

Why Not College?

It's All About the Money

BY RICH MALLEY

The economic and social advantages conferred by a college degree are well-documented, with graduates, on average, earning higher salaries and access to upward social mobility. Yet, one of the key constituencies that helped elect Donald Trump last year was non-college educated Americans. Did this reflect, as some suggested, a growing rejection of post-secondary education in the U.S.?

Her groundbreaking work has given Sara Goldrick-Rab, Professor of Higher Education Policy and Sociology at Temple University and the author of 2016's *Paying The Price: College Costs, Financial Aid, and the Betrayal of the American Dream*, a more nuanced perspective on the social, economic and educational divides that the election exposed.

Goldrick-Rab's book has helped start a national conversation about the fact that the biggest obstacle to attaining a college education is not gaining admittance or being able to do the work. It is the simple fact that college costs too much, and the financial aid system intended to help extend college opportunity to low- and middle-income families is no longer adequate.

As a social scientist, Goldrick-Rab is rigorous about grounding her claims in data. Her book was based on the Wisconsin Scholars Longitudinal Study, which she designed and ran with economist Douglas N. Harris. The study followed 3,000 students for six years, all of whom received multiple forms of financial aid.

But the data that came out told only one part of the sobering story, so Goldrick-Rab provided context by presenting the data alongside case studies tracking the experiences of six students in her survey, all of whom started college in 2008.

"I thought there would be power in the stories," Goldrick-Rab said in a recent phone conversation. "Maybe I could get schools and administrators to feel closer to this, and feel like they're ready to do something. It is so important to just really recognize the problem. There is so much rhetoric out there that money just is not really the issue in education."

One of the most infuriating revelations in Goldrick-Rab's book is the extent to which colleges and universities go to keep students in the dark about the true price of the education they're paying for. For instance, in their failing to inform recipients that the often paltry aid they get for their freshman year will likely be even more inadequate for subsequent years, as fees and tuition increase. And by pretending that the cost of college is simply limited to tuition, fees and books, not considering items such as food, shelter, clothing and transportation.

"We have to address these living expenses," Goldrick-Rab said. "For us to continue to not admit that food and housing are keeping people back is not OK."

Despite grants, loans and working multiple jobs at once, one of Goldrick-Rab's case study subjects couldn't make it and left college in her second year, exhausted, defeated, degree-less and in debt.



Sara Goldrick-Rab
Photo by Chris Kendig

"There are people (in the study) who got clobbered a lot worse, but they weren't typical," Goldrick-Rab said. "She got clobbered in a very typical way, which is why she's in there."

Another typical way financially strapped students get clobbered? By taking the initiative to apply for private scholarships to supplement their existing grants and loans, only to learn that their schools can "claw back" a like amount from the students' promised aid packages.

"It's got an official name," Goldrick-Rab said. "It's called aid displacement. The Gates Foundation loses millions because of this problem. Coca-Cola loses money because of this problem. (Schools) will claim in the name of equity that they're just going to distribute that aid to another kid. Except they don't."

And because the system is designed and administered to keep students in the dark about their own college finances, most don't realize their hard-won scholarship will simply displace a like amount of existing aid until after the fact.

If one hasn't already suspected as much, by the end of *Paying the Price*, it is hard not to conclude that for many lower-income students, financial aid can be an inducement to try college that leaves many worse off than if they had never gone.

"We open these doors to American higher education so widely, and we're so proud of that. We say that that's the epitome of the American dream," Goldrick-Rab said. "But they get there and we've fooled them by not giving them the support they need, so that they can do more than walk in the door. Because they walk through and so now they have debt. That's the infuriating trap to me."

So how does this connect with the election? "It was different 20 years ago," Goldrick-Rab explained. "You could go and not be harmed by just being (in college). Now you're harmed because you couldn't get in the door without taking on debt. And the public costs of this system are huge. The failures are costing us."

"This election was an example of this failure," she continued. "Look at the divide (among voters) in college educated and non-college educated people. This is not just that non-college educated people don't know stuff. It's that they are angry. They are pissed because they couldn't become college educated, because the system is stuck against them. They're not saying they didn't want an education—they couldn't get an education. It's so connectable."

Sara Goldrick-Rab will be a Keynote speaker at SXSWedu: March 6-9 at the Austin Convention Center.