

The deterioration of American education

BY BRUCE SMITH

Today, American colleges and universities are in a constant battle to maintain or increase enrollment. Following World War II, the GI Bill and the baby boomers created a swell of potential college students. Declines in fertility have reduced potential recruits and increased college and university competition. There are, of course, top-tier colleges that attract many more applicants than slots to fill. But, many small schools are struggling. It is difficult for smaller schools to achieve the scale economies necessary to keep costs down and tuition affordable.

Competition is the cornerstone of a strong and dynamic economy. Competition for students can also lead to conditions that undermine the very strength of the U.S. economy. College professors are frequently reminded of the importance of retaining current students. This might entail more personal contact with students that encourage study and active campus participation. More insidious, is the threats that budget cuts may lead to faculty layoffs or school closures. Grade inflation, a perceived deterioration of educational standards, is an obvious remedy to reverse student attrition.

According to Gradeinflation.com, over the last 35 years, grade point averages have increased by roughly 0.15 per

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decade (on a 4.0 scale). Stuart Rojstaczer, a researcher on the subject, believes that "the resurgence of grade inflation in the 1980s principally was caused by the emergence of a consumer-based culture in higher education. Students are paying more for a product every year, and increasingly they want and get the reward of a good grade for their purchase. In this culture, professors are not only compelled to grade easier, but also to water down course content. Both intellectual rigor and grading standards have weakened." A long-time critic of grade inflation and professor of government at Harvard University, Harvey Mansfield states, "There is something inappropriate — almost sick — in the spectacle of mature adults showering young people with unbelievable praise."

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There are bleak implications for the U.S. economy and American workers. Employees are paid based on what they can contribute to the bottom line of a business. But, the ability of a worker to contribute depends on the skills, dependability and determination engendered by a good education.

Is it any wonder that many U.S. companies are willing and even anxious to hire foreign workers -sometimes illegally? U.S. companies (e.g., hospitals and universities) want cheap, skilled and well-educated foreign labor. Many young in foreign lands consider themselves extremely lucky to be admitted to a university. They work hard to stay there and graduate. Many well educated foreign workers posses exactly the attributes U.S. companies desire. Indeed, many U.S. companies are willing to outsource production (i.e., jobs) to foreign firms (i.e., workers) in order to get qualified, cheap and dependable workers.

American education has been and remains a wonderful opportunity to pursue a dream for people who did not have stellar grades in secondary school. It should not be thought of as a diploma mill that entitles students, who enroll, a degree. Receiving a piece of paper is not the same as acquiring the skills and work ethic that produces a strong economy and a "good society."

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