

Education Is A Right, Not A Privilege

College, in the popular imagination, is still seen as both a time of freedom & intellectual exploration, and as the gateway to future economic opportunity. Yet young people today are increasingly working harder & taking on debt just to get a degree whose value is becoming more questionable. At the same time, universities are increasingly being subordinated to the needs of the corporate world. It hasn't always been this way and needn't always be this way. We suggest that in addition to being an important part of fighting for social justice & equality, a high-quality & accessible public education system can be part of the fight for a world which is not based on exploitation and economic inequality - a world beyond capitalism.

The Crisis of Higher Education

More and more Americans start college - but the costs of that education are rising, while the returns fall. The percentage of 30 year-olds who hold a B.A. has remained stubbornly at 25 per cent since the late 1970s, though every other advanced democracy has significantly increased its university graduation rate. In addition, from 1981-2010 college tuition-and fees have risen 7% every year – more than double the rate of overall inflation, 3%. Overall, college tuition and fees have quadrupled in real terms from 1982 to 2007. Additionally, federal financial aid, which used to be 80% grant based, is now 80% loan based.

Today, the average student will graduate with almost \$20,000 in student loan debt just for an undergraduate degree. But in the midst of our current economic crisis, having a degree no longer guarantees a good job. Unemployment among college graduates under the age of 25 is above 10%; and employers hired 22% fewer college graduates from the class of 2009 than they did from the class of 2008.

For people of color & women, the crisis of higher education is particularly visible. For example Blacks are much more likely to take on debt above \$30,500 at 27% compared to 16% of white students at that level. That is especially problematic since the unemployment rate for people of color, particularly blacks and Latinos, is still significantly higher than for whites.

And for poor and working class whites and people of color, college is only accessible with huge loans and working long hours while in school. Others forgo school entirely; each year more than 400,000 qualified students fail to attend a four-year college due to financial costs.

Education and Capitalism

In modern capitalist America, education serves two purposes: providing workers & product ideas for the capitalists, and shrinking the labor force, which helps to alleviate the lack of decent jobs provided by capitalism.

The corporate funding of research at universities has led to the creation of information that is useful, but not accessible to the public, or profitable products that are not necessarily useful (such as prescription drugs to replace generics). The funneling of corporate money into research – and cuts in state funding of research -- represents a fundamental flaw in our current education system.

Education & Socialist Vision

While it was capitalism's need for an educated workforce that gave rise to universal public general education, the ideal of education as inherently valuable challenges the logic of the capitalist market.

Too often, public debate over education accepts a flawed premise: that schools should primarily be designed to prepare people to work. The idea that education can provide people the intellectual tools to be involved and informed citizens - even citizens of a capitalist democracy - is being steadily undermined.

The debate over what our schools should be is part of a larger debate over what kind of society we want to live in. Starting with the GI Bill after World War II through the early 1970s our society

made a political commitment to make higher education accessible to the working class. We have moved away from that ideal, not because it was a failure but because there has been a political and ideological shift in this country away from the idea that education can serve a purpose other than to promote & sustain capitalism.

Even in its embattled state, higher education holds out the promise of an alternative to the cutthroat competition, authoritarian world structure, and inhuman motivations of the corporate world. For that reason alone, it is worth defending.



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