



American Colleges Are Committing Suicide

Self-inflicted wounds, not changing demographics, are undermining the higher-ed sector.

MAR 1, 2023  [Richard K. Vedder](#)

The evidence is everywhere: American colleges and universities are dying. Not all will die very soon—indeed, probably only a modest portion will. But the trend is unmistakably downward.

Why?

Is it because, suddenly, Americans stopped having babies and therefore the market for students is drying up? While demographics do play a role (not only birth rates but also international migration), the bigger problems are largely self-inflicted—decisions made mostly within the academic villages constituting today’s modern colleges and universities.

Let’s start with a little evidence. Enrollment in universities has fallen consistently for years. National Student Clearinghouse data [reveal](#) that, in the span from fall 2017 to fall 2022, total enrollment fell by nearly two million, from 19,949,828 to 18,165,619. I cannot think of another period in American history in which this has happened, although regular, reliable enrollment data are not available for periods before, say, 1850.

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Additionally, there has already been an uptick in the number of schools closing or merging with other institutions. As we read [here](#), credit rating services like Fitch are warning of “more operating woes” in the future.

The massive pandemic funding that began in 2020 is ending, exposing universities to grave financial weaknesses. Massive federal relief is extremely unlikely, particularly with Republicans now controlling the House of Representatives and federal finances increasingly precarious because of massive deficits, rising interest rates, and unfunded liabilities.

So how *are* colleges killing themselves, committing unintentional suicide? Five ways.

First are the high fees they charge. The tuition fees of colleges today are [nearly triple](#) what they were a half-century ago after correcting for inflation. [Editor’s note: Cheers to UNC for freezing tuition for the seventh year in a row.] Since the 1980s, the rise in tuition fees has exceeded the growth in family incomes, meaning college has become less affordable. While air travel and electronic gadgets have all become more affordable, college attendance is now a bigger financial burden.

Totally dysfunctional federal student financial assistance programs have played a big role by allowing colleges to aggressively raise their fees.

How have colleges used rapidly growing student-fee income? *Not* to fund or improve the main purpose of colleges—to promote the growth of knowledge, wisdom, and civility through instruction and research provided by faculty.

Fifty years ago, a typical college had far more instructors than administrative support personnel—registrars, deans, librarians, etc. Today, at many campuses, there are far more administrators than teachers. Moreover, a growing proportion of that vast administrative army is anti-academic, anti-merit, and anti-learning. Especially harmful are the “diversity, equity, and inclusion” apparatchiks, who believe campuses should be defined especially by the racial, gender, and other biological traits that students possess, not by academic accomplishments. These new anti-academicians increasingly control campus decision making.

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Second, most families send their kids to college in preparation for their becoming, at a minimum, middle-class adults living comfortably if not luxuriously. The key to that, of course, is getting a good job. Before 1970, that goal was usually realized, but not so much today. Going to college has actually become quite risky: [At least one-third](#) of those seeking four-year degrees fail to earn them within six years, while at least one-third of those who do get degrees are what the New York Federal Reserve Bank calls “[underemployed](#),” taking jobs traditionally filled by those with lesser education, for instance as baristas in coffee shops, home healthcare aides, workers in big-box retail stores, etc.

Colleges historically were sorting devices identifying the best, brightest, and most diligent of future workers. But today, with about one-third of adult Americans already possessing college degrees, college graduates are no longer very special.

With colleges downplaying academic merit in favor of attributes like skin color *and* increasingly not even *seeking* merit-based information (such as SAT scores) from potential students, today’s graduates are often disappointingly ordinary. The Sheepskin Effect (college diplomas being worth a lot) is considerably diminished.

A third cause of the diminishing academy is the near abandonment on many campuses of a most unique collegiate characteristic: true academic safe spaces where any type of thought and opinion can be openly expressed without fear.

Colleges are supposedly a “marketplaces of ideas,” where virtually all forms of non-violent expression are permitted and even encouraged. The search for truth and beauty that John Keats so eloquently wrote about just over 200 years ago (in his “Ode On a Grecian Urn”) is often being restricted.

Today, on too many campuses, individuals are kept away or shouted down if they don’t adhere to the prevailing campus ethos—most often radically left and woke. This is despite the fact that most Americans don’t want colleges brainwashing students into adopting a particular ideology, either liberal or conservative.

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To be sure, there are a few exceptions, for example some religiously affiliated schools that deliberately promote a particular set of faith-based beliefs, as well as a few schools with a distinctly conservative or libertarian orientation. However, a majority of students attend public universities or nonsectarian private schools that ostensibly welcome students of diverse political and religious perspectives. In reality, these schools often hound those who don’t hold leftist beliefs.

Fourth, all of this has led to new, less-expensive ways of demonstrating one’s employable skills. As the return on traditional college investment has diminished, cheaper forms of demonstrating employable competence are starting to emerge.

One example: coding academies, highly specialized schools offering bright persons great computer skills, leading, after a year or two of study, to high-paying jobs. Similar training facilities are arising in other growing areas of employment, such as the healthcare professions.

Fifth, the credential inflation characterizing American labor markets is perhaps coming to a rather abrupt end, with employers reducing the formal educational requirements required for employment. (You really don’t need a college degree to be a bartender in a spiffy restaurant, for example.) As Utah Governor Spencer Cox put it recently in [announcing an end to degree requirements](#) for most state jobs, “Degrees have become a ... barrier-to-entry in too many jobs. Instead of focusing on demonstrated competence, the focus too often has been on a piece of paper.”

The problem is ultimately one of ownership and control. In our quest to allow universities autonomy and protection from popular political passions, we have largely turned them over

to leftist ideologues and rent-seekers who are contemptuous of the people who provide their daily bread: taxpayers, parents, even major private donors. Universities are beginning to reap the consequences of their wanton self-destruction as more Americans just say no to college.

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