

EDUCATIONAL INFLATION

by Ernest van den Haag

Dr. van den Haag, professor of social philosophy at New York University and the New School for Social Research, was a participant in the fourth seminar of the Center for Constructive Alternatives, Education in America: Democratic Triumph or Egalitarian Disaster? He delivered this paper before Hillsdale College students and faculty.

Education requires the time and effort of students. Their investment is equal to the earnings they forego, and usually they bear the cost of it, often with the help of their families. College students also pay for some of the time and effort of teachers and of ancillary personnel through tuition fees; however, most of the money for most personnel comes from voluntary donors and from public funds not so voluntarily contributed by taxpayers; they also pay for most educational buildings. The costs of primary and most of the money for most personnel comes from voluntary donors and from public funds not so voluntarily contributed by taxpayers; they also pay for most educational buildings. The costs of primary and secondary education are almost exclusively borne by taxpayers; and the cost of a mounting portion of higher education as well is now borne by them.

Whether total investment, employment or revenue is considered, education currently is the biggest and the most rapidly expanding major American industry. Output, and particularly the quality and value of the product, is more doubtful. At present, however, the size of the educational establishment exceeds that of all manufacturing industries together; so does its growth rate.

There are two kinds of returns. Both, when they are obtained, benefit students as well as society at large. Whether the total benefits exceed the total cost is another matter.

(1) "Moral" returns consist of (a) the present enjoyment of education while it takes place. This may include any aspect of college life: coeducational dormitories, institutional food, sports, beer parties,

or participation in classroom discussion. This product of education, which is often overlooked by theoreticians though not by students, is a consumer good. It does increase the present enjoyment, but not the future productivity of the students (consumers). "Moral" returns also include (b) the hoped for increased value, because of his college education, of the *quondam* student as a parent, friend, citizen, husband, wife, etc. If it is obtained, this return might be both a consumer and a producer good increased value, because of its longer walk with the *quondam* student as a parent, friend, citizen, husband, wife, etc. If it is obtained, this return might be both a consumer and a producer good which benefits the former students as well as their environment by increasing both enjoyment and earnings generated by their activities.

However, it is by no means established that former college students are better citizens, parents, etc. then they would have been without college education. Even if they were found to be better than non-graduates - however that would be determined - their superiority may be independent of the college experience, an effect of *selective input into colleges*.

At any rate, there is no reliable research on this alleged effect of college education if one discounts, as one must, Kenneth Keniston's unsupported assertions. Of course, professors will think that the students they taught are better off than they would be untaught. And students are likely to confuse return (b) with (a). But there is no evidence for the greater wisdom, or for the healthier personality or the better citizenship - qualities as hard to define

im·primis (im-pri' mis) adv. In the first place. Middle English, from Latin *in primis*, among the first (things) . . .

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as they are to observe and measure — of college graduates. That college graduates are likely to appeal more than non-graduates to the other graduates who look for evidence of the superiority of graduates is scarcely evidence for their superiority.

(2) Finally, material returns—always future—consist in the increase of the market value of the services graduates are able to render, by virtue of their education, over what they would have been able to earn otherwise. In principle this increase is measurable, although in practice it is hard to distinguish from earnings that must be attributed to other factors.

Some moral and all material returns from education benefit society at large as well as students. Since as members of society they are beneficiaries, it has been argued that taxpayers should pay for education. By and large this argument lacks merit. The student is the only beneficiary of (1) (a) the current enjoyment of education, and the most direct beneficiary of (1) (b) the future moral returns from education. There is no reason why he should not pay for it. As for (2) material returns, these accrue to society only as services are bought from former students who receive payment for them. Payment for the services of former students as executives, teachers, lawyers, physicians, researchers, writers, etc., includes whatever increase in value can be attributed to their education. (If payments are, or become insufficient to pay for the education of those required to receive it to render services, fewer will offer these services and earnings will rise until they pay for the education needed.) No need for society to pay for the cost of education twice exists — when the students receive it, and when payment for it is included in the services they render as graduates.

There are some indivisible services which present students may render in the future. They may produce *great poetry, or philosophy, or sainthood, or leadership*. The marketplace may not pay for such services, although society benefits, because the benefit is indiscriminate: it goes to purchaser and non-purchaser alike. We might want to support those who render such services by public funds. But surely there is no reason to support all students because some may become poets. It is when they render the indivisible or indiscriminate services that we must think of compensation — not while they study.

There is no case whatsoever, then, for the public funding of higher education — for taxpayers paying for an education from which they will benefit much less than those to whom it goes, and who will get paid for the cost of their education when they render the services for which they have been educated.

To be sure some, indeed many students, are unable to pay for their education while they receive it. There is every reason to make ample credit available to them, with government help should that be needed. (There is no evidence that it is.) However, the government at present makes lending to, or investing in, students nearly impossible. There are willing lenders, but few willing and qualified borrowers because the government donates funds. Against that competition no banker can prevail.¹



The case of privately donated scholarships is different. People should have a right to donate their own money — though not other people's money — to whomever and for whatever they want. Scholarships going to students who seem unlikely to do well, and who therefore are not reasonable risks for lending, seem morally more justified than scholarships to students likely to do well. They will be able to pay back what they borrow and, therefore, are good risks and don't need scholarships.²

The tradition which insists that educational institutions and students should be beneficiaries of eleemosynary grants (and also that colleges always should be non-profit institutions) comes from a past in which education served the ministry almost exclusively, and it was thought pious to donate to it. Recipients, if indeed they fulfilled their pious mission, usually could neither pay nor borrow. Had they borrowed, they would have been led into temptations to increase their earnings rather than to lead a pious life.

The odor of piety still clings to educational institutions, although religion (even morality) is seldom taught there now. This odor still attracts government funds and private donors, and makes donations tax exempt. It also contributes to the educational inflation from which America now suffers. For the generosity which our government displays toward education at the expense of the taxpayers has nefarious effects both on education and on society at large.

(1) College graduates earn more than the majority of taxpayers throughout their lifetime. Public grants to colleges, or students, compel the less well to do taxpayers to surrender money to be given to students who on the average are, or become, more well to do than the (involuntary) donors. This is redistribution with a vengeance.

(2) Public grants are used inefficiently and even destructively. In New York — and in how many other places? — a megalomaniac governor has created an entirely new chain of state universities instead of giving scholarships to students in existing or expanding educational institutions. This would have had the advantages of the voucher system in primary and secondary education: it would have given the students a choice of colleges. And it would have cost far less (no new faculty, plant, etc.) But it would have been less fun for the planners, and there would have been no lasting visible monument to the governor, and no state dominated system of higher education. The “affirmative action” program (the setting of racial and sexual quotas for faculty and personnel by the Federal government for all institutions receiving grants or contracts from it) suggest that government money in any form in the U.S. is likely to mean government control, and that this control can, as in the affirmative action case, attempt to pervert academic into political institutions.

Many private colleges are rapidly losing their students now to the state supported colleges, which because of their subsidies can afford to charge little or nothing. Private colleges are financially so distressed that they will have to close their doors unless they too receive state subsidies. This would further inflate student bodies. Meanwhile there is a costly duplication of plants and of teaching, while students still have little choice unless they can pay high fees: they either attend the state university colleges or do without education.

(3) The undesirable effects of the present subsidy to higher education go far beyond waste of money to erode its very substance. The subsidy has made education a service purchasable below cost and with no other serious control of access. The last vestige of

control fell with “open admissions” to state universities. The enjoyment of the process exceeds the cost for many young people. They flock to educational institutions. There may be future material benefits too, whether derived from the educational experience, or from the credentials that go with it.

The result of present attitudes and values is that educational institutions are flooded. More than 80 percent of the age group graduates from high school; more than 44 percent attend college. Soon 80 percent will graduate. The increase in college education was sudden, but it will continue (with some ups and downs) as long as the cost to the students is less than the return to them — and this is likely to be the case for the foreseeable future. Meanwhile, the cost to society far exceeds the returns, some of which have become negative.

Faculties and student bodies have expanded with available money — and faster by far than available talent. This means that more people teach now and do research than are competent to do either, and more students attend than can benefit. The I.Q. of faculty members traditionally hovered around 140. It can be seen by a perusal of the figures that less than half of those now teaching are likely to approach it. Students were thought to benefit if their I.Q. exceeded 110. Only 25 percent of the age group possess that I.Q. while 44 percent attend. No wonder, then, that many students think higher education as it exists is irrelevant to them. It is because they are irrelevant to it. Higher education will remain irrelevant to them unless it ceases to be what it was: higher. It is on the way.

Educational expansion through subsidies is often urged because it is thought good for the young to learn. This argument confuses schooling with learning. But schooling is a specific method of learning, abstract on the whole, and apt, or necessary for some subjects and some people and not for others. Often learning may occur more easily in or outside schools, depending on the subject and the student. (Some learning indeed takes place exclusively in, some outside schools.) Attending an educational institution does not necessarily yield an education which makes the recipient better or more useful. Education probably corrupts more often than power, and not infrequently it makes the student unwilling to hold the jobs available, while yet incapable to hold the job he aspires to—if it is available at all.

What happens to the students who are not educated, even though they are enrolled, and to the professors who profess without professorial competence? One possibility—which is becoming an actuality in many institutions—is the debasement of the coin: grades,

credits and degrees are given without the learning for which they are supposed to stand. Students are graded beyond their achievements, educated to pretentiousness, and to ambitions beyond their possibilities. Since much grading is done on a curve, which may measure only the relative standing of the members of the class, this result is easily achieved, and as easily hidden.



Another possibility is that students and instructors who cannot make the grade, who cannot command the subject matter they are to teach or study, who cannot gain prestige through scholarly activity and merit, will find extracurricular ways to do so. Extracurricular activities for which they may feel fit range from revolution to sensitivity groups; wherefore they have begun to take the place of scholarly activity, and in some colleges they have even become part of the curriculum which thus has become "relevant" to students, if not to scholarship or subjects. Through these activities and "relevant" courses, students and faculties can protect their self-image of adequacy, which would be threatened by demands for scholarly achievements requiring more intelligence than they have.³

If colleges teach what the students who have been allowed to enroll can learn, instead of selecting those who can learn what colleges must teach if they are to produce higher education, then "relevant" courses become functional. So does the demand of some students, and of some faculty, that the institutions support, or commit themselves, to social or political actions other than education and knowledge. "Relevant" courses and social or political actions are alternatives to the scholarly and educational functions to be given up. If the function of higher education is to help students analyse alternative courses of action, to help them reflect on what is morally desirable and on the criteria and facts that make it so, on what means effectively can be used to achieve what is possible and desirable, and at what cost, if higher education is to serve reflection, analysis, **thought, if it is to be a guide to action, but not action**—then commitment to say actions or policies other than the study of actions or alternative policies is inconsistent with the task of colleges and universities.

Those who feel uncomfortable when asked to reflect, and who therefore are unwilling to suspend to reflect, and who therefore are unwilling to suspend or postpone action, obviously do not belong in a reflective institution. There are many organizations that have the purpose of organizing actions and they would be in place in such agencies. They threaten major damage to educational and scholarly institutions by attempting to force them to exchange their mission for that of a revolutionary action agency or a political party. Yet these students and faculty are lured to educational institutions simply because of the low cost and high reward for attendance.

If the effect of luring students who cannot benefit into universities on the universities is bad, the **effects on society are worse. Once the student leaves** the educational shelter, he will ask for privileges and emoluments according to his credentials—which may go far beyond his abilities and the value of what he has to offer. Disappointed, he will blame "the system" for the difference between what he expects and what is available to him. That difference is likely to increase. For the supply of actually "educated" people (as well as of people who have educational credentials) is rising faster than the demand. Wherefore the price paid for the services of the educated will fall below customary expectations. Above all, the income difference between the educated and the non-educated is likely to shrink.⁴ We already suffer from a shortage not of skilled but of unskilled workers, while universities turn out a mounting avalanche of sociology and theatre arts majors.

The broadened appeal of education in the recent past was associated with its investment value. When the cost of education was fairly high, and access restricted otherwise as well, comparatively high incomes were earned by the educated. An expanding economy needed their scarce skills. Thereupon education was deemed (by them and by others) to be the best way of increasing the relative incomes of the poor—to reduce inequalities. It was made available free of charge to the poor and finally to more and more people. The greater number of educated people helped to increase the overall income level, but reduced the relative advantage of the educated.

Yet the idea that education is necessary to relative income advantage lingers on, although inequality no longer is strongly correlated to education. Although the possessors of educational credentials will continue to have an advantage over nonpossessors, the advantage is likely to decrease and disappear as these credentials become more and more accessible. (Only the inequality based on unequal access to education decreases when access is equalized. Inequalities of earnings caused by inequalities of chance or of innate aptitudes—ranging from intelligence to diligence or imagination—merely are thrown into relief as inequality of access to education decreases.)

(4) As long as colleges and universities were scholarly and research institutions, it was in the social interest, as well as in their own, to staff them with the best available educators, scholars, and students. That way the investment would yield the highest return. However, as the proportion of the population attending college increases, and as the subsidy does, as education becomes an immense industry, colleges and universities become political entities. Offices in the college community will be regarded as rewards: a studentship will be a minor award, a professorship a greater one. Such awards cannot be made on the basis of merit alone. The various population groups that have political power will expect to be represented accordingly. Quotas thus become understandable, if not justifiable. Political representatives, whether in Congress, or in the Supreme Court, seldom are chosen entirely in terms of their fitness. They must also represent the population from which they are selected. So, increasingly with the college population. The best will be admitted, accepted and promoted only if they are also the most representative—which is not likely to be the case very often. The quota system which HEW now is trying to impose by “affirmative action” is nakedly offensive enough to be likely to be

ultimately defeated. But the idea will nevertheless prevail if educational inflation does; for it makes the representativeness of academic communities unavoidable.

(5) Educational inflation also is incompatible with academic freedom—the right and duty of professors to profess their views and values. Academic freedom assumes

- a) that professors are the most competent people to decide what to profess;
- b) that students are competent and mature enough to learn from conflicting views and select among conflicting values;
- c) that higher education differs from secondary and primary education. The latter transmit information and culture. Higher education is meant to continue, enlarge, interpret, and cultivate it individually. This gives the professors the right to critically analyse and at times oppose prevailing ideas.

The curriculum and teaching in primary and secondary education thus were prescribed by social authority, whereas in higher education the faculty decided who was to teach and what. As long as faculties largely were communities of scholars and students apprentice-scholars, academic freedom was possible. It continued to be possible when this idea still was a paradigm. But academic freedom will perish when

- a) faculty members are no longer selected by competence;
- b) students are not mature or intelligent enough to tolerate differences from their own ideas (formed by other professors, or outside universities). Harvard and Berkeley indicate that this development is already taking place. This development is accelerated when universities are unwilling to assert the right to academic freedom against students. (The State University of Iowa and Princeton University are recent examples.);
- c) the number of students is high enough to make it intolerable for society at large to see them taught whatever is contrary to prevailing ideas.

Educational inflation will stop only if the government stops pumping money and people into higher education. The prospects are for more inflation.

Under these circumstances both education and academic freedom will have a hard time surviving. There will be more attendance and less education.

¹Almost everybody receives primary and secondary education. Therefore it makes little difference whether funds come from taxpayers as they do now, or from the students whom as adults may return the funds advanced to them as children. They would come from essentially the same pockets with little redistribution.

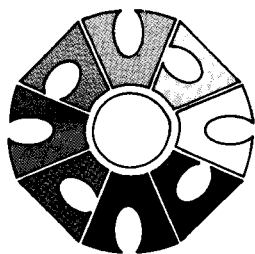
However, public funds should be given to students in the form of vouchers rather than to schools as is done now. If students or their parents had vouchers to pay for education, they would be able to choose schools, private or public, instead of being assigned to public schools often not of their choice. The schools might improve because they would have to compete for students. The students and their parents would have more choice to get the education they prefer. The acrimonious disputes about who should attend which schools and with whom, and

about how tax money should be apportioned, all would lose their object.

²There is a moral case—based on charity—for helping students who on the basis of social utilitarianism, or merit, might not be helped.

³The anti-intellectual movement in colleges was spearheaded by the intellectuals. I have elsewhere explored their proverbial perversity. However, the movement spearheaded by self-destructive or power-hungry or guilt-ridden intellectuals effectively benefits the less intelligent students and could not have gone anywhere without their support.

⁴Since educational credentials are now often used by employers as an irrelevantly discriminatory sifting device, some students attend college merely to have access to jobs for which they might have been just as fit without attendance. A law prohibiting discrimination based on irrelevant educational credentials would be as justified as a law prohibiting it when based on race.



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Four seminars have been scheduled by the Center for Constructive Alternatives for the 1973-74 academic year. They are:

September 9 - 14 — *Political Morality: From Socrates to Nixon*

October 28 - November 2 — *American Communications Media: A Study in Credibility*

February 3 - 8 — *Communism: Has the Protracted Conflict Ended?*

April 16 - 21 — *Crime and Punishment: The American System of Justice*

In future issues of *Imprimis*, we will list the participants and topic statements for the four symposia.

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