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'Four-Year College' Is Now a Misnomer

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It's fall, and the kids are leaving home for college. But parents dreading — or happily anticipating — an empty nest might need to consider that for many students headed into their fourth year of higher education, graduation is nowhere in sight. The cost of higher education is skyrocketing not solely as a result of tuition increases but also in the face of the lengthening time required to obtain a degree.

The newest academic surprise for parents is that although more than 70% of high school graduates will attend college, fewer than half of those enrolling will obtain a four-year degree. All bets are off when it comes to how long it will take them to graduate. The four-year college or university is quietly becoming an oxymoron in this country.

According to U.S. Department of Education data, the time it takes most students to finish is rising. For incoming full-time students, only 37% will graduate within four years, warns Education Trust, an independent nonprofit that analyzes these government statistics.

The result of this phenomenon is that the United States is becoming one of the few countries where 25- to 35-year-olds are no more likely to have college degrees than those in the 45- to 54-year-old age group. If this progression continues toward longer graduating times often yielding no degree at all, this nation will have a tougher time competing in a global economy.

College graduates are the most productive and sought-after workers in our increasingly information-based economy. Opting out of the workforce to pursue higher education is a high-cost yet prudent investment that will pay off in the form of higher wages for most college graduates. The Census Bureau estimates that the lifetime earnings differential between college and high school graduates will be close to \$1 million. When students fail to obtain college diplomas, it is not just an individual education shortfall; it also contributes to the long-term weakening of our workforce.

Colleges generally market themselves around the expectation of a four-year graduation, and few entering freshmen expect to take more than four years to graduate. All would be better served if schools made a more uniform and transparent disclosure of graduation rates. Without the knowledge of how long it takes for students to typically graduate, many families underestimate and thus underbudget the cost of a college education. And as they go beyond their fourth year of higher education, many students ultimately drop out for financial reasons.

Educators at all levels share responsibility for graduating more of our students from higher education on time. Colleges, by tracking academic progress more diligently, must push their students to meet the

four-year threshold far more effectively than they do today.

The problem in higher education is compounded by the fact that students are entering college less prepared to graduate on time. While the clock ticks, students are taking classes in college that they should have mastered in high school. According to the American Diploma Project, it is estimated that 28% of high school graduates are enrolling in remedial math and English courses during their freshman year of college.

Parents should encourage their college-bound teenagers to apply to the schools that fit their personality, interests and abilities. Too often, families get caught up in the extreme competition of getting into the best school but forget that it is more important to find the right campus.

By tackling these issues before freshman orientation, parents and students are more apt to ask the right questions in selecting a campus and in tracking progress for a timely graduation.

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