

October 9, 2009

OP-ED COLUMNIST

The Uneducated American

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"If you had to explain America's economic success with one word, that word would be "education." In the 19th century, America led the way in universal basic education. Then, as other nations followed suit, the "high school revolution" of the early 20th century took us to a whole new level. And in the years after World War II, America established a commanding position in higher education.

But that was then. The rise of American education was, overwhelmingly, the rise of public education — and for the past 30 years our political scene has been dominated by the view that any and all government spending is a waste of taxpayer dollars. Education, as one of the largest components of public spending, has inevitably suffered.

Until now, **the results of educational neglect have been gradual — a slow-motion erosion of America's relative position. But things are about to get much worse**, as the economic crisis — its effects exacerbated by the penny-wise, pound-foolish behavior that passes for "fiscal responsibility" in Washington — deals a severe blow to education across the board.

About that erosion: there has been a flurry of reporting recently about threats to the dominance of America's elite universities. What hasn't been reported to the same extent, at least as far as I've seen, is our relative decline in more mundane measures. America, which used to take the lead in educating its young, has been gradually falling behind other advanced countries.

Most people, I suspect, still have in their minds an image of America as the great land of college education, unique in the extent to which higher learning is offered to the population at large. That image used to correspond to reality. But these days young Americans are considerably less likely than young people in many other countries to graduate from college. In fact, we have a college graduation rate that's slightly below the average across all

Even without the effects of the current crisis, there would be every reason to expect us to fall further in these rankings, if only because we make it so hard for those with limited financial means to stay in school. In America, with its weak social safety net and limited student aid, students are far more likely than their counterparts in, say, France to hold part-time jobs while still attending classes. Not surprisingly, given the financial pressures, young Americans are also less likely to stay in school and more likely to become full-time workers instead."