

# Inquiring Minds topic – 19 July 2013

Moderator: Linda Forcey

## Illiberal Arts: ‘Is College Worth It?’ and ‘College (Un)bound’

By ANDREW DELBANCO – 21 June 2013 – *The New York Times*

More than a century ago, the president of Harvard, A. Lawrence Lowell, issued a warning to America’s colleges and universities. “Institutions,” he said, “are rarely murdered. They meet their end by suicide. . . . They die because they have outlived their usefulness, or fail to do the work that the world wants done.” Most of the institutions he had in mind are still around today, but the doomsday talk is back. William J. Bennett, secretary of education under President Reagan, and Jeffrey Selingo, an editor at *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, believe our system is self-destructing. Their tones are different — Bennett and his co-author, David Wilenzol, write in an expectant mood of good riddance, while Selingo is sympathetically alarmed — but their views are grimly consistent. College costs are up. Learning and graduation rates are down.

**“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 Wilenzol (278 pp. Thomas Nelson. \$22.99)**

**“COLLEGE (UN)BOUND” - The Future of Higher Education and What It Means for Students - by Jeffrey J. Selingo (238 pp. New Harvest/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. \$26)**

Bennett’s basic argument is a familiar one, at least from conservative pundits: “Too many people are going to college.” In the search for employment, he believes, a college education confers less advantage than is commonly assumed and leaves students with crushing debt. He would prefer to see the United States emulate countries like Germany, where most young people are tracked into vocational training, and he wants more Americans who do go to college to study science, technology, engineering and mathematics rather than what he calls “irrelevant material.” Before attempting college at all, students should “critically evaluate the data: student-loan debt, return on investment, lifetime salary earnings, academic performance, skills training . . . and so on.” This seems an improbable strategy for most adolescents and a surrender of hopes and dreams, especially for those whose parents have not gone to college themselves.

Selingo doesn’t propose early sorting, but he agrees that the roughly \$1 trillion students owe to private and public lenders are often wasted on empty pleasures, citing as an

**example the 645-foot-long river-rafting feature in the “leisure pool” at Texas Tech. My own sense is that most colleges are filled with hard-working students and teachers. At underfunded, overcrowded community colleges, which enroll more than a third of the almost 18 million American undergraduates, there aren’t many leisure pools.**

**But student debt is certainly too high, and Bennett and Selingo are right that the financial structure of college is breaking down. Private universities face a decline in federal dollars attached to research grants; endowment returns are unlikely to achieve the double-digit norms of a few years ago; and the relentless rise in tuition (which Bennett blames partly on the ready availability of government grants and loans) is unsustainable. At public institutions, which enroll three times as many students as private colleges, the problems are worse. After a sharp drop in the state appropriations that once kept the price of attendance affordable, tuition there has been rising even faster.**

**Bennett approaches these issues from a strong anti-government, pro-business perspective that leads to some odd contradictions. He commends for-profit universities even though at many for-profits graduation rates are low and student debt levels high. He scolds the federal government for violating “simple, sound banking principles” by lending money to students with “no credit history” but praises “private banks that, at large risk to themselves,” do the same thing.**

**Even if there were a quick fix for the fiscal problems, other problems remain. According to Selingo, today’s students “regard their professors as service providers, just like a cashier at the supermarket or a waiter in a restaurant.” He sees “a power shift in the classroom” as students evaluate their teachers through questionnaires “eerily similar to customer satisfaction surveys from department stores.” And, all too often, when professors evaluate students we know the result: grade inflation.**

**What to do? Selingo envisions a fundamental shift in how degrees are awarded — not on the basis of credit hours completed but on competency demonstrated. He sees students taking instruction, whether at a traditional college or through an independent online provider, using “adaptive learning technologies” that “adjust to the speed at which an individual student learns.” Each student’s progress would be continually tested and achievement recognized by a certificate or “badge” that would be more reliable than today’s diplomas, which are essentially based on time spent in class rather than on how much students have actually learned.**

**Successful machine-teaching is being pioneered by the Open Learning Initiative at Carnegie Mellon University, which Selingo rightly calls the “Cadillac” of online education. And some true believers in the online future — whether on the relatively modest scale of the Carnegie Mellon program or in the form of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) — are convinced that all but the wealthiest colleges will be swept away by economic pressure and technological innovation. Selingo is right to doubt it.**

**More likely, colleges will become increasingly stratified. Private institutions will retreat from their commitment to discounting tuition for needy students and will serve mainly the affluent, while public colleges, in order to cut costs, will rely more on technology and part-time faculty.**

**As different as they are in tone, these books share the assumption that education is mostly about what Selingo calls “information delivery.” If students get their information from multiple providers and demonstrate mastery of what they have learned, colleges will lose their monopoly on issuing marketable credentials. Some venture capitalists think this will happen soon, which is why there’s a surging number of for-profit education entrepreneurs.**

**So far, traditional colleges have fended off the challenge, mainly because they’re favored by the existing accreditation system. But Selingo suggests that they won’t — and shouldn’t — hold out much longer. For his part, Bennett dismisses most colleges as venues for “drinking, drugs, partying, sex,” though he adds, with evident reluctance, “sometimes learning.” He simply wants them to go away, allowing for some screamingly obvious exceptions: “If you get into Stanford . . . you should probably go.”**

**The colleges that survive will be those, in Selingo’s words, that “prove their worth.” Fair enough. But there’s a problem with this formulation, which presumes a narrow definition of worth that can be captured in data like rates of early job attainment or levels of lifetime income.**

**In times of economic stress, it’s entirely reasonable for students and families to demand evidence that paying for college makes sense. Bennett construes college as a business proposition, but Selingo allows himself to reflect on what’s sacrificed in such a view: “I worry at times about what might be lost in an unbound, personalized experience for students. Will they discover subjects they never knew existed? If a computer is telling them where to sit for class discussions, will they make those random connections that lead to lifelong friends? Will they be able to develop friendships and mentors if they move from provider to provider?”**

**These are the right questions. In striving to “prove their worth,” America’s colleges risk losing their value as places young people enter as adventurous adolescents and from which they emerge as intellectually curious adults. Such a loss could never be compensated by any gain.**

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