

Opinion Want to know why America is losing its edge? Look around campus.

By Seth Bodnar

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If you're attending a college graduation ceremony this month, you might notice something about the students on campus: there aren't as many as there used to be. Some 2.5 million fewer Americans are enrolled in college than in 2011, and the decline is accelerating. The college-going rate of high school graduates has dropped from 70 percent in 2016 to 62 percent in 2022, and if this trend continues, a group of young Americans will — for the first time in our history — enter the workforce with *less* education than the one before.

As a university president, I worry not simply for the financial health of the institution I serve. Rather, my fears are for our country's long-term economic competitiveness as we experience a widespread devaluing of education and the erosion of the educational advantage that we've held in global affairs for the past 70 years. This is the most serious long-term national security challenge facing our country.

When I was commissioned as an Army officer 22 years ago, I entered a U.S. military that possessed vast technological superiority over our adversaries. Our military power was — and still is — predicated on a strong education system and a fast-moving private-sector economy that can out-innovate any competitors.

As the Economist recently noted, in 1990, the United States accounted for 40 percent of the Group of Seven's gross domestic product; today it's 58 percent. Incomes continue to rise; American firms own more patents than Germany and China combined. But constant innovation requires education, and the steady increase in college-going rates from about 60 percent in 1990 to nearly 70 percent by 2010 played a vital role in this 30-year run.

Yet, some prominent business leaders (despite many of them having degrees themselves, often from highly selective universities) are vocally discouraging young people from attending college, arguing that you don't need a degree to be a successful entrepreneur or that success is simply a matter of "out hustling" your competition. At the same time, some political leaders are choosing to cast college campuses not as a driver of national power but as the favorite target in the country's culture wars. A recent [Wall Street Journal-NORC poll](#) of more than 1,000 Americans found confidence in the value of a college education is dropping, with 56 percent believing the time and money spent are not worth the degree earned.

But those viewpoints overlook higher education's vital role as an engine of social mobility and economic growth. Though some individuals certainly *can* be successful without college, the average impact of a college degree on a person's lifetime earnings is well over \$1 million — and growing. A person with a college degree is only half as likely to be unemployed compared with those that have only a high school diploma and 3.5 times less likely to experience poverty. And the benefits of education accrue not just to the individual but also to the broader economy. One recent study estimated that every additional year of schooling for a country's adult population resulted in per capita GDP growth of 9-10 percent.

Yes, higher education can be easy to criticize. I cringe when I hear students share plans to attend colleges that charge \$50,000 or even \$65,000 *per year* in tuition. While most public universities charge a fraction of this, the eye-popping prices at some institutions reinforce the perception that college is an overpriced, risky venture.

Universities also need to retire the unhelpful debate over what's more important: a broad education or specific skills. Some within academia hear the words "career readiness" as a mortal threat to a liberal arts education.

The reality is that though our students absolutely need a broad base of knowledge to navigate the complexity of today's world, they also need the tangible skills to be job ready on graduation day. Doing both requires universities to work more closely with employers to adapt programs to meet emerging needs, while at the same time making educational programs more accessible to people at all stages of their career.

But the answer to these flaws is not to write off higher education. Instead, we as a country must rally around higher education in all forms — two-year, four-year and short-term vocational training — as an American institution that needs to adapt and change but also remains indispensable for our long-term security.

When I led soldiers in the Army, I did so knowing that we possessed not just air superiority but also night-vision, sensing and communications capabilities that far outpaced our adversaries. Much of the battlefield technology the United States depended on in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere over the past two decades was the product of foundational research at American universities as well as the knowledge workers these universities produced.

The rest of the world recognizes the vital role education has played in building the military and economic might the United States has enjoyed. Our advantage is fading. At the turn of the 21st century, we ranked fifth among Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development nations in educational attainment; by 2021, we were 12th.

Our competitors are certainly not advising their youth, "Don't get an education." They're playing a long game, and they're playing to win.