

Higher Ed and Hollywood Wine

By Dr. Jean Norris, Managing Partner, Norton | Norris, Inc

The focus on higher education quality, outcomes, value, affordability and access dominates the headlines these days. Enough data has been thrown around to prove or disprove any position and yet the answer is obvious to those not directly embroiled in the battle. Let us look at the facts that all sides can most likely agree upon. The United States ranks behind other countries in terms of educational attainment; the President of the United States has called for (and has put big money behind) an educated America; traditional colleges and universities are not designed for return on investment models; community colleges do not have the means nor the experience to fill the education void alone; and career colleges can be a viable solution for many students but are not allowed to participate in a meaningful way.

Let us begin with the United States lagging behind other countries in educational attainment. According to the Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), in the United States, 42 percent of all 25-64-year-olds have a tertiary (higher education) attainment, making it one of the most well educated countries in the world. Only Canada (51 percent), Israel (46 percent), Japan (45 percent) and the Russian Federation (54 percent) have higher tertiary attainment

levels among this age group (2012). The push for America to be first in class is admirable, however the popular messaging implies the nation is far behind. Perhaps this is intended to strike a certain amount of fear into people or

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possibly a ploy to pull at the good ol' American heartstrings to jump on the bandwagon.

According to Ferenstein (2013), "While it is difficult to speculate why the U.S. persists as a titan of innovation, we need not be scared into trying to be like other countries. America has been at the top despite a lack-luster education system." Most importantly he points out an interesting statistic that is sure to catch your attention. "The U.S. benefits greatly from the top tier of students anyway...the innovators at the helm of an economy come from the top quarter of students. While the United States has a dismal track record

of inequality, we treat our brightest minds quite well.” Ferenstein further states that the U.S. should not be fearful of falling behind since we have among the highest percentage of top-performing students in the world. In fact, he claims that leading-edge technology has a direct correlation to the numbers of high-performing students and this is what is most important to the global

economy at the end of the day.

Given this, it is interesting that President Obama has called for Grad Nation 2020 to return America to its rightful position as the leader in higher education. This calls

into question the value of the bottom tier of students. The implication is they are necessary however the publicized message may be very different from reality. It is also curious why the community college system is positioned as the primary solution in achieving this goal – especially since the top tier

is not going there anyway. In fact, BILLIONS of dollars have been earmarked to the community college systems (Lauerman, J., 2012). One has to wonder why just one type of educational institution would be chosen to fill this void.

The important piece of data that is not in the headlines is the dramatic stats on children’s likeliness to attend college being directly related to a parent attending college. So how is a parent who may already be trying to balance family responsibilities and perhaps a job going to manage the traditional community college delivery model? It is interesting that they would be limited to a single choice versus positioning them for success. Truth be told, the community college option has been around for a very long time and for many, it is not a preferred choice. In fact, in a study of 332 career college students who had previously attended a community college, the career college experience outscored the community college in nearly every category. Specifically, student experiences at 150 different community colleges were

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meet. Jean credits this experience as her inspiration for pursuing her goals with the same work ethic. She began her own educational career in a 10-month medical assisting diploma program and went on to earn a bachelors degree from a private, nonprofit university; her master’s degree from a public, nonprofit university and her doctoral degree from a private, nonprofit that was later purchased by a for-profit university system.

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and organizational development positions at nonprofit, traditional colleges and universities as well as private, proprietary institutions. She also has served as an academic dean and taught in both sectors. Above all Jean believes American’s deserve access to education and the ability to make their own choice on the type of institution that best fits their needs.

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rated less favorably in 13 of 14 major factors of importance (Norton Norris, Inc., 2010).

Another big question is how the community college infrastructure can handle this monumental task alone while currently struggling with quality issues, low graduation rates and increasing consumer demand for flexibility and outcomes. Some of these colleges even want to offer four-year degrees adding additional burden to a system already in flux. As of March of this year, 22 states have already authorized their community colleges to offer the four-year degree credential (Breuder, Robert L., 2014).

It is also reasonable to surmise that the 1,132 community colleges serving over 12.8 million students across the U.S. are going to need some level of ongoing support for new faculty, administration, salary increases, health insurance, bigger buildings (maybe student housing), maintenance, technology, etc. (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012). It is likely the average American does not realize the plan is for these dollars to come in the form of increased taxes to their very own household (New America Foundation, 2013). Or perhaps the hope is that most Americans are not educated enough to realize this.

Traditional colleges and universities are not sitting still either. The winds of change are suggesting the traditionals will have to show value for the tuition and fees they charge. **Gainful Employment**, coupled with consumer demand, is focused on return on investment and student outcomes. This can become a future reality for the nonprofits, too. Perhaps their fear is a result of long-held practices and systems that would require substantial resources to change (if that is even possible) or could it be that some of the required outcomes

data is not collected (such as placement rates, graduate job titles and salaries).

Interestingly, private sector schools and colleges (for-profits) are not included in the conversation. There have been some bad actors, but it appears the attacks on this sector are simply because they make a profit. This is one of the weakest arguments out there given all schools, colleges and universities make a profit. It is simply that some spend their money on students and some on other

things. Consider Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan's recent statement about collegiate athletics (Inside Higher Education, 2014). Duncan said he was "concerned that athletic coaches' salaries do not provide the proper incentives for academic performance." It is fine that he is concerned, however private sector schools and colleges are literally (and daily) being attacked in the media for something as "heinous" as spending money on advertising.

Yes, there are the arguments that these schools enjoy a large percentage of government funds to educate these underserved populations. But has anyone considered they are serving, and have been since the early 1800s, the very people that need to be reached right now (Imagine America Foundation, ND)? Each time the private sector schools share data, the push back brings up the argument that a large number of students default on their student loans. There are numerous studies clearly spelling out the correlations to socioeconomic status and default – and yet no one listens. Then there is the fact that traditional institutions do not pay into the tax base to support their communities and private

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sector schools and colleges do. That is another point that often gets unnoticed. So in the absence of accepting this group as part of the solution, other arguments (and blatant attacks) are employed.

Another long-standing debate has been about which type of accreditation is best – Regional or National. Seriously? Even the regional accrediting agencies

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realize times are changing and maybe their standards are not that different after all within their own ranks. In an article by Doug Lederman (2014) he states the regional

accrediting agencies “recognize that wholesale differences among them are hard to justify – and Wednesday they took a significant (and probably unprecedented) step toward beginning to eliminate them.” Even with this recent shift, the question is where are the national accreditors in this conversation? Obviously, it is because a majority of the private sector (for-profits) holds this type of accreditation. We are all pushed into a corner to battle this argument out over and over again and yet the truth remains... both are recognized under stringent guidelines of the very same U.S. Department of Education. Someone out there deserves credit for keeping this battle going for decades. Congrats!

In the big picture, we are looking at a government who claims to be giving a leg up to the underserved in order to return America to a competitive place. What American would not get behind that? Maybe this is true in concept but there is another reality to consider. Check out these key outcomes as stated on the GradNation website (America’s Promise Alliance, 2014):

- A high school diploma matters to individuals, communities, and society. High school graduates are more likely to be employed, make **higher taxable income**, and aid in job generation.
- If we had already reached the GradNation goal, the additional graduates from a single class would have **increased GDP** by an estimated \$6.6 billion annually.
- Graduates are less likely to **engage in criminal behavior or require social services**. They have better health and longer life expectancy. High school graduates are more likely to be engaged in their communities, with **higher rates of voting** and volunteering.

These outcomes are interesting when reading between the lines (or at least the bolded words). This is a clearly defined agenda of graduating “these people” as a means to more money for the government, less criminal behavior, lower expenses to deal with them, and let us not forget the increased likelihood to vote.

Now we are looking at a situation where it is only the top tier that really matters and the government is pushing the others (lower tier) to very specific types of educational institutions that they control through their tax status and funding. That means our government can control what is taught. ***Is anyone else terrified by this reality?*** It is no wonder the government is pushing private sector, for-profit (not government controlled) education out with every weapon they can think of!

Here is an idea to consider. Let us allow consumers to choose the educational solution that works best for them. Imagine a world where traditional colleges and universities were the place where young adults can grow and explore over a longer period of

time versus forcing an ROI model. Those who choose this path will be allowed to learn how to learn and question the world around them in new and interesting ways. They can practice deep thinking and grow through the educational experience as well as the social growth of living on their own for the first time.

The community colleges can excel at being the place for those who want a lower cost solution to try college out, take a few classes, possibly earn their associate degree and maybe transfer to another school/college. In this model, there is no need to expand infrastructure so costs can be contained and the public is not burdened with even higher taxes.

Career colleges could then focus on what they do best. These schools can provide training and related skills to help students secure jobs in specific fields. They can also provide further education for busy adults who require flexibility to fit school in with family responsibilities and work. This type of education is for those who seek a very direct and expedient path. And let us not forget the value these institutions provide to each and every community through their tax payments.

These are just a few obvious examples of a solution for an educated America. But the focus does not seem to be on a solution, does it? With all the options out there for educating Americans, it is curious how this turned into such a fiasco. It certainly makes one wonder what is really going on here. Could this be about something else like political power struggles? Is it about the money? Or is it something else?

Well, as in most debates, fingers are pointed to place blame. In this case, the blaming is used to mask what is really happening. Think about it. Could it be that we are all being drawn into

the “flavor of the day” in order to distract from what is really happening and entice fighting? This truly is the art of deflection at its finest since the real truth is no one is paying attention to the facts or data anyway. It appears

a solution is not what they are after. This battle is not about access, affordability and value. It is not even about an educated America.

This battle is about preserving the long-standing belief that education is for the few, the deserving, the socially elite - not the common man.

Let us take a step back to examine the entry of private sector colleges and universities (for-profits) into this situation. Their very presence created a massive cultural shift by providing education to populations not originally intended by those in a higher social order. Now, these folks (we’ll call them the Aristocrats) aren’t happy about this as evidenced by their minimizing the quality of the education. For a long time they allowed the “peasants” to go about their business since the jobs they were preparing for were beneath them anyway but then another shift happened. These “evil” for-profits entered into their space when they began offering (wait for it...) DEGREES! How dare they actually offer a credential once reserved for the elite to those barbarians.

And then the great battle began.

Consider this through the lens of another cultural shift dating back to World War II. U.S. soldiers serving in the military during this time enjoyed sipping the wines of Italian and French winemakers. Seeking to replicate the

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wines they experienced overseas inspired them to seek solutions. There were obstacles though including varied geography, climates and temperature control. Continued improvements in technology, in the form of refrigeration, were introduced so no longer did the environment dictate the fermentation process (Baricco, Al, 2006).

Sounds like progress right? Expanding the marketplace threatened the very core of Italian and French winemakers. After all, their methods and processes were passed down from generation to

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generation. They were the rightful masters who grew up in families that had always had wine on the table. They embodied “age-old wisdom and absolute intimacy with the act of making wine”

(Baricco). The next step, predictably, was to bash the competition. In their minds, the very idea of mass production equated to low quality.

Just like the American soldiers, private sector institutions saw a gap and an opportunity to improve the process and delivery. What can possibly be negative about providing increased access to education and specialized training? Innovations like focused training, faster completion, online courses, flexible delivery options, career placement and an environment of caring were introduced. Many of these schools and colleges sought approval of their programs and organization recognized by the Department of Education – just like their nonprofit counterparts. And guess what? Consumers voted with their feet. Private sector schools and colleges realized tremendous growth (Career College Central, 2014).

In a recent article, the authors sum up the for-profit education industry in this way, “For-profit institutions developed an ‘all are encouraged to join us’ model, involving easy entry and aggressive recruitment of new students (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2014). The rise of the Internet and online education eliminated geography as the last barrier inhibiting institutional growth, which caused for-profit institutions to experience the fastest growth in higher education in the last decade.”

In truth, the Aristocrats saw federal dollars being doled out to those “less deserving” and the battle escalated. Consider recent headlines bashing the sector and how they continue to use the words “For-Profit” or even “Predatory” as a major descriptor. Most recently an article published in The Chronicle of Higher Education (2014) suggested that these organizations restructure in a way that would result in **turning students away**. Since forcing the large for-profits to close would cost the government too much money, the authors state “...forcing them (for-profits) to reform would result in continued operations and a **reduction in size to a more reasonable and sustainable model.**”

Did you ever wonder why the main target of **Gainful Employment** legislation is the private sector schools and colleges? In the big picture, one could argue that it makes sense to protect ALL Americans from entering into programs that have little hope of return on investment. Even some of the public community colleges cannot pass the test on their programs (Fain, 2014). Or is this whole concept not worthy given education is not about ROI? As Americans we are being asked to consider that these rules primarily apply to one segment, which happens to be the top consumers choice for an

educational model. The traditional model of higher education has a fortress built around it that does not welcome entry to first-generation students, minorities and adults trying to balance life demands.

If one just reads into the headlines, the rhetoric is obvious. The government jumps in to “protect the military” from predatory for-profits when in reality they really want the federal dollars to go to “their” colleges/universities. Does anyone really believe that the brave men and women who serve our country are so naïve and gullible that they need protection in selecting a program and college that works best for them? Seriously? It is insulting at the deepest level.

Despite defamation and many Aristocratic obstacles, the private sector schools and colleges went on just like the barbarians who were undaunted to create their “Hollywood wines” (aptly named as a reflection of established winemakers in an attempt to devalue the product). And guess what happened? These wines were met with acceptance. They were flavorful and aligned with what consumers wanted. How could this be? Attacks on “Hollywood wine” continued, but the barbarians kept going about doing business, being creative, modifying and improving to grow their market share.

Today, American winemaking permeates other markets around the globe under the better known names of *E & J Gallo Winery* (second largest in the world), *Mondavi*, *The Wine Group* out of San Francisco best known for their *Franzia* box wines and of course, *Bronco Wine Company* which produces “*Two Buck Chuck*.” These innovators brought a product to a “lesser class” to the dismay of the Aristocrats whose only means of rebuttal was (and remains) to demean them. In his book, “**The**

Barbarians – An Essay on the Mutation of Culture,” the author further defines this struggle as “...a question of class struggle” and “a competition between an established power and some ambitious outsiders” (Baricco, 2006).

At the end of the day, higher education and training is unarguably a way to a better life for all but it is shocking how headlines and stories continue to try and

manipulate the very people who could most benefit. Their hope is that the uninformed (or the not yet educated) can be

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easily manipulated through fear. The stealth moves by the government to control **where** people can go to school and **what** people learn is terrifying and yet its been happening right under our noses. Our only hope is to expose another reality and encourage thoughtful analysis before accepting the prop-aganda intended to brainwash the public as truth. Those in power will continue to manipulate messages to their own agenda. Now that the curtain has been pulled back, we all need to stand up and ask:

Could the very people who are supposed to protect the common man be the evil ones themselves?

Baricco’s (2006) summation of the cultural shift in winemaking fits appropriately here: “Abetted by a specific technological innovation, a group of humans essentially aligned with the imperial cultural model has gained access to an act that had previously been denied them and has brought it instinctively to a more immediately spectacular level and into a modern linguistic universe, thus granting it staggering commercial success.”

The response to this article will either result in new headlines with some earth shattering information to keep us distracted; or preferably, some positive action. If it is another attack on private sector career colleges with more smoke and mirrors, perhaps we hit a nerve. Either way, hopefully there is increased awareness that the enemy may now have a new name and face.

#equalrulesforall #choiceisgood
#gocrushsomegrapes

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