

BACKTALK

Is College the New High School?

BY RICHARD W. SMELTER

Outsourcing American jobs will eventually destroy our education system. Our schools will be unrecognizable in 50 years — and not in a good way. Changes in our economy will destroy the integrity of U.S. colleges and, eventually, every public and private school beneath them.

As middle-class manufacturing jobs have moved beyond U.S. borders, education has felt certain ripple effects. It's all well and good to say education's goal is to create enlightened individuals who become more complete persons by the expansion of their mental horizons. But, arguably, the most important goal of educational institutions is to prepare young people to be socially and economically self-sufficient. In short, a capitalist society needs to inculcate its paradigm through its educational institutions to ensure that future workers have the skills to hold meaningful, productive jobs.

K-12 education used to rise to this challenge admirably, and plenty of jobs were available for high school graduates. As jobs disappear, we must investigate exactly what kind of an economy we are preparing young people for. Obviously, they will enter a world in which few consumer goods will be produced in this country. Retail jobs will still be here, but hundreds of thousands of manufacturing jobs, if not millions, will be lost to outsourcing.

A person with only a high school education will face one of three options: move into the higher socioeconomic class, accept a career in retailing (in which a sales clerk generally makes much less than a drill-press operator), or sink into the lower socioeconomic class. I feel they will opt for the first choice. This means increased college enrollment because a move to upper socioeconomic professions usually requires an advanced degree.

In short, college will soon become the new high school. In a few years, having a bachelor's degree will be the rough equivalent of having today's high school diploma, and a master's degree will be the new entry ticket to the "good life" formerly obtainable with a

bachelor's degree. In other words, as the economic paradigm changes, the education paradigm must change with it, unless one wants a society in which scholars who can quote Shakespeare are working at check-out counters or, much worse, are on the state dole.

Here's the rub. While all people are created equal, not all possess the same intellectual ability. This means that, in the near future, many more high school graduates entering community colleges won't be able to function well in an advanced curriculum. The increased enrollments, however, will be a temptation to these institutions. All businesses like to make money, and colleges and universities are no exception. In order to garner the increased profits standing, literally, at their doorstep, the temptation will be to further lower whatever entrance requirements exist. I believe this will be a temptation too strong to resist.

Furthermore, in order to maintain this new-found tuition flow, the intellectual rigor of college courses will be lowered to prevent dropouts. One can readily see how community colleges will wish to become four-year institutions in order to expand their increased wealth.

How far will the current standard be "dumbed down"? Who knows? What is certain is this: Major colleges and universities will follow suit in order to maintain their share of the pie. In order to accommodate a new type of student, obtaining a four-year bachelor's degree soon will be no more difficult than earning today's high school diploma. The implications for master's and doctoral programs will be staggering. Obtaining an advanced degree will be far easier than it is today, and major thesis and dissertation requirements will soon go the way of the wind.

If K-12 institutions don't alter their programs to account for the new college-level paradigm, they'll wind up with a system as confused and balkanized as our current economic situation. Therefore, standards will continue to spiral downward, all the way to kindergarten, unless we wish to settle for a situation in which there will be no marked differences between high school and college courses.

Can this downward spiral be prevented? Only if we pass legislation limiting the percentage of middle-class American jobs that can be outsourced. The American economic and education sectors must join forces and demand that this legislation be enacted.

Not to do so is to risk becoming a second-rate power economically, and a laughing-stock educationally. **■**

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