

Majority of US college students never get degrees

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A report just issued by the non-profit group Complete College America sheds some light on the appalling state of higher education in the United States today.

Examining college completion rates, the report shows that the majority of college students never get their degrees, even when they prolong their stay in school while working or raising families.

There has been an explosion in the percentage of students in college or university over the past two generations, but for increasing numbers this has not translated into college degrees, good-paying jobs or any other social benefit. While there are currently more than 17 million students enrolled in education past the high school level, the percentage of them who will eventually obtain their degrees is substantially less than half.

What the report calls a new American majority on campus is a working class majority that finds growing obstacles in its path as it pursues higher education. According to the report, seventy-five percent of today's students are juggling some combination of families, jobs, and school while commuting to class. Only one-quarter of students attend full-time without commuting.

Forty percent of students are part-time, and they are not included in any of the government statistics compiled by the federal Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System.

Among full-time students, 60.8 percent in bachelors degree programs attain this four-year degree within eight years, and this is as good as the statistics get. By comparison, only 24.3 percent of part-time bachelors degree students get their degree within eight years.

For those seeking two-year associates degrees in community colleges, a number that has multiplied all over the country, only 18.8 percent of full-time students obtain bachelors degrees within four years and an even

smaller 7.8 percent of those enrolled part-time complete the program within that four-year period.

For minority students and older students returning to higher education, or undertaking it for the first time, the figures are worse still. Among African-American students, 39.8 percent of those seeking a bachelor's degree attain it in six years, and only 7.5 percent get their associates degree in three years. For Hispanic students these figures are, respectively, not much higher: 46.5 percent and 11.1 percent. For students 25 and older when they begin college, the figures are 27.0 percent getting a bachelors degree within six years and 14.4 percent getting an associates degree within three years.

Another problem dealt with in the report is the use of remediation. This has become the Bermuda Triangle of higher education, it declares. Most students are lost, and few will ever be seen on graduation day.

Just over half of those seeking an associate degree, 50.1 percent, require remedial courses. For those seeking a four-year degree the figure is lower but still significant, 20.7 percent. These remedial students are significantly less likely to graduate: only 35.1 percent of them get their bachelors degree in six years, compared to 55.7 percent for all students in four-year degree programs.

Many of these students, while they may indeed be unprepared for college work, are simply steered into remedial courses that do not help and in many cases further discourage them. Behind the distortion of the remediation programs is a system that, even where it involves non-profit or public institutions, has been shaped by the profit system.

Every major decision is dictated by cash flow considerations and not the needs of the students. Why don't the remedial students get the intensive assistance

they may require to keep them in college? In most cases colleges use these students as another source of revenue. They enroll in some non-credit courses and are then forgotten. This state of affairs permeates the system as a whole.

One of the main themes of the report, reflected in its title, is that “Time is the Enemy” of college completion. “The longer it takes, the more life gets in the way of success”, the authors of the study explain. “Student’s lives fill up with jobs, relationships, marriages, children, and mortgages. Not surprisingly, college often gets left behind. “

This may be true in the broadest sense, but the authors are employing a few euphemisms. It is not merely life, but the concrete problems of life that get in the way. Not only do jobs, marriages and mortgages intervene, but also joblessness, divorce, legal problems, foreclosures and homelessness. Millions give up on school not because they have busy and fulfilling lives, but in despair and disappointment. They are unprepared for higher education, they cannot afford it, they have to work two or more jobs just to make ends meet, or they become discouraged over future job prospects even if they obtain a degree.

This social reality makes the actual proposals advanced by College Completion America for dealing with the crisis of college completion basically useless. The report suggests the use of block schedules, with fixed classroom meeting times, to encourage students to continue with both jobs and schooling. It advocates peer support and learning networks among students in the same program, and embedding remediation into the regular college curriculum so students don’t waste time before they start earning credits.

None of this will make much difference, however, without such related matters as decent jobs, affordable childcare, housing and health care. These basic social rights are precisely what the capitalist system cannot provide.

Complete College America is largely funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and other big business philanthropies. These sections of the ruling class are worried about what the report calls a yawning skills gap caused by too few trained workers for more high-skill jobs than ever. As a result, the authors warn, incomes shrink, and America falls further behind.

While Gates and his fellow billionaires are

understandably concerned about a skilled workforce, they cannot address the fact that American capitalism confronts a crisis that threatens permanent mass unemployment and the continued erosion of the infrastructure as well as social conditions that have been taken for granted for several generations.



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