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“Going to College? Welcome to the Circus”

The 20th century has seen a dramatic expansion of access to higher education, but what have been the benefits, and for whom? And education for what ends? Why do you need a college degree?

For centuries the prospect of a college education was reserved for the children of the rich and powerful. Traditionally, the purpose of higher education was to train young, white men for entry into the church, the law, or the state bureaucracy. The United States was the first democracy to initiate free public schools in the 19th century. Free public education led many students to demand more advanced academic and vocational education. This led to the development of the public high school, and later, the junior college. Both of these institutions were designed to prepare students for higher education. By the end of the 19th century, universities were becoming the only venue for training and certification in the modern professions, like medicine, law, engineering, social work, and teaching.

If one wanted social status and entry into the middle class then going to college was becoming a necessity. But only five percent of the 19 to 22 year old white, male population in the United States was enrolled in an institution of higher education by 1910. This number was much lower for all of Europe and Australia.

However, access to college steadily increased throughout 20th century. By the 21st century, most European countries, the United States, Canada, Australia, and Japan had drastically expanded their systems of higher education. As of 2006, about 30 percent (on average) of the adult population in these countries had at least a two-year college degree. The United States ranks near the top of those countries with the most educated citizens. About 38 percent of adult Americans have at least a two-year college degree, and about 28 percent have a four-year bachelors degree. While these numbers are quite impressive, a majority of all citizens in every developed country still lack access to college.

Only some citizens, at the expense of others, have been positioned to take advantage of a college education. Longstanding discrimination against women, racialized minorities, the working class, and immigrants in the developed world has caused both uneven rates of participation in higher education, and also uneven rates of economic return for a college credential. The United States offers one of the best case studies for this phenomenon. In America only 40 percent of the poorest 1/5 of the population make it to college, and only 12 percent of these students will graduate with a bachelors degree. The richest 1/5 of the population, however, have a college-going rate of 70 percent, of which 40 percent of these students will earn their bachelors degree. Only 2.5 percent of rich white students in America drop out of high school, compared to 24.5 percent of poor African Americans and 41.3 percent of poor Latinos. Compared to African Americans, Latinos, Puerto

Ricans, and Native American Indians, White students are two to three times more likely to graduate from college with a bachelors degree. Once in the labor market, these markers of social discrimination still have a corrosive effect. In 2000 the average women with a bachelors degree earned almost half as much as the average man with a bachelors degree. The average African American or Latino man with a bachelors degree earned about \$13,000 less a year than the average white man.

Gender, class, and race are not the only factors determining the value of a college degree. Another important factor is a student's choice of major. Professions with a high demand in the labor market, often accompanied by the highest salaries, are those in health care, technology, engineering, physical sciences, law, and business. Professions in the arts, humanities, social services, and teaching are near the bottom. Many young professionals, even in lucrative fields, have also been increasingly subject to contingent contract, as more and more globalized companies outsource important jobs to cheaper, adjunct professionals who are willing to work longer hours for less pay. Those students with degrees in the arts and humanities have been hit the hardest in the 21st century labor market, as most of these professionals cannot find steady work in their field. Increasingly these people are forced into the low-paid service sector, which has been the fastest growing sector in many developed economies.

By 2006, the average American with only a high school diploma was earning less than half of the salary of the average American with a bachelors degree. This wage gap is expected to increase. Many influential economists have noted that a college degree will be the essential ticket to the middle class in the 21st century, and those who fail to earn a college degree will find themselves more and more impoverished. With such a burden, students across the developed world are clamoring for a college education, but demand is eclipsing capacity, and junior colleges, community colleges, technical colleges, and for-profit colleges are springing up to grab a piece of the lucrative higher education pie. Students increasingly choose majors based not on interest or ideals, but on cold, hard cash dollars - banking on a future career.

Some have likened higher education in the 21st century to a frenzied circus, where students and teachers perform a wide variety of staged acts, and for what? What is the purpose of this circus? Most students never catch a glimpse of what lies behind the curtain. Most students faithfully continue to perform the tricks of their trade, accept whatever coins are thrown their way, and sometimes dream of life beyond the big tent. But poets and artists are rare breed today, starved by the economy. I hope your not one of them, such poor creatures!

Do you really want a college degree? The answer seems obvious. Most are eager to jump through the hoops. But are you able to pay? Do you know what it costs? Just your soul and 30 pieces of silver. Welcome, the circus awaits.