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Congratulations! You're in debt

Published: Wednesday, May 25, 2011, 5:00 AM

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By Rich Lowry

Amid all the uplifting cliches at their commencement ceremonies, graduating college students won't hear a line applicable to some of them -- you got ripped off.

Student debt just surpassed the country's credit-card debt for the first time. It is projected to top \$1 trillion this year, according to The New York Times, when it was less than \$200 billion in 2000.

For the class of 2011, the mean student debt burden is nearly \$23,000, up 8 percent from a year ago.

There's no doubt that graduating from college brings a significant economic advantage, but that doesn't excuse the waste and self-satisfied lassitude of American higher education. Colleges appropriate tuition dollars from America's students with an ever-accelerating voracity, yet don't deliver any additional educational benefits -- indeed, they do the opposite. Higher education is one of the sectors of American life that most desperately needs a thorough re-conception.

What are students going into hock for? In their book "Academically Adrift," Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa sift through data that only Bluto could relish.

They cite the work of labor economists Philip Babcock and Mindy Marks showing that in the early 1960s, college students spent 40 hours per week on academic work; now they spend only 27 hours per week. In 1961, 67 percent of students said they studied more than 20 hours per week; now only one in five study that much.

Miraculously, grades haven't dropped, despite less study. Such are the wonders of grade inflation and students selecting the classes where they can most easily slide by. The two labor economists believe that students have mastered "the art of college management," whereby they succeed at "controlling college by shaping schedules, taming professors and limiting workload."

There are fewer professors to tame than in the past. Full-time instructional faculty dropped from 78 percent in 1970 to 52 percent in 2005. "On average," Arum and Roksa write, "faculty spend approximately 11 hours per week on advisement and instructional preparation and delivery." The rest is devoted to research and sundry other professional and administrative tasks.

The hiring binge on campus has been devoted to what sociologist Gary Rhoades calls

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"managerial professionals" specializing in sundry student services. What kind of learning environment is it, after all, without a director of sustainability initiatives?

If increasingly students don't study, teachers don't teach and college employees aren't primarily concerned with either, it raises the question of what the hell happens on campus. Well, many students have a grand time during a years-long vacation from real life. They enjoy state-of-the-art facilities, socialize and figure how to come away with the credential of a degree in exchange for minimal effort. (That is, if they graduate at all -- four-year institutions only graduate about a third of their students in four years, and two-thirds of them in six.)

This is not a formula for drinking deeply from the fountain of learning. Arum and Roksa find only minimal gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning and writing for many students. Forty-five percent of students barely ticked upward after two years, and 36 percent hadn't budged after four years.

Reformers are brimming with ideas to renovate an expensive and inefficient system. Economist Richard Vedder suggests dismantling the current architecture of financial aid -- which helps drive up costs in a never-ending cycle -- and giving help only to truly needy students who are performing well academically. Sen. Lamar Alexander, R.- Tenn., asks why we can't move toward three- rather than four-year degrees. Charles Murray of the American Enterprise Institute wants other ways to credential young people besides a B.A. Gov. Rick Perry of Texas is embarking on a controversial push to get the state's universities to devote themselves more to teaching than to obscure research.

In their book, Richard Arum and Josipa Roska make the elementary suggestion that colleges foster "a culture of learning." That would seem to go without saying, except in the groves of academe.

Rich Lowry can be reached via email: comments.lowry@nationalreview.com

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 **sagerat** May 25, 2011 at 6:46AM [Follow](#)

And to make matters worse, many of them have taken courses that will do them no good


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in getting a job, they'll end up working at something they could have done without a degree. Hint: Want fries with that? In the interest of the nation, send the top 10-15% to college for free to study engineering, science, math, medicine, etc. The remaining 85-90% teach to drive a truck, wire or plumb a house, become a nurse, weld, machine, etc.

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ObamaZombies May 25, 2011 at 10:26AM
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Government statistics show that only 27% of Americans have a college degree. And those that do, typically earn hundreds of thousands of dollars more over their careers than the other 73% of Americans who do not have a college degree. So why should I care that the 27% get into debt attaining their college degree? Why are we even supporting public colleges and universities with taxpayer subsidies? The cost of a college education should be entirely supported by tuition and fees, and scholarships should only be available for those high performing students who are indigent. We need to end the gravy train for the 27% who are getting their vaulted college degrees on the backs of the rest of us.

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lemmyschild May 25, 2011 at 8:14PM
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good one zombie,
lets get as many as possible in to the 73% group....lets make it swell up to 99% and then EVERYONE can earn less and be stupider
why not try to get everyone to graduate college if it is going to earn you hundreds of thousands more than if you hadn't?
are you really advocating more stupidity and poverty for our country. is this a new plank in the conservative platform? have you informed all the rich college educated conservatives out there of your brilliant idea?

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JackDonaghy May 25, 2011 at 7:29AM
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I agree sagerat. Trying to push a majority of kids into college just doesn't work. The result is that you end up encouraging students who just aren't able or qualified to take out big loans, which they are then going to struggle to pay off whether they end up graduating or not. We need to expand vocational programs since there are still many jobs to be had in those industries and they are a much better fit for a lot of people.

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Seeking May 25, 2011 at 7:29AM
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It doesn't matter because a ton of these younger people voted for Obama, and Obama got the gov't to take over the student loan business.
So as long as they keep voting democratic, the loans don't need to be repaid.

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caveman1313 May 25, 2011 at 7:51AM
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the educational-industrial complex is powerful, with their teacher unions funding liberal politicians and their liberal brain washing of young minds.

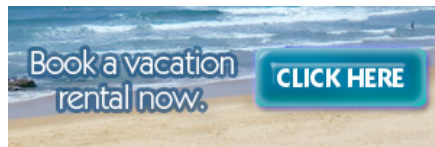
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birddog May 25, 2011 at 7:53AM

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And that's about all that's talked about in our college classrooms today. Class dismissed!

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lemmyschild May 25, 2011 at 8:23AM

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all this bullsh*t from a bunch of crusters that have not set foot in a college classroom in years.

but you got it all schussed out. got the dynamics figured and have decided that, wait for it.....its the fault of the liberals. of course. why did i know that before i even read the sprack?

one dude bitching about loans that will not be repaid (as if he knows) and one advocating we give free education to the people in the fields he works in.

hey sagerat, you gonna give free education to the electricians and truck drivers also or just the people who wanna earn a living doing what you do?

and then there's caveman with his incredible understanding of the demographics of college faculty. caveman, ever go to college at the university of Maine at Presque Isle? it's what's referred to as "way the f*ck up north", and most of the faculty comes from the region. they hunt, they fish, they vote republican. exactly like conservative on the faculties of a lot of schools all over the country.

if you think the faculties are too liberal, why don't you go put in the time and energy it takes to acquire a doctorate and go get a professors position and begin saving us all from the liberal scourge? because you don't think it is valuable, right? so instead of mustering up your testicular fortitude and going out and putting in the work required to put yourself in position to do something about the terrible injustices you think are occurring on campus, you just sit around expounding on something you know apparently very little about.

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get on the bus May 25, 2011 at 10:26AM

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Well put lemmy... I will say that I can agree with the concept of more vocational schools. The problem of course is unless we get our economy on the mend again there are no jobs for plumbers, carpenters, iron workers etc. But I do agree for a lot of kids this would be a better course of action than a 4 year degree.

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John in Beaverton May 25, 2011 at 11:19AM

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\$23,000 dollars of debt for a graduating class represents on about 1 year of cost. At one time a 4 year degree was the norm instead of 6. But then knowledge was considered more important than self esteem.

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Pliny May 25, 2011 at 11:38AM

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I am not about the source of the partisan tone. Most of what Mr. Lowry is saying has been said by vatiuous "scambloggers" (e.g. All Education Matters, Shilling Me Softy, etc.) for the past few years. I do not agree with everything they say, but for anyone to think that this is either new or partisan is faintly ridiculous.

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Seeking May 25, 2011 at 11:53AM

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I stand by my prediction, the gov't will adopt a policy that allows student loans to be forgiven in bankruptcy, which is NOT THE CASE NOW.

And that policy will be the brainchild of President Obama and the Dems...Hit me up in 10 years and you will see I'm correct.

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Stronzo May 25, 2011 at 4:31PM

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How commendable; you've backpeddled from an outright statement to a prediction with very little prodding.

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pdxsoftwareguy May 25, 2011 at 2:31PM

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The perpetually flop-sweat incrusted Lowry is spot as always. Heck, after graduating from the University of Virginia with nary a dent in his trust fund, Lowery's has actually achieved negative gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning and writing (as evidenced above).

And Seeking is just as gifted in the complex reasoning skill set as Richie. We must never allow students to default on \$23K for any reason. However, if you are not a student, own a sports franchise team, have \$13.4 billion in the bank, and your name is Paul Allen, then you should be able to default on a \$110 million dollar investment in the Rose Garden just because you can.

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BandonGolfer May 25, 2011 at 5:12PM

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what need does Lowry have for critical thinking or complex reasoning? all he needs to do is regurgitate decades of bunkum churned by the Spawn of Bloom, who found in "The Closing of the Am. Mind" a roadmap to steady paychecks and occasional accolades from right-wing honks.

not that Lowry wouldn't forgive all student-loan debt for anyone who could find a cure for hypersebaceous glands and chronic rosacea.

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