HVAC. A problem arises, though, in that the Pell grant is not a bottomless pit, and students who want to pursue an Associate’s Degree (as opposed to a Technical Degree), will have to pass Learning Foundations Math and English, and many students struggle to pass these gatekeepers classes, eating up the limited Pell grant. Additionally, students that change majors multiple times will also find that grant dwindling.

According to Denhart (2014), when students do not pay for services, a “Moral Hazard” ensues because students are not sensitive to the costs associated with it. They tend to consume further years of education without any sense of responsibility, or concern for what it actually costs. Additionally, when students have no “skin in the game,” they take longer to finish a degree. If higher education was free, and students chose to take an extra year to graduate, the additional load on taxpayers would increase by 33% (Lederman, 2020).

A Limited Number of Seats

Education in Greece is “free” (Dabilis, 2014), and has been for years. That statement comes with a caveat, though. Since the actual number of higher education institutions is limited, the state began requiring exams in order for potential students to qualify. According to Dabilis (2014), once students are accepted at the university, they can become, what they call “eternal students,” and many do. There is no requirement, and thus, no motivation to graduate. Once enrolled, people can list themselves as students for decades.

Even with such stringent entrance requirements for the top Greek colleges, they rank low in world standings (Dabilis, 2014). This low ranking is “because the standards are so low once students are admitted, and the universities are run by politically-oriented groups aligned with the country’s notoriously divisive parties – as is the faculty” (Dabilis, 2014).

In 2014, there were about 105,000 Greek students taking part in the exams, but only 70,305 spots open at state schools around the country, with the University of Athens among the most in-demand (Dabilis, 2014). This game of “Musical Chairs” again favors the better students, leaving behind those whose families would benefit from a higher education degree, but are not as adept at the rigors of the Greek exams. The students who score the highest have their choices of the most sought-after majors, such as law and medicine. Other students who want to be teachers, or such like, wait to see how they scored stacked up against the competition, and how many openings there are open for that subject, making the contest for placement even more intense (Dabilis, 2014).

In the United States, we, too, have a certain number of existing colleges and universities. Each of these institutions has some classrooms, with so many seats. There are also only are so

many qualified teachers. We can build more spaces for students, and we can train more teachers, but that is another aspect that has to be reckoned in the accounting of what is free and how much it costs. If a thing is free, it will eventually have to be rationed, as is the case with Greece. If 100 people want ten free things, we have to make a decision who gets them. If 100 people want a free thing, and there are only 50 available, who will get them, and who will not? What if we raise the number of free things to 80 or 90? There will still be rationing. There will still be “winners” and “losers.” In the case of Greece, the winners are the ones who score the highest on the national exams (Dabilis, 2014).

On the website for the National Center for Educational Statistics (n.d), we find that in 2017, there were 14.56 million college students in the U.S. enrolled in public colleges and 5.1 million students enrolled in private colleges. These figures are expected to increase to 14.98 million and 5.33 million respectively by the year 2028. There are approximately 7,000 institutions of higher learning in the United States (n.d.), so a question arises, where will we put these approximately 20 million students if we also open the doors to anyone for free?

A report on the web site of the National Study Clearinghouse (2018), entitled, *New Report Ranks States Based on Colleges’ Performance in Helping Students Transfer to Four-Year Universities and Earn Bachelor’s Degrees* tells, among other things, the graduation rates of community colleges. Here is what they found.

Studies have shown 80 percent of new community college students want to earn a bachelor’s degree. However, only 14 percent of the 720,000 degree-seeking students examined in the study — who enrolled in community college for the first time in fall 2007 — transferred to and graduated from a four-year university within six years of entry. Among students who started at community college and successfully transferred, only 42 percent completed a bachelor’s degree. This is far below the 60 percent degree attainment rate of students who started at public four-year colleges.

As mentioned earlier, community college is, for all intents and purposes, free of charge right now. If a low-income student applies and is approved for a Pell grant, and registers for classes, that student will be matriculated. There are no entrance exams, and no minimum requirements for any programs, except for English as a 2nd language and the nursing programs. Students are required to take placement tests for math and English to determine if they are ready for college-level Algebra and English, and these “learning foundations” classes are at capacity, with many students needing to repeat them. Nevertheless, even with the first two years of their education paid for by taxpayers, the graduation rate is abysmal. Only 13 percent of community college students graduate in two years (Chen, 2010), and this is when more than \$9 billion is spent on both two- and four-year college students each year by state and federal governments. However, all that free or reduced tuition could not produce a college graduate that could bring those years of education to the country’s workforce (Chen, 2010). Not to paint all community college students with the same broad brush, as there are plenty of students who are ready to learn and eager to start a career. However, with the offer of even more free tuition, how many of the ambitious students would be displaced by those who come to class simply because it is free? How many instructors at these institutions have students in class now that, to put it politely, are simply unemployable?

Declining Enrollment in Higher Education

Perhaps some motivating factors like lower enrollment will help get higher education leaders on board the free tuition train. Sedmak (2020) quoted a study of public four-year institutions’ enrollment dropping from 2018 to 2019 by 97,426 students or 1.2%, and public two-year institutions declining by 77,092 students or 1.4%. As cited in Sedmak (2020), Doug

Shapiro, Executive Research Director, National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, stated the following.

With every institutional sector experiencing enrollment declines this fall, the higher education industry has now shed more than 2 million students since its peak in 2011 and the unduplicated count has fallen below 18 million for the first time. Most of the pain hits the Midwest and Northeast, even as some states in the South and West saw modest growth (Sedmak, 2020).

When German universities removed the tuition requirement, enrollment rose by 22 percent, and this is according to the Ministry of Education and Research. This uptick was higher than in other member countries of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development, or OECD. At the same time, the number of Germans students choosing a vocational education has fallen. The cost to taxpayers footing the bill for free higher education went up a whopping 37 percent (Marcus, 2019). One might be tempted to think that these statistics would pique the interest of higher education leaders here in the United States, but that is not the case, at least at the moment. According to Lederman (2020), college presidents are not impressed, with only 22 percent agreeing with the statement, “I support the idea of free public college.” Forty-seven percent of community college presidents support the idea of free tuition, a full 30 percentage points higher than other types of institutions. Next, at 15 percent were public master’ s/baccalaureate university presidents. Perhaps the least surprising were the presidents of private college presidents, a majoring of whom were opposed, with seven in 10 vehemently opposed. Perhaps they know something the rest do not.

Those Costly Repairs and the Cost of an Education

Lest we forget the upkeep of an institution’s physical space, this also must figure into the cost of higher education. After years of biting the financial bullet and budget cuts, universities

and colleges together face a staggering deficit of \$30 billion for what they label “deferred maintenance” or “deferred renewal” to buildings badly in need of repair (Marcus, 2019b).

The Cooper School in New York was featured in the documentary *Ivory Tower*. They offered free tuition for years but erected a new building that set them back millions. According to Marcus (2019b), other institutions collectively have also continued their building plans and spent a record \$11.5 billion last year. This spending was designed to attract new students when enrollment is leveling off or falling, or to produce more income from new gymnasiums and residence facilities with lazy rivers. This construction requires money from somewhere, along with interest on the loans, but the bumper sticker from many proponents of free tuition is, “Tax the rich.” However, as with a quote attributed to Margaret Thatcher, “The problem with socialism is that you eventually run out of other people’s money.”

REFERENCES

- Chen, G. (2010, November 18). The Catch-22 of Community College Graduation Rates. Retrieved from <https://www.communitycollegereview.com/blog/the-catch-22-of-community-college-graduation-rates>
- Dabilis, A. (2014, June 17). Pressure That Kills: Greek University Entrance Exams. Retrieved from <https://greece.greekreporter.com/2014/06/16/pressure-that-kills-greek-university-entrance-exams/>
- Denhart, C. (2014, October 10). There Is No Such Thing As A Free College Education. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ccap/2014/10/03/there-is-not-such-thing-as-a-free-college-education/#342d5476417a>
- Lederman, D. (2020, March 13). Inside Higher Ed. Retrieved from <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/survey/survey-presidents-reveals-growing-divide-confidence-opposition-free-college-and-broad>
- Marcus, J. (2019a, April 16). How free college tuition in one country exposes unexpected pros and cons. Retrieved March 18, 2020, from <https://hechingerreport.org/free-college-tuition-one-country-exposes-unexpected-pros-cons/>
- Marcus, J. (2019b, May 9). Long-neglected maintenance threatens to further escalate the cost of college. Retrieved from <https://hechingerreport.org/long-neglected-maintenance-threatens-to-further-escalate-the-cost-of-college/>
- New Report Ranks States Based on Colleges' Performance in Helping Students Transfer to Four-Year Universities and Earn Bachelor's Degrees. (2018, August 9). Retrieved from [https://www.studentclearinghouse.org/blog/new-report-ranks-states-based-on-colleges-performance-in-helping-students-transfer-to-four-year-universities-and-earn-bachelors-degrees/?highlight=community college#038; hilite='community','college'](https://www.studentclearinghouse.org/blog/new-report-ranks-states-based-on-colleges-performance-in-helping-students-transfer-to-four-year-universities-and-earn-bachelors-degrees/?highlight=community%20college#038;hilite='community','college')
- Sedmak, T. (2020, January 2). Fall Enrollments Decline For 8th Consecutive Year. Retrieved from <https://www.studentclearinghouse.org/blog/fall-enrollments-decline-for-8th-consecutive-year/>
- The NCES Fast Facts Tool provides quick answers to many education questions (National Center for Education Statistics). (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=84>

