

two million people behind bars, a conservative estimate of the number of imprisoned innocent people is probably in the thousands, and perhaps in the tens of thousands. Our criminal systems must be improved to minimize the chances of wrongful convictions in the future. Balko and Carrington have produced a great—and infuriating—book about how this can happen. The state of justice in Mississippi may have been particularly bleak, but so many of the problems that happened there are not unique at all.

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The Case Against Education: Why the Education System Is a Waste of Time and Money

Bryan Caplan

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Bryan Caplan is a professor of economics at George Mason University who has spent over 40 years in school. “The system has been good to me,” he confesses. “Very good. I have a dream job for life.”

He’s also a shameless traitor to his profession and guild, a critic of the system that’s afforded him a life of leisure and affluence. That’s a *good* thing. We need more honest critiques of the higher-education boondoggle from privileged insiders. As an economist, moreover, he argues from data and facts, not feelings or emotions. He’ll undermine his own best interests if statistics lead him inexorably to positions at odds with his personal welfare.

The Case Against Education: Why the Education System Is a Waste of Time and Money hits bookshelves amid reductions in government spending on universities due to budget shortfalls in the aftermath of the Great Recession. The chorus of complaints runs something like this: “Legislators don’t realize what goes on in the university; they don’t understand what it takes to teach and research; they don’t know what I do to earn my pay; they don’t appreciate how important education is to our state; they can’t competently assess my everyday work.”

But Caplan understands these things, having spent his entire career as a student or a professor at major research institutions. The argument against educational excess is more credible coming from an academic, like him, who’s complicit in its harms.

Caplan's chosen title (with subtitle) says it all: His target isn't the acquisition of knowledge (it's *good* for people to learn), but the wasteful, exorbitant *system* that in many cases impedes rather than facilitates the acquisition of knowledge. Five provocative words on the book's opening page—"there's way too much education"—are predicated on the proposition that learning and education are distinct, that garnering credentials does not correlate with increased erudition or competence.

It's no secret that the costs of higher education have been rising steadily for decades. Universities have long been reallocating resources away from basic classroom instruction and towards amenities, administrative payrolls, athletic programs, student services, and construction projects. The ready availability of federal student loan money has enabled colleges to hike tuition and fees, forcing students to shoulder heavy, often unmanageable debt burdens. As a result, the artificially inflated price of a college degree is greater than the actual costs associated with teaching and research.

Caplan believes enough is enough. "The heralded social dividends of education," he insists, "are largely illusory: rising education's main fruit is not broad-based prosperity, but credential inflation." He boldly submits that "the average *college student* shouldn't go to college."

Objections to these strong claims are predictable: don't college graduates earn more money than those without a college degree? The answer, of course, is yes. But that's not the full story.

Caplan explains that the primary value of a college degree is in its "signaling" power. That diploma on your wall doesn't tell employers how much you know or what skills you have attained. Rather, it signals to them your tenacious character and work ethic. Finishing college proves you have the wherewithal and discipline to claw your way to the top. The problem, of course, is that an abundance of earned bachelor's degrees diminishes their value while graduate degrees become the substitute marker of distinction. If you aren't learning practical skills as you chase multiple degrees, you and the institutions funding your education (likely the government) are just dumping money to jumpstart or advance your career, in which case all this spending seems, well, inefficient and unnecessary.

Courses in college aren't intrinsically valuable. You can spend months on YouTube watching recorded faculty instruction at Yale and Stanford, learning vast amounts of information, but no one will hire you for that effort. After all, you've gained no credential. On the other

hand, you could sit through college classes that don't interest you, excelling on exams but forgetting the tested material as soon as the class ends. You will be no wiser from this experience. Employers know that and don't care. They don't hire students for wisdom or knowledge. They hire students with a record of demonstrated success.

Caplan emphasizes the importance of "conformity" to the signaling model. Employers and teachers share a key preference: they generally favor cooperative and dutiful personalities over lazier and more disagreeable alternatives. The ability to fit in, to adapt to different social settings, tends to impress business leaders. College grades reveal temperaments, dispositions, traits, and priorities—they demonstrate whether a student conforms to expectations. Formal education isn't the only way to demonstrate conformity, but, in Caplan's words, it "signals a package of socially desirable strengths." He adds, "If you want the labor market to recognize your strengths, and most of the people who share your strengths hold a credential, you'd better earn one too."

Caplan sensibly advocates vocational training as an institutional corrective, but has little workable advice for people pursuing certain vocations. Someone who wants to be a teacher must earn the necessary credential; someone who wants to be a lawyer must attend law school. Whether these credentials are needed at all—that is, whether they are suitable prerequisites that adequately prepare students for the everyday practice of their desired vocation—is a significant question warranting extensive debate, but regrettably it falls outside the scope of Caplan's project. His substantial case against education might leave you wondering, at any rate, why he thinks universities can effectively provide vocational training at all. If they're so bad at what they do, why would they shine at this new task?

There's also a "presentist" element to Caplan's thesis. Universities weren't designed to prepare students for vocations outside of medicine, law, or the clergy. Until late in the 20th century, you didn't need college to compete on the job market. Universities have a complex and chaotic history that makes undue emphasis on workforce training seem shortsighted. The number of students attending college to advance innovative research or otherwise contribute academically to the sum of knowledge remains low. The central purpose of the university isn't served by the current form of higher education in which a premium is placed on employment outcomes. Caplan isn't trying to remake higher education or return it to its medieval roots, but by

inflaming passions at least he might redirect attention to the central mission of universities: to educate and spread knowledge.

As the holder of a Ph.D. in English, I commend the colorful chapter “Nourishing Mother” to the skeptically inclined humanities professor who stands ready to accuse Caplan of prizing social and economic returns over the immeasurable effects of literary, aesthetic, philosophical, historical, or theological inquiry. The scholar of arts, society, and culture may be surprised to find a useful ally in Caplan, although his discussions of “high culture” and “taste” may irritate English professors, who will quickly recognize how little Caplan understands their discipline.

It’s obvious that higher education in its current manifestation is financially unsustainable. Something has to give. Skeptics should read *The Case Against Education* with an open mind and an eye toward the future. Caplan is heavy on issue-spotting but short on solutions, but he provokes difficult conversations that are long past due.

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