

# On Campus

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## In Defense of the “Takers”

According to the cynics who lost the 2012 election, the so-called “takers” won because there are more of them than the so-called “makers.” According to this argument, some people take from the government while others work and pay taxes to pay for services for them to take.

In finding blame for his loss, Governor Romney returned to his theme of takers receiving gifts from President Obama. “Forgiveness of college loan interest was a big gift,” Romney said. “Free contraceptives were very big with young, college-aged women.”

While Governor Romney has lost his claim, his central theme that the federal government and the states can no longer afford entitlements has become the accepted paradigm of cutting government spending for Republicans and at least some Democrats in exchange for reducing tax breaks for the rich.

As usual in this Orwellian world of Newspeak, the word “entitlement” has been transposed from a “legal right or a just claim to receive or do something” (Oxford American Dictionary) to a socialist plot to weaken America.

George Will, the *Washington Post* columnist, calls his version of a so-

cialist plot “statism - expanding the entitlement state at the expense of economic growth.”

The central question here is what causes economic growth?

Certainly not finance. The system of unregulated financial practice clearly caused the financial meltdown that led to the current world-wide recession.

Most economists and economic historians agree that increasing graduation rates for high school and college, funded by local, state, and federal governments, caused the long-term economic growth that began after WWII. The GI Bill that gave WWII, Korean War, and Viet Nam War veterans grants to attend school, combined with the expansion of high quality, low-cost state colleges and universities in the 1960s and 1970s fueled the economic boom of the last half of the 20th Century. Increases in graduation rates were matched by increasing income for college graduates.

Even Mr. Will, when not chattering about the benefits of unfettered capitalism, called the GI Bill “the most successful federal program of the 20th century.”

This system worked well until sharp cuts in state and federal funding for

higher education over the last 20 years forced tuition above affordable levels for many students. Public colleges and universities now reserve places for high-income students who can pay the higher tuition, excluding competent lower income students from enrolling and pressuring low-income students to drop out. The result is that educational attainment is dropping in the US relative to other countries. According to the National Commission on Adult Literacy, “The U.S. is the only country among 30 OECD free-market countries where the current generation is less well educated than the previous one.”

An environment of declining educational attainment cannot sustain long-term economic growth.

Those students who stay in school to graduate face expensive debt that causes economic problems for graduates and the rest of the country. Current debt averages almost \$30,000 per graduate; a kind of mini-mortgage without a house. Current college graduates cannot afford to buy a houses or start families, which were the bedrock signs of post-WWII economic growth.

It is time to renew public investment in quality low-cost education that created the greatest economic boom in

history. Increases in federal and state grants for financial aid, lower or no interest loans for college students, and increases in loan forgiveness programs for public service make sense.

But these improvements aim at effects rather than their cause: the high cost of college.

The Occupy Student Debt Campaign calls for tuition-free public higher education for students who merit admission. Other student organizations have also proposed free tuition for students who maintain a certain grade point average or perform public service, and a surcharge for high-income students. Katrina vanden Heuvel in the *Washington Post* estimates this would cost about \$30 billion per year, which is less than states pay for prisons.

I think this a reasonable government investment for renewed economic and social growth. This only sounds radical because we have forgotten that state college and university tuition was almost free before 1980. I paid \$100 tuition per semester at UMass Amherst in the mid 1970s. The time is right to turn back the clock and give more to the “takers.” ■