

Coronavirus Has Liberated Students From College Shackles

Each year, nearly three million high school seniors graduate and then go straight on to college. I suspect many of them are just as clueless as I was when I graduated high school. Most just go to college because that is what they have been told to do.

This coronavirus has turned all that on its head.

For the first time in a generation, high school seniors are being forced to reconsider what they will be doing in the fall. As COVID-19 progresses, questions about the new school year in the fall are starting to become urgent. High school seniors are left to wonder if they can start college at all. Will classes be online or in person? Can their parents still afford the tuition? Will their college of choice still exist? To date, one school – Urbana University in Ohio – has [announced](#) it is shutting down permanently due to financial problems resulting from the pandemic. Undoubtedly, others will follow.

Most colleges have yet to commit themselves to any course of action. They are waiting and hoping for more clarity. The suspense must be stressful for current high school seniors. To be honest, I envy them. The coronavirus is forcing them to stop and think hard about why and how they want to go college.

I wish I'd pondered those questions a bit more during my senior year of high school (class of 2000), or given heed to Mark Twain's famous quip: "I have never let my schooling interfere with my education." Instead, I sleepwalked into enrolling in college.

Why? Mainly because I couldn't imagine doing anything else. I had very little notion of what kind of career I wanted to pursue afterward. But – hey! – I knew that as long I went to college good things were bound to happen.

This is the case for many high school seniors. The entire course of their lives has been determined by the K-12 system, so another four years of school is a natural progression.

On top of that, high school seniors hear public figures like Michelle Obama [spout](#) platitudes like, “Empower yourselves with a good education, then get out there and use that education to build a country worthy of your boundless promise.”

So they enroll in college in droves. This wouldn't be so bad if college was a harmless folly – maybe you learned something, but if not, at least you got the credential that's required for most entry-level white-collar jobs. But by now it's been [well-established](#) that college can have a life-long devastating financial impact.

Today, American student loan debt comes [in at nearly \\$1.6 trillion](#).

When I was a high school senior, the books I read about college admissions brushed off the cost by saying things like, “Can you afford to go to college? The real question is whether you can afford not to.” Then they would quote a lot of statistics about how much more degree-holders earn than non-degree holders. Yet those statistics about earnings deserve a list of asterisks as long as *War and Peace*.

A quick glance at [websites](#) devoted to [college admissions](#) reveals that the college sales pitch has changed little since my day.

Legislation [passed in 2005](#) made student loan debt virtually impossible to discharge in bankruptcy. Unsurprisingly, student loan rates shot up after that. If you still haven't finished

repaying your loans when you reach retirement age, the government will garnish your social security.

Ironically, our society frowns on early marriage. Parents who would never let their high school senior get married at age 18 are fine with him or her taking on five-figure or even six-figure-student-loan-debt – despite the fact that an unwanted spouse is much easier to ditch than debt from a degree you don't use.

During the Democratic presidential primary, candidates Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders pledged to cancel student loan debt. I'm glad they talked about the problem, but they are taking the wrong approach. A fair and sustainable solution is one that will force colleges to put some skin in the game.

The coronavirus crisis has given rise to speculation that the higher education bubble will finally burst. That's possible, but it will take years for the full ramifications of the virus to become clear. In the meantime, the pandemic has cut through all the propaganda about the supposed value of earning a college degree.

Students will have to make decisions about college based on their own unique situation and how the virus has impacted their family. No one has a clue how to handle this situation, so they face far less pressure to do "what all their friends are doing."

Today, high school seniors have been set free. I envy them.

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