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Today's College Degree Should be as Accessible as a High School Diploma

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Today's College Degree Should be as Accessible as a High School Diploma

By Dick Crepeau

UCF Forum columnist

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In his recent State of the Union message, President Obama mentioned the high cost of higher education. This is an issue that he raised a year ago at the same venue, and one that the vice president has been spearheading. For those of us who have been on a college campus for quite some time it is an issue of growing significance.

President Obama has also donned the mantle of the champion of the middle class, something that was a theme in his re-election campaign. At least 85 percent of all Americans think of themselves as middle class, and nearly all Americans, except the rich, aspire to be members of the middle class.

The essence of the American dream, for at least a century and a half, has been the dream of upward mobility, rising to or within the middle class. The major vehicle in the movement has been education, and therefore equal access to that education is vital to maintaining the American dream. A century ago that meant access to public education through the high school level. A high school diploma was the key to advancement.

Since World War II this standard has been changing and we have now arrived at the point at which a college degree has replaced the high school diploma as one of the keys to advancement. Possession of a college degree today is as important as holding a high school diploma was a century ago. Today, undergraduate education should be open to all those academically qualified— and at no cost. Public education must be truly public up at least through the bachelor's degree.

It is not a surprise to those of us in public higher education to see an increasing number of reports on the decline of upward mobility in America. It should, in fact, be quite alarming across America that European societies are displaying more upward mobility than our own, even the class-encrusted British world.

When I finished my undergraduate education, I walked away without any debt. When I finished my M.A., it was the same. When I finished my Ph.D., I had some debt but it was not a burden to pay back over a decade.

If I received a Bachelor of Arts from an American public university today, given the same background out of which I came, I would be leaving with a diploma and backpack of debt that would not only be a burden for a decade, but would have made it very difficult for me to eventually get an M.A., let alone a Ph.D. The upward mobility that I experienced would not have taken place, my life would have been considerably different, and who knows where that might have led.

It is difficult to watch undergraduates who are working full-time try to survive in a college classroom taking a full academic load. They are doing that because of a plethora of pressures pushing them to finish the degree as fast as possible. Some do not make it for a variety of reasons, but within that variety the financial issues are nearly always a significant element. If they do make it, they walk away with considerable debt facing a difficult job market and beginning their working career far behind the starting gate.

The point is that presidential administrations can talk all they want about the cost of higher education and the need to bring it down — and they should — but they must also talk about the importance of the college degree. They must devise a way to make that degree as accessible for this generation as a high school diploma was for previous generations.

If this can't be done then it is time to lay the American dream to rest, and watch longingly as societies across the world create levels of mobility that allow their young people to dream the dream that is now fading in America.

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