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REVIEW ESSAY

Is College Worth It? A Former United States Secretary of Education and a Liberal Arts Graduate Expose the Broken Promise of Higher Education, by William J. Bennett and David Wilezol. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2013, 240 pp., $22.95 hardbound.

College: Who Profits?

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William Bennett and David Wilezol ask the question, "Is college worth it?" in their recently published book. The answer for some is yes and for many no. But the question that undergirds their thesis is, "Is college for everyone?" Here, the answer is an unequivocal *no*.

At too many colleges, as Bennett and Wilezol note, a yawning gap exists between student (and parental) investment and the return on that investment, looking at the matter in purely economic terms. Surely, federal government aid is partly to blame, along with uninformed consumers, but the lack of accountability and genuine performance measures at many universities is a central culprit.

Too many college graduates are suffocating under a mountain of accumulated debt, with very limited opportunities for employment and no acquired skill. Bennett and Wilezol appropriately call this group the Zombie Generation. In June 2010, total student loan debt in the United States surpassed total credit card debt—$914 billion versus $672 billion—and even surpassed total auto loans and mortgages. One Associated Press analysis of 2011 graduates found that 54 percent were unemployed and many who were employed worked jobs unrelated to their college studies.

Why then do vast numbers attend college? For some, the system works, yielding decent jobs and an effective rate of return on investment; for others, the illusion that it will work and the constant drumbeat that a college degree has market value is irresistible. For middle-class students, college has become a rite of passage, what Peter Thiel has called "default activity." Keep in mind that in his first State of the Union address, President Obama said, "I ask every American to commit to at least one year or more of higher education…"

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The question is: Who pays for this experience? With tuition costs rising to the amount of money available in federal student aid programs, increases are inexorable (the “Bennett Hypothesis”). As a consequence, an ironic condition has resulted: the more aid one receives with tuition increasing accordingly, the more aid one has to have—in an unending cycle. Intended to make college study more affordable for its recipients, financial aid actually makes things worse or maintains a pace equal to tuition rates. Rather than consider elasticity of demand based on cost, tuition is a function of federal funding—or what they can get away with, among elite institutions. Between 1982 and 2007, the period of dramatically increasing federal assistance, college tuition rose more than 400 percent (about four times the rate of inflation).

This assistance was designed largely for students from low-income backgrounds, and yet, the authors point out, while 12 percent of recent college graduates came from the bottom quartile of the income distribution in 1970 (when Pell Grants didn’t exist and the student loan program had barely begun), that percentage had *decreased* to 7.3 percent forty years later. It would seem, then, that the taxpayer is getting very little for this increased expenditure. As Bennett and Wilezol point out, higher education is certainly not underfunded, but “it is under accountable.” We do indeed know something about costs, but next to nothing about outcomes.

Years ago, I argued that a human capital market like the stock market could easily sort out worthwhile university activity from the fluff and silliness, a proposal also mentioned by Luigi Zingales, professor of entrepreneurship and finance at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business, in a 2012 *New York Times* article. But as things stand, all students are treated alike, for example, the major in human consciousness and the major in computer engineering. Unfortunately, government aid doesn’t discriminate.

It is also the case that faculty salaries have increased exponentially as faculty teaching loads are decreasing and administrative bloat has reached laughable proportions. Both conditions are sustained by student tuition dollars. Arguably the most significant drain on budgets, at least an avoidable drain, is the proliferation of questionable academic programs. It is almost impossible to caricature the offerings in the contemporary college catalog, from queer studies to identity studies of every possible permutation. By the time Tom Wolfe’s sardonic *I Am Charlotte Simmons* was published in

2004, the novel seemed like a mild nonfiction account of student life and study in the academy.

University life has in so many respects become a "diseased organ," to use an apt description by Roger Kimball. It is a microcosm of the increasingly politically correct culture that demands sensitivity to race and gender, but not to traditional religious views. The Academy espouses free speech as long as what is said conforms to the prevailing radical orthodoxy on campus. Once again, I ask why we sustain so much of this absurd exercise for so great an expense?

There is little doubt the nation has changed. Blue-collar figures are not cultural exemplars, even though many blue-collar jobs are compensated far more favorably than professional employment. It is frequently observed that there are jobs Americans won't do—an argument made by immigration reformers like Jed Bush and Clint Bolick. I consider this claim condescending. Surely at some price, labor will adjust to the market. But it is also true that many Americans find working with one's hands demeaning.

Third-generation sentiment is yet another issue. In *Buddenbrooks*, Thomas Mann illustrates how the first generation makes the personal sacrifices to build a business, the second generation does what is necessary to sustain it, and the third generation rejects it completely to seek instead expression in the arts. College students are disproportionally third generation.

Last, for a generation that has been told "self-esteem" is what counts, an esteem without obvious manifestations of commitment or talent, STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) study seems arduous, notwithstanding the jobs available in these fields.

And yet, curiously, most surveys indicate that the overwhelming majority of incoming college students believe the reason for attending college is "to get a better job." Here is university alchemy at work. Despite growing evidence to the contrary, admissions officers have convinced students that the parchment received after four years of study will enhance employment opportunity. Of course, sometimes it does; but for many it is the path to becoming a waiter, a cabbie, or a clerk saddled with enormous debt.

PayPal cofounder Peter Thiel offers a different option. His "20 Under 20" program provides $100,000 grants for talented individuals to skip college and explore their own research and entrepreneurial impulses. In some ways it is the model for college dropouts like Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Mark Zuckerberg, and Ralph Lauren, who defied conventional educational routes to success.

Notwithstanding Bennett and Wilezol's appropriate emphasis on cost-benefit analysis, higher education in the best sense forms the basis for truth, beauty, and virtue, the essential principles of Western culture. Just as significant, it is a mechanism for the transmission of "the best that that has been thought and said." So long as there was a shared belief in the Judeo-Christian tradition and its organic relationship to the Constitution—conditions once widely accepted—the bounds of scholarship and inquiry were clear. Now with every traditional belief assaulted, replaced by relativism or an orthodoxy of pantheism, the values attached to the university system and the larger society are in disarray. As I see it, despite concern about vocational preparation, there is an essential place for a core of common studies serving as an intellectual communion of students and instructors. This core would show what a well-ordered society might be, and it would also indicate a commitment to liberty that undergirds this polity.

While I regard the common core as a central feature of university life, I also recognize that it is in desuetude—what President George W. Bush described as "the soft bigotry of low expectations." Can it be recaptured? Perhaps, but the present system doesn't provide much evidence for it. In 2012 Peter Berkowitz, a Hoover Institution scholar, noted that political science majors at Yale, Princeton, Stanford, and Berkeley could receive a B.A. without any study of the Federalist Papers, the essential commentary on the Constitution written by James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay. American Council of Trustees and Alumni scholars note that in many universities reading Shakespeare is not a requirement for English majors. But this progressive philosophy that treats all themes as valid, whether cartoons or the trial of Socrates, debases knowledge and the ability to make discriminating decisions regarding the curriculum.

Help may be on the way. Digital learning is the catalyst for an academic revolution. Some of the most prestigious schools in America are embracing these percolations, even though faculties generally oppose this reform, fearful that their jobs may be in jeopardy. And they are probably right. The driver of this reform, the so-called MOOC—massive open online courses—offers courses for little or no charge to millions of students. Anyone can sign up for them and Udacity, the brainchild of Sebastian Thrun, even provides for the certification of skills at various testing centers.

Here is an opportunity for genuine diversity. One doesn't have to tolerate the herd of independent thinkers across university life or feel the chastening effect of challenging

prevailing campus opinion. This education is open, inexpensive, non-elitist, and accessible. Some will contend that the quality does not meet the standard of brick and mortar classrooms. But if Michael Sandel is offering the introduction to philosophy online as he does, it is likely to be the same brilliant lectures he gives his Harvard students. Willy-nilly, this ed-tech movement will alter higher education. Perhaps the elite institutions will be somewhat unaffected because of their "labeling effect," but the face of higher education will assuredly receive a facelift.

Bennett and Wilezol provide a compelling case for reform and for the obvious—but often overlooked—fact that college isn't for everyone. On one point, I demur. The authors admire the German "tracking" system that after a series of exams and aptitude tests places a student on an academic or a vocational track. My own experience leads to a different conclusion, one I have called "aspirational redirection." I went to college to play basketball. My studies were a mere adjust to my central ambition. Then I met Jacques Barzun, Dan Bell, William Casey, Lionel Trilling—inspiring instructors. To my astonishment, I became more interested in the hardwood shelves of the library than the hardwood on the basketball court. Redirection, I suspect, is often impossible when tracking is imposed. However, this is a niggling point.

At this moment, the United States is still the global leader in the technology industry—due in no small part to university experimentation. But a shortage of STEM workers constrains the nation's ability to compete. In fact, this is the compelling bipartisan argument for a liberalized immigration policy. By 2020 there will be a shortfall of 1.2 million computer science employees in positions that pay well. Nonetheless, Americans do not possess the requisite skills to fill these slots.

We spend, as a nation, $1.1 trillion on education—$460 billion on postsecondary education excluding loans that are now at $27,000 per graduating student. Is it any wonder online education is on the rise? The higher education financial bubble is about to burst with Coursera likely to be as important in the future as the Ivy League is today. Moreover, most Americans are aware of the frivolous nature of much of what passes for higher education and are reluctant to subsidize it.

There are multiple purposes of higher education, as already noted, that may be difficult to replace, such as equipping "the mind and the soul to recognize what is right and good," in Bennett and Wilezol's words, and to ask the essential questions of life: Why am I here? How do I leave my mark? What is my

relationship to my God? my family? my government? Recognizing the derision of death we all face, how do I meet my Maker? Whether the current college experience explores these matters is a subject about which I am dubious. Nonetheless, the present system is dying and from it may emerge one that captures the spirit of the past with the technology of the future. At least one can hope, which is usually the harbinger of change.