

IS COLLEGE WORTH THE CASH? | In her opinionated new book, journalist Claudia Dreifus challenges the value of American higher education. She talks to Lynn Sherr



AS MILLIONS OF mothers brace themselves—and their kids—for the fiercely competitive gauntlet of admission to the country's top-ranked schools, journalist Claudia Dreifus has startling advice: "Don't send your kids to a status symbol. That's what an Ivy League undergraduate education often is. At Yale and Harvard, undergraduate teaching is too often an afterthought; at the University of Pennsylvania, the classes can be as large as at many public universities. You're really paying for the name."

Controversial words from a writer for the *New York Times* who teaches a graduate course in media at Columbia University. In her new book, *Higher Education? How Colleges Are Wasting Our Money and Failing Our Kids—and What We Can Do About It*, Dreifus and her co-author, Andrew Hacker, a veteran political science professor at New York's Queens College, charge that America's 4,400-plus undergraduate schools "hold a monopoly on kids' futures that is immune to all the basic economic laws that govern the rest of society, including the laws of the marketplace."

Her argument: The schools are too expensive and don't deliver on their promise to educate young people. At some, the total bill (for tuition, room and board, and extras) has ballooned to \$250,000 for four years. "Most



families cannot afford that, incurring indebtedness that shackles their future," she says, adding that the similarity of tuition costs at colleges across the country "would make an antitrust lawyer salivate." Most of that money, she says, is going not into better teaching but rather into "institutional growth, empire building and full-time pay and perks."

Dreifus and Hacker, who are domestic as well as writing partners, visited some 100 campuses to examine this "mutant sector of the economy," which Dreifus discovered while teaching in the early 1990s. I asked her to elaborate.

Q Why do you think a Harvard education may not be worth it?

A First, it's overpriced. Harvard has just raised its fee to over \$50,000 a year, and that will trigger a cycle of increases throughout the system because Harvard sets the trend.

Harvard says it's raising the number of scholarships, and that's well and good, but the overall effect of the tuition hikes on the rest of the system is thoroughly immoral—most schools are not nearly as well endowed and can't award as much financial aid. I believe that the elite universities we call the Golden Dozen—Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Dartmouth, Penn, Brown, Columbia, Cornell, Stanford, Duke, Amherst, Williams—are, for the most part, overpriced prestige items.

Q But they have great faculty.

A Over 70 percent of college teachers—even at top schools like Yale, Harvard and Stanford—are graduate students or adjuncts or gypsy visiting professors. That's up from 43 percent in 1975. There are 181,000 teaching assistants at work in 280 research universities around the country. And it's not just the elite colleges. Florida Keys Community College, for instance, has 24 full-time faculty and about 90 adjuncts per term. Using a contingent workforce costs the schools much less money. At Yale, for example, teaching assistants earn roughly \$20,000 a year.

Q So the students are not taught by the stars?

A Rarely. And this bothers me, because you're cheating the young people. »

Q Where are the adjuncts coming from?

A Universities are overproducing PhDs way beyond levels anyone can use in this country. From 2005 to 2007, they awarded 101,000 doctoral degrees—but there were only 16,000 new assistant professorships created.

Q You criticize what you call “vocational training” at many colleges: Resort management. Equine science and management. Apparel and accessories marketing. Why does this bother you? Doesn’t it help kids get jobs?

A I think 18-year-olds are too young to know what they’re going to do with their lives. We’re a rich enough society that we can give people four years to find themselves—to expose them for one brief moment to ideas and thinking, to take a hiatus from the world of commerce. We can afford an educated populace.

Q Even in these tough economic times?

A Yes. It’s not a luxury to be educated.

Q So who pays for that education? More federal and state support?

A I’m not against that, but this whole sector of the economy also has to stop wasting money: on tenured faculty, on bloated salaries, on bloated building and land acquisition and on an enormous administrative class on campus. At Williams, for instance, 69.9 percent of the employees are doing something other than teaching; the school has a faculty of 318 and a staff of 739. There are 33 athletic coaches, a 69-member alumni and development staff, and a 40-member information technology crew. The president of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, an engineering school in Troy, New York, brings in nearly \$1.6 million a year in total compensation from the school; she reportedly picks up an additional \$1.3 million for serving on several corporate boards. Meanwhile, Rensselaer students graduate with an average student loan debt of \$27,000.

Q Why don’t you believe in teacher tenure?

A Because we’ve seen that it doesn’t work. Wherever we’ve gone, students have rarely told us that their best teachers are the tenured. Privately, university presidents said the same thing: They can’t get the tenured faculty to do anything they don’t want to do. This guarantee of lifetime employment creates a huge class of immune slackers.

Q Why do you oppose high-powered athletic programs?

A We’re not against students working out, but at some highly selective schools, a quarter of the admissions places have a sports component, and that means they are discriminating against students with academic ability. And when large sectors of the budget are taken up by sports costs, it means academic subjects are not being funded. Kenyon College recently erected a \$70 million athletic center, as fancy as any in Beverly Hills. Of course, they have all manner of staffing: a sports information director, coordinator of lifetime fitness, assistant athletics director of compliance, more than 40 coaches. But their philosophy department has only five faculty members. The role of a university is not to provide entertainment; it’s to educate young people.

Q Doesn’t a winning team make money for the school?

A Rarely. Most are draining resources from the real mission of the university. Even in the top football division, which can count on strong ticket sales, 113 of 118 teams still run a deficit. And of the five money-making teams, only two brought in enough to erase the overall deficit of the school’s athletics department. It’s also not always true that teams bring in more alumni donations, small or large. We looked at all the gifts of \$100 million or more given between 2000 and 2008. Of the 45 schools that received these gifts, only three had leading football programs; five didn’t have football at all. »

Q What should colleges be concentrating on?

A They should be exposing young people to the great ideas of the past and present, and they should be giving them a chance to stretch their minds. A return to the liberal arts: history, philosophy, English, physics. Science as a whole needs to be valued more on the undergraduate level. Too often science classes are taught by people who speak English too poorly to communicate clearly—all to save money.

Q What's the solution?

A De-emphasize professors' need to publish and promote those who are good teachers. Abolish tenure. Pay adjuncts something like parity per course. Force professors, no matter what their ranking, to teach undergrads. Cap presidential salaries. And end sabbaticals: They're a total waste of money—a raid on parents' and students' resources. If a professor wants to advance her career by writing a book, she should do it on her own time.

Q What can parents do?

A The first value should be not starting your youngster off with five-figure debt. Consider alternatives to the most expensive schools. It's not so important to be able to say, "My child is at Princeton." What's more important is to say, "My child has a good future," which partly means a future without crippling debt.

Q Can any college deliver "a good future"?

A A large number of CEOs of major corporations didn't come from the Ivies but from second-tier schools. There are good things to be found anywhere; the system is big enough so there is something for anyone. The trick is to find the right match.

Q How can a parent judge whether a college is good for her child?

A Look closely at the catalog. If the courses are written in jargon, in academesse, avoid it—that's a

sign that the classes have been designed for the professors, not the students. And carefully consider your own values. I snuck in on a lot of tours at colleges; many parents were asking questions about parking and the swimming pool and the fraternities. Perhaps as a result, the schools were not selling their teaching or their best professors—they sold their facilities as if they were a Club Med. Instead of investigating the extras, parents should sit in on some classes and see what they're like.

Q You list schools you admire. What are your top four?

A Cooper Union [in New York City], because it's highly selective and it's free. Evergreen State College [in Olympia, Washington], a public liberal arts school where faculty members from different departments teach classes together. The University of Mississippi [Ole Miss, in Oxford, Mississippi], for its honors college, its attention to racial reconciliation and its back-to-basics approach. Arizona State University [in Tempe and Phoenix] has a break-the-mold president who tries everything, and an excellent honors college.

Q Why sound this alarm now?

A It should have happened earlier! No one has looked at the system the way we've experienced it—seeing universities as an economic sector all its own that has gotten away with some really unregulated, unmonitored activities, not always for the social good. No one's watching them. Why, with the thousands of books coming out of academia, hasn't anyone on the inside written a book like this before? Because the tenure system discourages intellectual audaciousness.

Q Are you being intellectually audacious?

A I'm sure people think I'm a bit of a brat! But I'm saying, and Andrew is saying, the emperor has no clothes. ☺