Devaluing the Bachelor’s Degree

January 3, 2011

Happy new year! OK, that’s out of the way. Back to the dismal science.

Coming soon to a college or university next you: graduation rate inflation.

National Public Radio’s “Morning Edition” had a feature this morning (Dec. 28, 2010) titled “States Hold Colleges Accountable For Graduation Rate.” This follows hard on the heels of the New York Times’ Christmas Day article “A Quest to Explain What Grades Really Mean” (a discussion of grade inflation in colleges).

College faculty, particularly in the hard sciences, economics, and some other social sciences, have bemoaned the terrible preparation of entering freshmen for decades. From my view in front of the classroom, the problem has only gotten worse over the years. Many students simply never come to class. Attendance rates in my classes are around 60 percent. From conversations with other faculty and students, I gather it’s not just me. It remains a mystery to me how these students expect to graduate – unless, of course, they listened to NPR this morning.

The NPR show included the following statement from Teresa Lubbers, Indiana Commissioner for Higher Education:

“Going to college is not what we want. We want them to leave with a credential. And we’re going to hold them accountable for producing those credentials.”

Got that? In most states, funds for public colleges and
universities are scrupulously allocated based on enrollment. This incentive has caused administrators to recruit students from all over the world, admit anyone with a pulse (although in some cases I wonder), and do their best to maximize enrollment (thereby maximizing their budgets). Personally, I have failed the same students in several classes, leaving me to wonder why they are still in school. I suspect the rules regarding academic disqualification are being overlooked (to put it politely).

So watch out. Give administrators an incentive to increase graduation rates and they will. The first step is to avoid giving any student a failing grade in any course. One easy step in this direction is to hire more part-time lecturers. These poor folks are the itinerant tinkers of our day, flitting from campus to campus every week in an attempt to earn a halfway decent living. And each of them desperately needs good student evaluations. Otherwise they will not be rehired the next academic term. The easiest way to get good evaluations is to give high grades. An additional benefit of that strategy is fewer complaints from students after final grades are distributed.

Just today I got an e-mail from one of my fall quarter students inquiring about why he had received an F in my class. After all, he said, he had turned in all the homework. I was forced to tell him that flunking both midterms and the final exam pretty much meant the homework was meaningless. Where the heck are they finding these students, anyway?

I just finished skimming an interesting paper that puts a value on an Associate of Arts degree.[1] The paper looks at various regions, metropolitan areas, and does a pretty good job of estimating the rate of return on an AA. It’s under 1% per year compared to a high school diploma. How long will it take for the Bachelor’s degree to become similarly devalued? How long until a Ph.D. will be a prerequisite for any job that
pays above twice the minimum wage? Most important, how long will taxpayers put up with public institutions succumbing to the type of political pressures being exerted by Ms. Lubbers? A Ph.D. will be required to get any job. Even today, more and more students are entering master’s degree programs to compensate for the inferior preparation their undergraduate degree provides. And, believe me, there are a lot more M.A. and M.S. programs than just the ubiquitous MBA.

Magical thinking. That’s what’s going on here. B.A. or B.S. degrees have magical properties. Get one and you’re set. Don’t worry about whether your major is electrical engineering, computer science, or history.

Well, I’m afraid the party is over. Today NPR shows are flooded with calls from unemployed college graduates. Mostly they seem to be liberal arts majors of one description or another. Perhaps that’s just the NPR demographic. Then again, maybe not.