

# Are Colleges Stealing From Their Students?



Written by Victor Brown

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During the time I spent teaching at a liberal arts college, the school president liked to say that every decision the college made had to be one that would support student achievement.

It was a noble sentiment, but perhaps college administrators and trustees need to now ask themselves a very different question: Are we stealing from students, parents and taxpayers?

I think this is a valid question, and is much more fundamental to the current higher education crisis than any of the well-publicized behavior of professors who want “[more muscle over here](#)”, advocate “[days of \(white\) absence](#)”, or lead [shameful demonstrations](#) aimed at denying guest speakers an opportunity to advance their views on campus.

I believe victimization and identity politics will fade over time - especially if colleges and universities focus on reform in several areas in which they, as institutions, may be guilty of stealing from their students.

## STUDENT RETENTION FAILURE

Nationally (the following [data](#) is all national, and individual programs may differ):

Only about 60% of matriculated students earn a degree in six years, a performance that cannot possibly be defended.

In 2015, only 73% of first year students returned for a second year at any college. Only 61% returned to their same college for a second year.

In raw numbers, approximately 2 million students drop out of college each year.

Student loan debt now exceeds \$1.5 trillion - including, of course, loans taken by students [who have since dropped out](#).

It is clear that colleges are admitting students that have little hope of earning a degree, but continue to admit

them they do – taking their money, their parents’ money, and taxpayer guaranteed student loans. After all, fewer high school students are causing colleges to scramble to keep their classrooms full, even at the cost of lowering admissions requirements and discounting tuition by a now-average 50%. But, if this results in admitting students who cannot succeed, is taking their money not theft?

## RUNAWAY COSTS

From 1840-1978, prior to federally guaranteed student loans, [college costs rose](#) approximately 1% per year. Since 1978, fueled by federally backed student loans, that rate of increase has tripled.

Where is the added money going? Certainly not to faculty salaries. Over the last three decades, the percentage of tenured faculty [has declined by close to half](#), and now account for a minority share of all faculty. They are being replaced at a rapid clip by adjunct and short-term contract faculty, who are (especially the adjuncts) grossly underpaid, and often receive no benefits.

According to the Delta Cost Study, funded by TIAA, the faculty [savings are being funneled to administrative spending](#) in admissions, recruiting, student counseling and athletics.

Is failure to place instructional spending at the top of the priority list not theft, or at the very least a misrepresentation of the college product?

## FAILURE TO DELIVER VALUE FOR THE MONEY

For those students who do graduate, what kind of an education have they received? The data is often not encouraging.

Over 200 colleges have been participating in a little known academic test protocol called the College Learning Assessment Plus ([CLA+](#)). It is designed to measure how well students have developed critical thinking skills, by demonstrating their ability to assess

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the quality of evidence in case studies, and to interpret the meaning of data in a table.

In over half of these colleges, fully one-third of their graduates fail to demonstrate these critical thinking skills. Worse, there appears to be little improvement over the four years. We can probably safely assume that this pattern would be repeated in the colleges that currently do not participate in the CLA+ testing.

Rather than just fret about it, companies are beginning to set up [their own in-house universities](#), in an effort to fill the education gap they see in their new employees.

If over a third of students are graduating from expensive programs without the critical thinking skills necessary for their careers, are they also not being defrauded?

## CAN COLLEGES STOP STEALING FROM STUDENTS?

Absolutely! Higher education does a lot of things well, and we can't throw out the baby with the bathwater. But there are ways in which these institutions can be more honest, and can ensure that they are not taking from their customers without full value in return. I would suggest several fundamental reforms:

### ADMISSIONS

Don't accept students who cannot succeed in college. [Studies show](#) that 37% of twelfth grade public school students are proficient in reading, and 25% are proficient in math. The remaining students really have little business being in college, and to take their (or parents, or taxpayer) tuition money is tantamount to stealing.

Fixing student achievement is a lifelong process – it starts with a strong family structure, and depends on intense parental involvement with schools while the students are in grades K-12. No amount of remedial courses in college, which incidentally are not working very well, will fix this.

Admit only the students who are likely to succeed. Do the others a favor, and nudge them on to careers in fields where an expensive degree is not required.

Don't attempt to engineer a class composed of the "right" mix of color, gender, and ethnic backgrounds. [As I have written elsewhere](#), these students really do not interface with each other to the degree that many believe. Four years fly by, and well-intentioned colleges are not in a position to solve the fundamental racial problems that beset our country.

### COST REDUCTIONS

Fewer admitted students will mean lower levels of tuition. It will therefore be necessary to eliminate low-demand courses, figure out what the academic strengths of the college are (or should be), and select courses accordingly.

Colleges need to take an axe to all of the administrative functions that suck up cash at an alarming rate. Implement zero based budgeting to determine how many people are really needed for admissions (in our newly streamlined process), student services, development and - dare I say it - intercollegiate athletics.

[Only 2% of NCAA student athletes](#) go on to a professional sports career. Leave the expensive sports programs to the big time schools that use them as sources of significant revenue. For the rest, intramural sports are fine. The savings will be significant.

Question the quality necessary for student housing, food service and ancillary facilities. Compete for students on the basis of a quality education, not on the basis of how many food courts are available on campus.

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## *FACULTY COMPOSITION*

Eliminate tenure. It's already happening, as tenured faculty are now only about a third of all faculty members. This will eliminate bad tenure decisions, and faculty who have retired in place. The good ones - and there are many - will continue to thrive, to contribute and be a valued part of the college value proposition.

Employ a strong strategic planning process that will determine the academic direction of the college, and then trim the courses - and the faculty - that don't fit this vision of the future.

Determine the combination of research oriented faculty, faculty with broad off-campus backgrounds in selected areas, and capable adjuncts who can be integrated on a long-term basis into the life of the college, paid appropriately and active in student advising and effective career service counseling.

Give the students a high quality, focused education for their tuition dollar. Emphasis will be on the courses required in the major area of study, plus a generous number of rigorous courses intended to better develop the critical thinking skills that are in short supply today.

## *DON'T BE AFRAID TO CLOSE THE DOORS*

The competition for students is growing more fierce with the declining supply of potential students. But, sadly, some colleges have already lost the battle.

Sweet Briar College ([now down to 300 students](#)) was a well-publicized case in point, but there are many others who have recently closed, with the projections for this trend to increase in the next few years.

As an example, Cheney University, outside Philadelphia, has seen [enrollments plummet](#) over the last decade. This year, enrollment dropped 38% - from 755 students

to 469 students. You simply cannot run a university with such a tiny student body, and the chances of recovery are slim.

Despite the sensitivity that Cheney is a historically black college, their students are not being well served, and its time for that university to merge into a more sustainable institution. To accept their tuition money in return for the current product at Cheney is theft.

## **NOW ASK THE QUESTIONS AGAIN:**

Are we providing a high quality, focused educational experience for the student?

Are we controlling costs for the student's benefit?

Are we less of a burden on their parents, other loan co-signers and the US taxpayer?

Have we been strategic in our thinking, and selected programs that we can deliver exceedingly well – and do we have the right composition of faculty to deliver them reliably?

Have we made the right strategic decisions in determining whether we can continue to survive as an independent school? If not, we need to close or merge. There is no shame in this, it happens in all other industries.

If the answers to these questions are unequivocally “yes”, then the college administrators and trustees can rest assured that they are not stealing from their students.