

Immigration and Education's Downward Spiral

BY RICHARD PELTO

Few now doubt that our education system has some faulty valves and is sputtering badly. What requires understanding is that it will continue doing so as a consequence of Obama's reelection. Media coverage and most societal commentary on the state of education leaves out the reasons why this is so.

Little media attention is given to a possible need for a major analysis of just how the educational system is now constructed — that it mirrors societal priorities — and how that plausibly explains diminishing results.

The most egregious educational factor that escapes media coverage is our nation's immigration policy. Somehow selective perception is universal about what is happening in immigrant-ridden districts in New York, Los Angeles, or Seattle, Washington's South King County. Teachers are faced with a very challenging task — trying to teach Shakespeare, let alone “comic-book” literature — to ever-larger numbers of students whose primary language is not English.

The Obama administration's policy of ignoring the meaning of illegality and the unsustainability of absorbing many millions will now continue for another four years.

Many factors now attract the millions per year who come here. Free education, among others, is a strong magnet, especially if it is not available in the migrant's country, and that may be where our now worsening-under-Obama immigration policy has the strongest impact.

If anyone doubts that Obama is doing his best to encourage large numbers of illegal immigrants to come here, those doubts should be allayed by learning how the Border Patrol has reacted to his recent presidential mandates. National Immigration and Customs Enforcement Council president Chris Crane recently told his group, “This Administration's ever-expanding policy of ‘prosecutorial discretion’ that allows certain illegal aliens to avoid deportation and even get work permits gives (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) ICE agents the

discretion to determine which illegal aliens meet the criteria originally outlined in an administration, August 2011 memo. However this policy of ‘prosecutorial discretion’ does not allow for any discretion whatsoever.”

Not apparently satisfied with the large numbers of immigrants in K-12 schools, Obama is doing all he can to put as many as possible in our colleges by amnestying millions who have come here illegally, and amnesties come easily for him as he has shown by providing it to the illegals affected by the storm that hit the East Coast in October.

Border agent Chris Crane said Obama's move to provide amnesties to illegals is essentially legalizing illegal immigration. “By threatening your law enforcement officers with suspension for exercising their discretion, you are sending the message that, rather than having discretion to determine who is eligible for amnesty, ICE officers are required to turn a blind eye anytime they encounter any illegal alien who has not been convicted of a specific violent crime, regardless of how dangerous that alien may be.”

This immigration policy is creating a demographic shift happening in districts across the nation. According to a 2011 report of the Brookings Institution, nearly a quarter of schoolchildren in the United States are immigrants or the children of immigrants. It states that a substantial percentage of these children, especially those from Latin America, are falling behind in school. More than 5 million, for example, struggle with their academic subjects because they are still learning English. Because of this, societal mandates have arisen. Teachers — especially in the multicultural-embracing urban areas — are confronted with an ever-increasing number of “special ed” students, many of whom are the product of the rapid increase in the number of non-English-proficient students (one recent study declared one in eleven students nationally are now children of a poorly educated illegal immigrant, and there are one in four in some districts, like the Seattle School District in Washington State). Is there any wonder that districts all over the country now struggle with English fluency mandates? Thus we have a system deeply affected overall by

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an immigration policy driven by the corporate world's perceived need for ever more access to cheap labor in order to pursue an assumed unlimited growth. In addition, there is strong support provided by corporate-aided ethnic bureaucracies fueled by generous local, state, and national subsidies.

Rather than admit that systemic change is creating a significantly more difficult educational process, accepted education criticism focuses on things like class size, length of school year, having structured class procedures or permissive ones, and nitpicking what order and content should determine curriculum rather than carefully looking at what constitutes the system's structure. Answers to what are perceived as key problems now generally assume that the system just needs minor modifications. The politically convenient smorgasbord of educational complaints run the gamut from overworked teachers and principals...frustrating school assignment policies...high dropout rates (even given huge expenditures on alternative schools)...opposition to standardized tests...to disproportional discipline and achievement statistics. Suggested solutions generally assume that the system just needs a little tinkering: start the educational process earlier, fire incompetent teachers, get rid of teacher unions and associations, lengthen the school year, increase money spent, raise teacher pay, or, now gaining wide dissemination, privatize all schooling. But not the need for systemic change.

Politically, the option of throwing money at the problem is particularly appealing. The politician can at least appear to please everyone by doing so. Democratic Governor Christine Gregoire of Washington State pandered especially openly and generously through two terms. Interestingly, the *Seattle Times* reported that "surprisingly...Gregoire seems unsure that the (large amounts of) money she poured into education in her years as governor improved student achievement as much as she hoped." She is then quoted saying, "I put a lot more money into K-12. But then you sit there and say, 'Why have I not been able to get the result I set out to achieve?'"

Why indeed!

She remains befuddled.

But apparently after some thought, she did come up with an interesting course of action. The *Times* reported, "Gregoire said she had a eureka moment over the summer when she concluded that public schools and higher education are too decentralized and balkanized." Little definition was provided for what she meant by that, but her solution was that she needed to gain more power to influence the educational process. The result of

that was continuing appeals for more money and continued educational results.

It must also be noted that this shift is only one of many indicators, especially evident under the Obama administration, that the U.S. is negligent in understanding that sustainable development in many areas, including education, is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.

With the unflagging help of people like Gregoire and Obama, the unsustainable increase in population and a demographic shift bringing educational consequences is accelerating especially fast in this country, and is made evident by what is occurring in the state of Washington.



Washington Governor Christine Gregoire

The Kent School District in Washington State is a major recipient of immigrants, and, as a consequence, joined a few years ago in the trend of minority students outnumbering whites. It's part of the demographic shift that's happening in districts across Washington State and the nation — fueled by immigration and a minority population that's younger than the white population and has a higher birth rate. Eight years ago, the students at Scenic Hill Elementary in the Kent District, as well as at many of its other schools, were largely white. The students now playing soccer on play grounds, swinging from the jungle gym, or batting tetherballs are now heavily immigrant Asian, Hispanic, or black. Two years ago the Kent School District became the seventh Seattle-area district in which the majority of students are minorities, joining Seattle, Tukwila, Highline, Renton, Federal Way, and Tacoma. This is fueled by immigration and by the fact that the minority population is younger and growing faster than the white population, whose birth rate is declining. Washington's white population contin-

ues to rise, but minority groups — especially those of Hispanic and Asian descent — are growing faster, especially among residents under age 18.

In Kent, where students speak more than 100 different languages, district administrators now require costly and mandatory diversity training for staff, and have opened a refugee center to support immigrant students and their families plus taking on the necessity of beefing up the district's English-language programs. Kent, the state's fourth-largest district, has undergone the most rapid change among Puget Sound districts, from about one-third minorities five years ago to about 51 percent this past school year. No one tracks exactly why that's occurred, but district officials mention the efforts of area churches and businesses to bring immigrants to the area, and the availability of low-cost apartments. After English, Spanish is the most commonly used language in the Kent School District.

The growing diversity in Washington schools means new and veteran teachers alike need more help in attempting to take on the new challenges created by its politicians generously providing state taxes encouraging ever more illegal and legal immigration. Many of its K-12 schools are identified as "low-achieving," and thus are eligible for federal grants ranging from \$50,000 to \$2 million, reflecting the belief that throwing money at a problem solves it. Of course among them are those who have the largest numbers of immigrant children attending. They are Highland Park Elementary, Chief Sealth, Rainier Beach, Foster High, Lakeridge Elementary in Renton District, Olympic Middle in Auburn, and two high schools that primarily serve English as second language students at the Academy of Citizenship, the Global Connections High School, and The Essential School in the Highline District.

The Kent and the Bellevue School District recently hired the first two Hispanics to lead school districts in Western Washington. The Seattle School District soon followed that example. Influencing these hirings were parents and teachers expressing hopes that the new hires will be role models for students, and that they will build better relationships with the ever-increasing numbers of parents. The Bellevue superintendent now often meets with Latino parents and answers questions in Spanish, and ethnic advocates say the community is now feeling more comfortable with the things that the school district is doing. As a consequence of Washington State governor Christine Gregoire's making enabling driver's licenses available to illegal aliens, all the school districts in King and Snohomish counties have a higher percentage of minority students than they did prior to

this action. Tukwila, which had the highest percentage of minority students in the 2003-04 school year, has even more now—a nearly equal mix of whites, Asians, Hispanics, and blacks. The *New York Times* called it the most diverse school district in the nation.

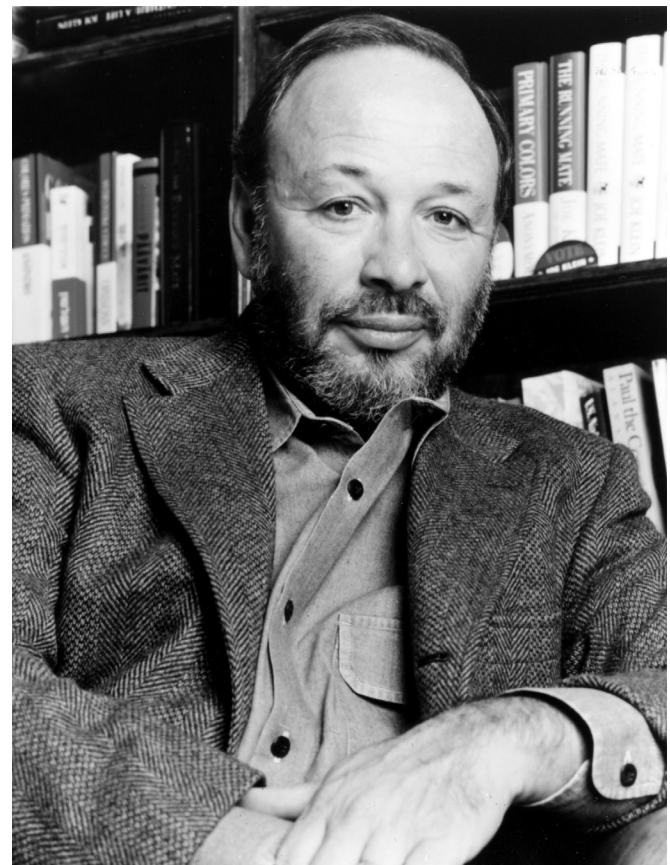
The increase in Spanish-speaking families means the Spanish-language masses at Kent's Catholic church reportedly now have standing-room only.

As a consequence of this, state projections say that in less than 20 years nearly one in three Washington residents will be a minority. For residents under age 18, minorities will make up almost 40 percent. The Hispanic superintendents now preach how important it is to embrace diversity.

An article in *Time Magazine* by Joe Klein illustrated well the ubiquitous ignorance that now exists about the cause and effect of our demographic change, and the decline of this country's educational system.

It makes clear that the well-generalized American myopia is widely promulgated. The article, "America from the Road," trumpets its attempt to disclose "the big issues in education our politicians aren't talking about."

Interestingly, Klein initially notes that there is nearly universal dismay with the state of our educational system, and then somehow manages to ignore what



Time magazine columnist Joe Klein

should be obvious. As he implies, few have little doubt that the system is wracked with problems, or that politicians jump on the disgust bandwagon and grasp quickly onto a favorite political appearance solution such as firing those teachers whose students don't do well on standardized tests.

Klein provided a line in his story that personifies this concern: "...the American education system has proved entirely incapable of taking students to a higher-skill level."

But Klein then proceeds to ignore the glimpse he provides into just what systemically is wrong, and what makes the educational process ineffective without public awareness of it. Toward the end of his article is a description of his visit to a neighborhood in Yuba City, California, where he has dinner with many of the people living "in the bankrupt Dunmore subdivision." He finds it "remarkable" that living next door to the Chavez family he is visiting is a Hindu family on one side, and, on the other side, a Muslim family. A Zimbabwean from nearby drops in, along with Mexicans from across the street. He talks with Bill, a half Filipino and Panamanian, who tells him proudly that Yuba City has the largest Sikh population outside of India.

Klein doesn't note the obvious — what U.S. thinking generally ignores — in the article. What it may be like to face the task of walking into a classroom and attempting to teach composition to all these immigrants' children, who are students with varied backgrounds and have a limited understanding of the teacher's language.

What must be understood is that a trip to the local Yuba City schools could have brought Klein to a classroom where the teacher was confronted by an abundance of Mexican students whose parents on average have less than an eighth-grade education. Given that most of the immigrant families Klein met at the Chavez family home arrived here somewhere between very recent to 20 years ago, just being able to converse on a basic level with them would be a challenge for that teacher, let alone being able to present the difference between reading for plot or theme in a Shakespeare play.

What Klein should have given more attention to is research data that studied the impact of increased immigration in Clark and Washoe counties in Nevada, and concluded that the rapid increase in the number of non-English-proficient students "is taking a dramatic toll on resources and education quality" in a state "highly affected" by immigration. Of Nevada's 2.5 million residents, in a recent survey, some 353,000 are illegal immigrants, and it is estimated that approximately 14 percent of the total population increase between 2000 and 2006

in Nevada was directly attributable to immigrants, not counting the children of previously arrived immigrants. In 2005, the Pew Hispanic Center put that figure at 150,000 to 200,000. The rising numbers of non-English speaking children means that the state has had to spend much more to educate them than it spends on English-speaking students. Nationwide the cost of educating U.S. children in 2010 ranged from 7,000 to 10,000 a year, and for special-ed and immigrant children, the cost runs closer to 12,000 per year.

Nevada spent \$730 million a year on (Limited English Proficient) education — an average of \$9,273 for each non-English-proficient student, in some cases 30 percent more than is spent there on educating kids who are fluent in English. Those additional resources, plus the time spent by teachers providing special attention to English learners, comes at the expense of the education received by other Nevada school children. And in meeting these rapidly growing demands, school districts increasingly decry inadequate funding.

An educational process evolves from many factors. Having attended and taught at schools at various levels for almost 70 years, for me this clearly illustrates that what existed decades ago and what exists today provides a marked contrast. And it could be argued both ways whether the demographic change has caused the changes, or whether general changes in societal priorities and values have caused them.

In elementary school in the 1940's I remember being very nervous at the end of each school year, sitting there filled with nervous expectation when the teacher read the names of those who passed, and feeling great relief when I heard my name, then knowing I lived up to the standards of that time.

Unlike today, students then did fail to advance, unlike now when essentially age determines passage. Even special-ed students who can't speak and must have diapers changed now "advance" from grade to grade.

When I began college in the 1950's, I experienced first-hand that professors often graded strictly on a bell curve. It was thought that doing so would identify those who were excellent from those who were less capable. There was this one student with a beard who didn't take careful notes like most in the class but who ended up getting the one A grade. I studied diligently and bought not just the text, but complementary ones, and managed to get a C grade that was a source of pride. Importantly for me, the realization came quickly that the competition for grades at this level was daunting. You quickly learned that competition, and responding to it effectively and diligently, was essential and necessary.

Too many examples of a lack of a need for discipline and drive should now make it clear that systemic change is now necessary in the U.S. educational process. Any cursory look at educational statistics makes clear that there is a massive growth in the complexity of problems affecting it.

An example of how demography may be a corrupting influence occurred in Seattle. Deep in a story by the *Seattle Times*, it noted that Franklin High School, a school with a large percentage of foreign-born and minority students, had “Obsolete E’s rotting on the book” because of bookkeeping doctoring. The school apparently felt a need to hide these signs of failure, as have schools in other areas of the country in “helping” students “succeed” on standardized tests. This school wanted to hide and not report the fact that students failed. Because administrators are paid to achieve goals, and parents and community bring pressure to overcome anomalies in the process, the educational task is becoming ever-more difficult for them, and desperate measures are now increasingly being turned to in order to gain at least the appearance of success.

A fundamental of the process is that teaching works best when there is a vibrant interaction of awarenesses between a teacher, who seeks to make sure skills are developed, and students who have the ability to respond and question what the teacher presents.

There is another factor that reflects Obama influence to a lesser degree. There is a large increase in numbers of students since 1960 with serious and challenging handicaps who are now being mainstreamed into classrooms — a rapidly increasing number of whom cannot speak at all. We now have an educational situation that would defy or strain any person’s remarkable pedagogical capabilities. That is true because every teacher in every classroom must primarily address the lowest-capable student in the classroom. This may provide some perspective to why complaints about too much homework should now be considered passé. The Center for American Progress recently published a study that stress and time consumption are not the problem with homework — it is the fact that homework is now too easy. “Many students believe their classwork is too easy,” it reported. Even in homework the teacher has to keep in mind those who are least capable of learning. Consequently, when the seriously deficient students and the by-necessity bored capable students in our system take standardized tests, it is little wonder their scores compare miserably with those in most other countries.

It is popular to ask, is this the problem of an abundance of weak teachers, when what should be asked, is

do the system and the demographics of the community in which that teacher works guarantee poor results?

Despite increased expenditures, districts across the country have to admit that standardized scores on tests have experienced little change, and what has mostly occurred is dismal. The performance of Nevada schools as measured by student performance on standardized tests has plummeted, and now ranks 50th out of 51 public school systems in the country, surpassing only the heavily immigrant-populated District of Columbia. So most Americans plus Mr. Klein should look at flawed governmental policy more than at flawed educational theory. What is rapidly becoming a norm of the educational process is that teachers are trying to teach students who don’t speak the same language as the teacher, let alone that they are often coming from a cultural learning context foreign to the teacher. It must be repeated that teaching works best when there is a vibrant interaction of awarenesses between a teacher, who has some background in the subject matter and seeks to make sure skills are developed, and students who are prepared to respond, and have the ability to absorb what the teacher presents.

It should be further recognized, and was clearly done so as early as the Greek golden age, that learning means a disciplined acquisition of skills. And grades must be used to indicate whether levels of learning occurs. Otherwise, teachers are glorified babysitters, and the students realistically seeking learning often end up sitting around in groups waiting for catharsis or inspiration, trying to avoid being bored.

Also now getting only cursory notice is occasional reports that parents of gifted children have become the unhappiest and most contentious constituency.

And then there are the politically correct but emotion-charged educational attacks, like this example of educational criticism: “creating separate programs for such students — who happen to be mostly white in a mostly minority district — smacks of tracking.” It is popular in some areas to call this “elitism” and make it anathema to the educational process.

Suspicion of elitism is muted when everyone “succeeds,” and this is a factor influencing grade inflation today. Attending college classes as I continue doing and comparing what goes on now with what attending classes was like in the 1950s makes clear there is grade inflation. The instructors today provide mid-term and final exam questions prior to the exams, and make it difficult to not know what the hoped-for answers are. An “average” grade should easily be attained by anyone. One must be remarkably incapable and inept in and out of

the classroom, while having little need to study, in not doing so. In contrast, in the 1950s, I had to devise my own strategy in preparing for exams. It involved asking myself what questions I would ask if I was teaching the class, then writing out at least 12 questions, and then putting together A answers for all, even if only three were to be on the exam. This required effort that isn't part of the demand today.

Another grade-inflation factor that gains little attention is the public university need to meet politically correct societal mandates by providing ethnic and "rights" classes that meet less than rigorous standards, and often involve presenting very selective data. These classes help attract the mandated number of minority students, and help them in getting degrees. Passing such courses often requires less writing and historical methodology skill. Another factor is the allure of gaining university growth through making online learning available, thus diminishing the face-to-face community that has been the heart of the college experience. Getting more money may trump concerns about how hard-to-digest classes may be affected and whether online browsing may easily replace deeper, instructor-directed reading and direct exposure to the instructor's experience.

Also contributing are the rapidly growing entrepreneurial for-profit schools that focus on recruiting the increasing numbers of students who have a difficult time or are unable to get into the universities. These for-profit, proliferating institutions flood the media with advertising promising an education, classes easily taken at home, tuition money easily available, and a college degree plus a lucrative career, and, finally, of course, a better life.

Examples of those providing these promises are "for-profit" colleges like Kaplan University Online and the University of Phoenix. They preach that all you need to do is sign up for a low-interest government loan that you'll easily be able to pay back once you graduate and get your dream job.

A woman named Shannon Croteau was 11 classes away from a Kaplan degree (which is owned by The Washington Post Company) when she learned she was out of financial aid, and \$30,000 in debt. Here's the most interesting part — the degree she was working toward would be worthless in her state of New Hampshire. She was billed for loans she never signed up for, enrolled in classes she didn't choose, and when she complained, was given the runaround by a succession of fake "loan officers" who wouldn't tell her the truth, let alone their last names. "They lied and cheated," Shannon told Change.org. "It has ruined me."

Shannon is just one of many students to have their financial life devastated by the fraudulent and predatory practices of for-profit colleges. Countless other Kaplan students have come forward, saying they've been charged for classes even after they've withdrawn, been stalked by aggressive admissions officers, or had their degrees held hostage if they don't ante up to pay for "surprise" fees.

These for-profit institutions serve as bottom-feeders of the educational process today — which is a rapidly growing opportunity for profit-making. Glibly, they liberally promise jobs, unlimited opportunity, and government-provided financing, despite the fact that most of their students have not previously applied themselves in gaining basic skills. They oppose government regulations that might limit their ability to "meet the needs of those who need more support while also providing 'schedule flexibility,'" which means providing easily accessible credit. Just read an advertisement with words like "Have you had a job? We'll give you college credits for all you learned from it." That allows them to avoid expenses of direct classroom contact while maximizing profits.

A recent media article must be noted here, identifying a "sham" university. It reported that "Federal officials are accusing Pleasanton University of serving as a front for an illegal immigration operation that accepted millions of dollars to obtain student visas for foreign nationals. In a complaint filed on Wednesday, federal prosecutors call Tri-Valley University a 'sham' and accuse its founder, Susan Su, of fraud. They say the university made false statements to the Department of Homeland Security that allowed hundreds of people — mostly from India — to stay in the United States on student visas."

So sham "universities" are now developing while grade inflation grows in "respectable" universities. As grades inflate, the ability to apply rigorous standards to the educational process deflates. Over the last 40 or so years, seniors graduating from high school have had to meet less demanding state-mandated requirements. Alternative schools provided nurture and field trips, but less than adequate actual reading and writing instruction demanding disciplined learning. Rapid growth of at-home instruction also provides a strict, but intellectually limited moral environment because often there is less critical questioning of public policies reflecting change, and that helps undermine the democratic process society we so easily congratulate ourselves for having.

Regardless of cause and effect factors, one thing is certain. More and more employers complain about lack of math and language skills, and colleges complain about burdens imposed in trying to provide catch-up

help. Test scores make clear that every state in the union is producing less functional students.

It should not come as a surprise that a January 18, 2011, Associated Press story noted that a study of more than 2,300 undergraduates found 45 percent of college students show no significant improvement in the key measures of critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing by the end of their sophomore years. In addition, it found that not much is asked of students either. Half did not take a single course requiring 20 pages of writing during their prior semester, and one-third did not take a single course requiring even 40 pages of reading per week.

The study findings are in a new book, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, by sociologists Richard Arum of New York University and Josipa Roksa of the University of Virginia. The study provides data on students who took the standardized test in their first semester of fall 2005 and at the end of their sophomore years in spring 2007. The schools took part on the condition that their institutions not be identified. The study, an unusually large-scale effort to track student learning over time, comes as the federal government, reformers and others argue that the U.S. must produce more college graduates to remain competitive globally, ignoring that getting quantity without quality is self-defeating. Of course, whether or not boosting graduation rates matters is moot if students aren't learning much.

As with so many other factors noted here, little societal attention has been given a recently developed policy in meeting the challenges of education today. It is called "developmental education," a more politically correct term than "remedial" education. At great expense, colleges — especially on the Junior College level but also on university levels — are now having to create a new offering euphemistically called "preparing students for college level" work. Of course one of the aspects of it requiring laudatory praise is that it provides an example of "diversity." The primary problem involved in meeting its challenges is to find as many ways as possible (because of cost during economic recession) to reduce the "sequential" requirements and gain "accelerated outcome progress." In other words, encourage teachers to identify as many as possible as quickly as possible whose skills are adequate. Administrators, in order to justify costs, have to come up with this terminology in order to provide evidence that what they are doing is "effective," and yet meeting "personal needs."

One community college in Washington State devotes a little over one-third of its curriculum to non-English-speaking students, and most of the community colleges offer more English as second language courses than courses for native Americans.

Among the findings outlined in the Arum/Roksa book and report, which tracked students through four years of college: "Overall, the picture doesn't brighten much over four years. After four years, 36 percent of students did not demonstrate significant improvement, compared to 45 percent after two. Students who studied alone, read and wrote more, attended more selective schools, and those who majored in traditional arts and sciences posted greater learning gains. The racial gap between black and white students going in widens: black students improve their assessment scores at lower levels than whites." Arum and Roksa overlook the "developmental demography" aspect by blaming this on students who don't study much and seek easy courses and a culture at colleges and universities that values research over good teaching.

Subsequent research found students one year out of graduating from college are not faring well. One-third moved back home, and 10 percent were unemployed. Almost half of those surveyed said they rarely if ever discuss politics or public affairs with others, either in person or online. Thus a less viable citizen is achieved who is amassing unprecedented debt. The report does make clear that accountability should be emphasized more at the institutional level, starting with college presidents who spend most of their time chasing money. Only if societal changes occur will college presidents be more inclined to change perspective.

It should be clear that flooding the country with illegal and legal immigrants, plus having medical advances allowing an increase in the survival rate of non-functional children, and then mainstreaming them into classrooms, has to have an obvious impact on what the educational process produces.

Of course there are good teachers, good schools, good districts, and all forms of "diversity" are not bad. But somehow the failure to realize the costs and the cause and effect of the systemic shortcomings of the kind of diversity now being mandated continues being ignored, because the answers would require major changes in attitudes and understanding of how present policies are non-productive and clearly unsustainable — policies that have been central to Obama administration purposes during its first term. ■