

Student Debt-The Tax On American Progression

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College is pretty insane. From the Animal House antics to the three extra hours of work one puts into their assignments, college is as overwhelming an experience as it is rewarding. But there is something that haunts the student years after college, and it isn't that "Spicy" tattoo stamped at the top of their ass crack, or that memory of the time they walked in on their roommate holding several opened bottles of canola oil, and four scantily clad Scandinavians dancing in the center of the room. What will plague the student far into adult life, is debt, and debt is far more withstanding than a few scantily clad Scandinavians.

But Scandinavians aside, debt is, quite frankly, a fat stinging bitch. College used to be, as Jeff Williams elaborates in his article "Debt Education: Bad for the Young, Bad for America," pretty cheap: "Gone are the days when the state university was as cheap as a laptop and was considered a right, like secondary education. Now higher education is, like most social services, a largely privatized venture, and loans are a chief way that a majority of individuals pay for it" (Williams 45). Middle and lower class citizens (the majority of America's population) resort to loans to help them send their chipper little kids off to college to learn what they need to learn. However, unlike the higher classes who can whip a few Benjamins from their pajama jean pockets, lower and middle class people have to claw at the scraps left over in their safety deposit box to pull together enough for the end of the month. This is not a good sign. Now, the majority of our population ends up leaving college with debt, and competing with other, super sharp and

productive countries like Japan is enormously harder when our country starts the race in a hole.

So how will beginning adult life in this chasm of student debt affect the graduates? Williams believes that student loans "are the new paradigm of college funding. Consequently, student debt is, or will soon be, the new paradigm of early to middle adult life" (Williams 45). In other words, debt is becoming an expectation, a right of passage into adulthood. Graduates are expected to slave away into their late thirties, slowly ushering debt away instead of saving for a house or car. Graduates can't settle down and start a family or even save up to get a decent ride to work. They have to sloppily scramble up the corporate ladder instead of steadily climbing the ranks in order to make enough money, and that's a problem. Why? Because when you're rushing through work or trying to hurry through to get a promotion the quality of work declines. It's something every student knows. When heart isn't in the work, the product simply suffers, or bad decisions are made and those terrible products or awful decisions could drive the economy into a rut.

While some supporters of student debt may argue that this debt is a great way to teach a student responsibility, it is useless simply because the student learns responsibility at college anyway. They learn to take care of their business on their own with their work or by commuting to class every day. What student debt instills is a buzzing urge to get out of college and pounce on the best paying job their degree can afford. This is a problem. Take Clay Cunningham in Michelle Singletary's article "An Alert to the Dangers of Student Debt: The Student Debt Initiative," for example. Singletary states, "Clay Cunningham, a senior at the university of Wyoming who wants

to be a counselor, wrote this: ‘When I graduate, I will have gone to school for six years in order to make \$30,000 a year. I will not make enough money to buy a house and pay off my student debt.’” (56). Students like Clay lose money while training for their job. That really ruins the point of college, doesn’t it? Students go to college to become independent and develop their skills to get a good job in a field they like, yet they can’t be independent and support themselves because they have to pay back more money than their chosen occupation can provide for. How do students cope? Many try to switch majors, choosing a more business-oriented occupation than a more cultural and creative one, such as art or music. But even this is a problem. Not only are we losing more artisans, but also Americans are losing their dreams. What good is a guitar player who feels he has to be a pharmacist? How productive can that guitar player be if he is only dishing out ibuprofen to pay his bills? Debt is giving students the wrong mindset; make more money now. If people are so focused on just making money, than they can’t follow their ambitions or work on what’s really important. They can’t work on what our nation needs, they can’t solve our nation’s problems, and they end up contributing to this idea that Americans should be mindless drones who need to get paid and do things quickly and cheaply.

According to one New York Times journalist, ten years ago, when a student left college with a PhD, his goal would be to find the cure for cancer. Now, another student, same college, same PHD, leaves college wondering how he can make the most money. It’s not just about the student debt, or saving up for the new house, it’s about the way we as a people think. Unfortunately for us, though, all our little capitalist system can think about is making money. According to Williams, “the traditional idea of education is

based on social hope, providing an exemption from work and expense for the younger members of society so that they can explore their interests, develop their talents, and receive useful training, as well as become versed in citizenship-all this in the belief that society will benefit in the future. Society pays it forward” (49). In other words, America used to have a give and take idea of education. Students were given leeway to pursue what interested them without too much fear of debt while learning how to be decent and industrious American citizens. These students could eventually pay back America with their good work ethic and excellent services, pushing American society further. Now, America wants everything back all at once and graduates rush to get that money back before they default. The service doesn't matter, neither does the quality or content of the work the graduates perform, thus, American society suffers for it. Not to mention we're losing our innovation, our creativity, and sacrificing those essential ingredients for progression in favor of quick and easy cash.

Everyone knows Reganomics can't make the money trickle down, but it certainly can make the lower classes more desperate to rake in the cash. Unfortunately, that desperation translates to the kids-the future America. Our children will grow up with the mindset that the only reason they should hold a job is to make money, not to find a cure for cancer, solve world hunger, generate new energy sources, create a new genre of music, or be the next artisan crafter who transforms their city into a cultural epicenter. Our new generation will begin taking little shortcuts because it's faster and cheaper. America won't be able to fix herself, let alone compete with other nations and this inhibits our graduates. With so much debt, young adults can't be brilliant. They have to be, as William's describes “indentured students” (50), of the state before they can even be

employed. With that kind of pressure and responsibility, graduates are forced to set aside their ambition to contribute to society or start a family, and instead focus on paying off that impossible loan. What's worse is that with so many students leaving college with this debt, debt steadily becomes a part of the expected transition into adulthood, like an economic puberty. This vexing debt weighs heavy on the minds of graduates, and it translates to their children, who then pick up the idea that working isn't supposed to make a difference or help America take that next step forward, but instead is a tool to make money. This idea of working simply to get paid eliminates freedom since students now feel they have to pick certain jobs to keep up with their debts. American society becomes trapped in this circle that we are born to work and get paid, thus our bold American ideals of freedom and democracy begin to seem a bit hypocritical. Our people, the quality of our goods, our ability to compete with other nations, the services our country provides, and our own ideology become affected by our younger generation's debts. These debts are not pushing America forward, but holding America back, keeping America from being the land of freedom and opportunity it so adamantly proclaims.

Works Cited

- Singletary, Michelle. "An Alert to the Dangers of Student Debt: The Student Debt Initiative." *Changing Society: Readings for the Engaged Reader*. Ed. Jerome Schwab and Amy Love, Boston, Prentice Hall 2010. Print. Pg.55-57.
- Williams, Jeffery J. "Debt Education: Bad for the Young, Bad for America." *Changing Society: Readings for the Engaged Reader*. Ed. Jerome Schwab and Amy Love, Boston, Prentice Hall 2010. Print. Pg. 45-54.