

[Transcript] Plain English with Derek Thompson / Why Americans are Losing Faith in College

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In 2008, I graduated with a degree in journalism and I entered the labor market. This was a time when the economy was falling apart. Everybody was going around, freaked out about the world, pretending to know what a collateralized debt obligation actually was. It was a terrible time to enter the workforce. So a lot of my peers, the old millennial, geriatric millennial, micro generation, didn't go into the labor market at all. They went to grad school. It could have worked, but they said, no, more school for me. This was a period in American life where more school, more college, was a good answer to just about every question. And the numbers bore this out. People with associate degrees clearly earned more than high school grads. People with bachelor's degrees clearly earned more than people who just went to community college. People with master's earned more. People with advanced degrees earned even more. More college, more money. That was the formula. And it created the sense that college flatly worked. In fact, it might have been the last American institution to flatly work. Trying to think about what American institutions were like, you know, in the milieu in the 2000s. Baseball, you know, steroidal mess. The banks clearly broken. College, college worked. In one poll in 2009, 96% of parents who identified as Democrats said they expected their kids to attend college. Among Republican parents, 99% said they expected their kids to go to college. In a country where you cannot get 90% of the public to agree about anything. Basic historical events, 2 plus 2, find Canada on a map. Just about everyone said college is awesome. Now you fast forward to today, just 13, 14 years later, in a 2023 Gallup poll, the share of Republicans who said they have a lot of confidence in higher education was, yeah, actually, I'm going to let you guess. I'm going to give you a space to guess. Think about it. Here's the pop quiz. If in 2008, 99% of Republicans said they expected their kids to go to college, what percent do you think said they had a lot of confidence in college 14 years later? In 2023, was 90%? 50%? 30%? Try 19.

19. And it's not just Republicans. It's not just the right. Confidence in college is declining among practically every demographic in America, among young and old men and women,

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Republicans,

Democrats, those who did not finish high school and those with two, three framed PhDs on the wall. And by the way, it's not just attitudes. This is not a podcast about like three surveys.

Fewer people are going to college. In the country that probably has more famous colleges, universities, and any other, college enrollment is falling swiftly. In the fall of 2010, there were 18 million undergrads enrolled in colleges and universities across the US.

Last year, there were about 15 million. That is a decline of roughly 16% in just over a decade.

A huge, huge decline. In a recent essay for the New York Times, the author Paul Tuff, who has published several excellent books about college in America, wrote, quote, Americans have turned away from college at the same time that students in the rest of the world have been flocking to campus. Why? What changed in the last decade to make a college education and higher education as an institution so unappealing to so many Americans? End quote.

That is the subject of today's episode. What happened to college? Today's guest is Paul Tuff.

We talk about how a nauseous stew of economic change and cultural change and inequality has turned a surprising number of Americans against higher education. Who's to blame and what comes next? I'm Derek Thompson. This is Plain English.

Paul Tuff, welcome to the show. Thank you. Great to be here.

You have written several books about college. You've written several articles for the Times about college. I want to start by forcing you to steal me a position that might be obvious to you and a lot of people listening. What's so great about college? College is just two for maybe six years of our life. What is so important about these two for six years of our lives? Well, I could give you a couple of different answers. I don't know if either will count as an official steel man position, but from a human perspective, I feel like this is this incredibly important developmental time in a young person's life, usually starting around 18 years old. Often, this is the first time a young person leaves their home. It is just a moment where you grow up, where you figure out what you care about, what you believe in, who you are. Parts of your identity, I think, become much clearer in those years, whether you're in college or not. Being in a place where that can happen in a positive, productive way can be a super important thing. That's the mushy humanistic side on the hard economic side.

The data is really clear that something happens to people who go to college that tends to increase their earning power by a whole lot. Whether that is actually gaining knowledge or whether it's, I think, more likely gaining the skills that turn out to be really valued in the marketplace. Something happens to make you a more valuable economic actor in those years. Do you have a strongly held theory about what it is that happens that makes people capable of being great, smart, complex workers when they graduate? Because something that I've noticed in my life is I think about all of the majors that my family and my friends did, the majors that I did. You'll have all these situations where someone's a major in English and they write an essay about Gertrude Stein and they end up being a PM for Google. It's like there's nothing that's directly related between writing an essay about Gertrude Stein and being a wise PM at Google. What do you think is happening in these four years that seems to allow certain people to engage in complex work that sometimes just doesn't have very much to do with their major?

So you sound like a humanities major. When you say that, I was the same thing.

I was a journalism major in political science.

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It depends on the major. I think there are some people like computer science majors, engineering majors, but also people who are studying HVAC or welding or plumbing at a community college for whom they are literally building professional skills that they're going to use on day one. I'm sure they're also learning how to work, how to show up on time, how to complete assignments, but there's a lot of very specific job skills. For everybody else, I think there's a case people make that if you're not learning specific job skills, you're not actually learning anything valuable. It's just the sheepskin effect. It's just about credentialism.

But I had this experience when I was reporting my last book, *The Inequality Machine*, where I was following this young Princeton student, a woman I was following because she'd grown up in really disadvantaged circumstances, and it made it to Princeton. She was in this amazing, I can't remember what they called it, this seminar with 15 other brilliant Princeton freshmen sitting there talking about some Roman writer sitting around a table, and it was very erudite and smart. And I realized at a certain point that it was absolutely job training, like the sorts of skills that she was learning about how to sit around a conference table and speak your mind and hold an argument and analyze someone else's argument, like precisely but not rudely, there are so many jobs where this is an incredibly valuable skill. Writing a close reading of Gertrude Stein, incredibly valuable if you're never going to read Gertrude Stein again, the idea of taking a text and reading it very closely and analyzing it, there's all sorts of ways that these are valuable. So I say that not as sort of like a mushy case for the humanities, but just to say like I think the way that modern workplaces have evolved, knowledge worker workplaces, a lot of those sorts of skills that do not have very little to do with content matter a whole lot. What you're learning in college matters a whole lot when you get to those workplaces. Let's dive right into the thesis of this podcast, which is that something incredibly strange and incredibly important has happened to American attitudes toward college. I want to start the story in 2009, the year the Great Recession is winding down, which to me seems like a high watermark in terms of American attitudes toward college. Remind us how highly approved the institution of college and universities were just 14 years ago. Well, so you can look at all sorts of different numbers that point to the same positive consensus about college in that era 2009 and just afterward. So 74% of young adults were saying that a college degree is very important.

I think maybe the most powerful number is that 70% of that year's high school graduates went directly onto college that September. But the polling number that really sticks in my mind this poll that was done around then with parents where 98% of parents said that they expected their kids to go to college, which you just don't get a lot of 98% polling numbers no matter what the poll is. So yeah, I feel like both in terms of what young people were actually doing and what people were telling poll takers, there was this vast consensus that college was the way to go. And tell us what's happened in the last 14 years.

Well, things have changed. So in terms of the polling data, that 74% of young adults who were saying that a college degree is very important has fallen all the way to 41%. Those parents who used to be almost entirely unanimous that they expected their kids to go to college, now almost half of American parents say that they would prefer that their children not enroll in a four-year college. And the swing is not quite as dramatic when you look at actual numbers of students going straight to college, but it's still pretty big. Now it's

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down from 70% to 62%. In the most recent year that we have data for, 62% of high school graduates went directly onto college that fall. And what that's meant in terms of the total undergraduate population in the United States is that it's fallen from 18 million back in the fall of 2010 to dipping below 15.5 million undergraduates in 2021. So like two and a half million undergraduates have disappeared from the nation's college campuses.

I think it's really important to point out that this is not just an attitude shift. I wouldn't consider it that important if nothing was happening to enrollment numbers and nothing was happening to college graduation numbers, but Americans just had vaguely different attitudes toward the institution of college. This is an attitude shift that is happening at the same time that enrollment has declined and the share of high school grads going to college has declined. And if college is as important as you say it is, and as I, in fact, believe it is, this is a really, really big deal and also really, I think, strange mystery because the U.S., probably more than any other country in the world, has more famous colleges, more famous universities, maybe outside of Western Europe and the U.K., maybe has some of the oldest, most famous universities in the world. And so the fact that we're seeing this decline, I think, is a really notable and bizarre example of American exceptionalism. I want to break down our attempt to explain this phenomenon into a couple categories, really just two big categories. I want to talk about the economic side of the explanation, the cost of college, the benefits of college. And then after we get through that, I want to bring in some cultural and sociological theories that we can sort of layer on top of the economics. So starting with the numbers, let's introduce the idea of the college wage premium. Because when I hear economists or sociologists talk about the value of college, the literal monetary value of college, the watchword or watchphrase, I suppose, is college wage premium. What's the college wage premium and what has happened to it, Paul? So, yeah, as economics numbers go, this is a pretty straightforward one. So the college wage premium is just the typical median wage earned by somebody who has just a BA, no advanced degree, compared to someone who has only a high school diploma. And that number used to be quite high back before World War II, when it was only rich folks who were going to college and they were earning a lot of money compared to high school graduates. Most people were high school graduates at that point. There were only a few college graduates. But then it fell a lot in the years after World War II, mostly because of the, well, two things. One, because of the GI Bill. So suddenly the market was flooded with college graduates. But it was also a time of strong unions and a big boom in manufacturing. And so in the 50s and 60s, there were lots of great well-paying jobs that you could get without going to college. College would give you a bit of an advantage. At that point, the college wage premium was about 30%. Typical college graduate earning about 30% more than the typical high school graduate. Things changed in beginning in the late 70s and early 80s. And as good manufacturing jobs started to disappear and as technology shifted in ways that created more returns for those who had more education, the college wage premium started to rise. And around the year 2000, it crested 60%, meaning that college graduates were earning about 60% more than high school graduates. And it has plateaued just a bit above that in sort of hovering around 65% and it's been stable ever since. So to recapitulate what you just said, there's four chapters to the story of the college wage premium. There's the pre-World War II story

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where the only people going to college were patrician elites in the first place. So what you were looking at wasn't really just a college premium. It was also a college plus class premium. And you had a really, really high college premium. Between the 1950s and 1980s, you saw the college

premium come down a bit as the U.S. became a manufacturing powerhouse. And potentially as the value of the college wage premium was somewhat appreciated by the fact that there were just more people getting a college degree. But since 1980, more globalization, more technology, higher and higher college wage premium, this is the argument that people are most commonly making about the value of college. You have to go to college because you will benefit in terms of your lifetime earnings. That is a story that really concretized between 1980 and 2020.

But now in the last few years, we're starting to see the college wage premium slow down a little bit or at least a flat line and maybe come down a little bit. I think it's important to point out that college is not just a benefit, it is also a cost. And it is increasingly a cost because the value, the cost of colleges has gone up a lot in the last few decades. And as a result, a lot of economists are trying to pull in this new idea of the college wealth premium. Paul, what is that? So yeah, this is something that these economists with the Federal Reserve in St. Louis came up with a few years ago. And the idea is instead of just looking at how much you earn at any particular moment in your life, the college wealth premium looks at all of your assets, but it also looks at all of your debts and all of your costs, everything that you're spending money on, just literally how much you have saved versus subtracting everything that you owe. And when they looked at the college wealth premium, they found a very different story than they found when they just looked at wages. So there's a couple of things that get more complicated when you look at the college wealth premium. The first one is that it's changed over time and really matters when you were born. So if you were born before 1970, especially before 1980, then the college wealth premium is working exactly the way people who are in favor of college will tell you that it should for folks born in the 50s and 60s. If you have a college degree, you end up your working life with two or three times as many assets as someone who only got a high school diploma. So that kind of makes sense. But when you look at more recent cohorts, millennials, people born in the 1980s and afterward, that college wealth premium starts to really disappear. It's a lot smaller. And these economists also divided people by race and ethnicity. And when they looked at African-Americans who had gone to college and gone to high school, it was people born before 1970. Again, the college wage premium was, the college wealth premium was positive, was paying off in a big way. But for those more recent cohorts, the college wealth premium had more or less disappeared.

And why is that happening? I mean, that's really unbelievable to think that among families where the head sort of breadwinner was born in the 1980s, the wealth premium is now essentially indistinguishable from zero, especially for, I think, black and Hispanic households. I mean, that's wild. How did this happen?

Well, so they can't say with complete certainty because they can just see the assets minus the debts. But their theory, and it makes a lot of sense, is that it has to do with the cost of college, which has gone up a ton over the last few decades. And at the same time that the cost has gone up, so has student debt. And that student debt has been especially getting in the way of wealth formation. Obviously, it is just in the most simple way. It subtracts from your wealth,

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it subtracts from your assets. But it also, when you are, this is something you hear from a lot of millennials when you are saddled with debt early in your life, it makes it harder to start a small business, to build up a nest egg, to buy a first home, all of the traditional sort of wealth building activities that take place in that in early life. And so as a result, the wealth generating capability of younger people, the younger cohorts who went to college is really diminished, even if their wages remain well above those of high school graduates.

Obviously, there are thousands of colleges and there are millions of people who are going to those colleges. So it's very difficult to make big general proclinations about like, college is now worth it or college is now not worth it. It is a very individual decision. When is college worth it and for whom? So right now, Paul, given everything that you know about this distributional picture, for whom is college worth it and for whom is college less worth it? I don't want to say not worth it entirely, but considerably less valuable.

So I'll switch from relying on these economists in St. Louis to relying on this other Federal Reserve economist named Douglas Weber, who's done some really great research digging into exactly that question for whom college pays off and when. And what he finds is that there are a few things that matter. First of all, how much you spend on college matters a lot. Second, what major you take matters a great deal. But what also matters and what is a little bit harder to sort of identify who falls into which category is how likely you are to graduate. So about 40% of people who start a four-year degree don't finish it. They don't graduate. I'm sorry, who started a two-year or four-year degree don't complete it.

And for them, Douglas Weber has found the process of going to college, especially if they borrow money, can often be a real financial disaster. So he calculates depending on the likelihood that you're going to drop out how worth it is college. So one of the numbers that he came up with that I find just really eye-opening is that if college is free, if you're actually not spending anything, and if you can guarantee that you're going to graduate, then for 96% of people, college is worth it. So in that very basic way, college is worth it for almost everybody.

The problem is there are lots of folks who are not able to persist and college is certainly not free, at least for most people. And so as a result, once you start adding in the possibility of dropout and you start adding to the cost of college, his equation really changes. So once you hit college costing \$25,000 a year, which it certainly does for a lot of Americans, your likelihood of coming out ahead of the game of earning more over your lifetime than a high school graduate goes down to two in three. And once you hit annual college cost of \$50,000, it goes down to a coin flip. And the other calculation that he makes is about major. And this is

sort of what all guidance counselors are telling kids these days, when you take, if you major in a STEM field or in business, your likelihood of coming out ahead in that college bet goes up a whole lot. But if you're anybody else, if you're majoring in humanities or arts or social sciences and you're spending \$25,000, \$50,000 a year, your likelihood of coming up ahead goes to 50-50 or even lower. This is a topic that comes up a lot online where someone will point out that there's been this enormous decline in English majors or an enormous decline in comparative lit majors. And on the one hand, look, I love books. I love analyzing books. I love fiction.

So I don't, in a vacuum, want to see English majors go away. But if the cost of college is just going to rise and rise and rise, and a bunch of rational consumers of this good are going to say, I really need to discharge this incredibly expensive service in a proctoral way, I'm going

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to major in computer science or engineering or economics or business. And I'm going to read fiction on the side. That seems like a reasonable business decision for a 19-year-old to make. So to summarize your point, if tuition is affordable, and I guess affordable means something like under \$25,000, \$20,000 a year by your definition, everyone, other families, you're going to have their own definitions of affordable. If tuition is relatively affordable, if you finish college, if you get the actual degree, if you major especially in one of these more profitable majors, whether it's STEM or business or economics, you are very likely going to come out ahead when it comes to this college decision. Whereas if tuition is unaffordable, if you don't finish college, you're much more likely to be in trouble. This brings up one of these just classic questions of cost and economics in the 21st century in America, which is what the hell happened to the cost of American schools? Like in Canada and Japan, I think I'm just telling you your own reporting, public university tuition is like \$5,000 a year. In Spain, in Israel, it's \$2,000 a year. In France and Germany, it's basically zero. And in the U.S., it is tens of thousands of dollars to the point that we now have total student debt hovering around \$1.6 trillion for student borrowers. What do you think are the most important drivers of the cost of college for the median student? I want to be clear in this conversation. I don't care about what they're serving for lunch at Williams. I don't care about what they're serving for dinner at Amherst or how fancy the new gym is at Harvard. We're talking about typical colleges for the median college student. Why are those costs going up so much? Well, I mean, the fancy gyms matter to a certain extent. So I want to talk about those in a second. But I think the shortest answer to your question for me is that we made a series of legislative decisions over the last 40, 50 years, but especially over the last 15 years, that changed the basic balance of who pays for public higher education. So most American college students are going to public colleges. And in the 50s, 60s, 70s, public colleges were mostly free, or they were incredibly cheap, so that if you were an in-state student going to a public college, even a really good one, you could over the summer, working a minimum wage job, earn enough to pay your tuition and fees for the whole year. That is certainly not true now. And that happened gradually. It sped up a whole lot after the Great Recession 10, 15 years ago. But it sort of happened through a series of budget cuts, a series of decisions. And as state governments started spending, contributing less and less towards the cost of college, colleges realized that they could just start charging tuition or start charging more tuition. And it didn't have a huge effect on who would show up, partly because this was happening everywhere. It wasn't like there were some cheap colleges and some expensive ones. Everything was going up. But it was also because of the ease of getting student loans, which also shifted over time, beginning of the Johnson administration. Obama made it easier again. And that ease of borrowing just also, I think, sort of became a cultural norm that, yeah, this is a good investment. You should borrow to go to college. And so there wasn't pushback on the increase in those tuition costs. So that's public college. It's a bigger mystery to me what happened in private colleges. And different economists will come up with different explanations. I think part of it was just that same like there was no pushback on raising tuition until pretty recently. Now there has been some big pushback over the last few years. But because of the ease of borrowing, it was easy to raise tuition. Because public tuitions were going up, it was easier to raise your private tuition. But also something that I wrote about not in this article, but in my book and in previous

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articles, is about this very strange fact that college as a consumer good is very different than other consumer goods. I mean, in some ways, what it's similar to is luxury goods, right? If you charge, if you raise the price on your Hermes bag, it actually becomes more valuable, more desirable. So there are some studies that show that the more that you raise tuition, oddly, you get more applicants. You get seen as more of a high quality college.

And also, I mean, these colleges that are private colleges that were raising tuition were spending a lot of that money on things that made them more appealing to a certain type of applicant. And so, yeah, what they're serving in the cafeteria at Williams and the new gym at Harvard actually do make a difference in terms of who's applying. There are a lot of students for whom that kind of amenities seem to matter a whole lot. For a while anyway, it mattered more than the price

Yeah, there's a few explanations that you didn't touch on that I've heard from other sources. Some people will talk about Balmost Cost Disease and the fact that we have productivity advances in so many different parts of the economy, where you, for example, need way fewer engineers to make a chip with a certain ability to have a certain amount of memory. But as chip making gets more efficient due to Moore's law, you have declining costs in software. But with those productivity advances in one part of the economy, you tend to have wage increases in other parts of the economy that don't have the same productivity advances like college. If you're a professor who does Psychology 101 to 200 students in 1960 and 2020, there is zero productivity advance in your ability to lecture to 200 students. So there's a little bit of Balmost Cost Disease, I think there might be a little bit of administrative bloat. I've seen several reports that find that if you look at the increase in hiring in colleges, it's not, in fact, happening at the faculty level, so much as it's happening at the administrative level. So the support the kids get in terms of there's a vice provost for student activities, and there's a larger office for helping kids figure out, or I should say students, figure out what they're going to do after college, more administrative heft in these college labor forces. But I really think that you put the hammer on the nail when you pointed out that among higher income schools, they're straightforwardly becoming luxury products, that the dorms are just much nicer in the 2020s than they were in the 1970s, and the gyms are nicer, and the labs are nicer, and the buildings are nicer, and the lawns are nicer. There's just a lot of turning a Hyatt into a Ritz Carlton across the campus, and that is going to be discharged to students. And then finally, I really want to nail this point again, the U.S. made a public policy decision to shift financing from the state to the student. So if college is going to cost \$50,000 forever, you can have a situation where the state can say, actually, rather than us pay \$50,000 per student, we're going to pay \$10,000 per student, but we'll make it easier for students to borrow \$40,000. In that scenario, you are mechanically raising the cost of college as it is born on the average family going to college, and I think that there's definitely a lot of that happening. Before we turn to culture, is there a big part of this picture that you think we missed? Because I think it's really important for people to come out of this conversation with the understanding that declining faith in the value of college might be a somewhat reasonable, or I should say on-the-margin reasonable response to the fact that the value of college isn't rising the same way it has been rising in previous decades, at the same time that the cost of college, especially as born on college-going students,

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has gone up a lot. It's become, for many, a worse deal. Before we go into culture, how central do you think that explanation is to the declining faith in college as an institution? I think it's very central. I think it's the main event. If I can, there are two things I would add to that, just on the finance side. One of the things that I really like about the way that this economist, Douglas Weber, expresses this is that he says that the college wage premium still exists, still does pay off in the same way. What was added is this idea of risk, of uncertainty, of variability, that in the past a college degree was more like buying a treasury bill. It was just a stable, boring, responsible thing to do. It was going to pay off in a certain way, and if you could hack it for four years, you were going to get that benefit. Now, all the stuff we've talked about, it's in the language of risk. Well, if you take this, you'll come out this far ahead, but if you take this, well, you might drop out, and then your losses are going to be huge. It's just a way of thinking about education and higher education that was completely foreign. It's certainly foreign in other countries, but it was foreign in this country until recently, and doesn't make a lot of sense when you're talking about 19-year-olds, that these are not folks who are in a position to make that high stress arbitrage decisions about how exactly they should be investing their money. I think that uncertainty, when you're talking about public opinion, is something that regardless of what the actual cost is and how much it changes, just this sense that I've got to go to college for four years, maybe I'm not dying to study for another four years, and I'm taking this incredible risk where if I do everything right, maybe I'll come out ahead, but if I screw up in one small way, which is extremely likely for people in their late teens and early 20s, I'm going to be screwed for the rest of my life. The one other thing that I would say is that when you look at other countries and how the American system of higher education developed compared to Canada or Japan, France, the other places that we've talked about, a lot of them have a few really first-class universities the way that we do, but what is different in the United States is that there is this, so I was from Canada originally and was in Canada over the last summer and talking to lots of friends who had kids going to college, and what really strikes me there is that it's a much flatter system, so that there are here a handful, whether you want to, Canada's 10, 20, 200 excellent universities that cost a whole lot and tend to pay off pretty well, but there are also a lot of institutions of higher education that are not great and are not bringing a lot of benefit to students. Whereas in Canada, there's a lot of quite good universities. There are some really great ones, University of Toronto, UBC, McGill, that maybe they're a tier above some of the others, but it is much flatter. Anywhere you go, you're going to get a good education. There aren't going to be places that are going to rip you off and you're not going to get any benefit. There's something about the mindset that that creates where it does relieve a lot of that stress and uncertainty. When talking to 18-year-olds who are going off to college, they're like, yeah, I'm going to graduate from high school. I guess I'll go to college. It doesn't have that same kind of stress that every American high school student seems to feel at the end of high school. As a result, I think that has a huge impact on public opinion. It just doesn't feel like this stressful institution the way it does in this country. That's a really interesting point, and it connects to a much deeper observation about the character of America and the choices that Americans both make and live with. Because to your mind, and I'm just going off of what you said, because I've heard other people say this

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about colleges in Europe and Canada, but I can't comment on it from personal experience, maybe because they rely so much more on direct government financing, they are more similar. The same way that there's not a wild range of DMV experiences across the country. DMV experiences are like it's a government experience, and maybe some places it's really terrible and some places it's only okay, and I'm not trying to disparage DMV experiences, but it's fundamentally a government good. Whereas you look at another industry category, like say hotels. There are some shitty-ass motels, and America has some of those beautiful hotels in the world, just extraordinary range motels that are doing extremely different things for extremely different clientele, and that might be more similar to how American colleges are as an industry category, that there are some that are essentially luxury products, and there are many that are merely trying to take people who have grown up in poverty and give them an education that they have a chance of purchasing their way into the lower and middle classes. And there's a very big difference, I think, between sort of maybe the DMV approach and the hotel approach to higher education. Well, I love that analogy. The one thing that I would add to it is that instead of looking at DMVs, look at high schools. Look at public high schools. If you go to a public high school in California and Texas and Michigan, they're going to be some differences. There are better ones, there are worse ones, but they're not that different. The American public high school experience is pretty similar, and that's on purpose, because we think like a high school education is a public good, everyone needs it. We more or less know what we want to do, what we want kids to have learned, and so there's not a whole lot of variability. The reason that I think that's a good comparison to college is it's what happens right before college, where suddenly, as soon as you graduate from high school, you go from this system that is national and similar and basic to suddenly you're thrown into this system where you might end up in a Motel 6 or you might end up at the Ritz. JLL believes you should expect more from your office space. So ask yourself, is your office working as hard as you are? Does it foster collaboration, fuel productivity, and help build culture? Is it designed with intent, aka is it a place you actually want to be with fresh air, natural light, and innovative technology? Your office can be a powerful asset, so put your office to work with JLL. Learn more about JLL office solutions for businesses of all sizes at jll.com/slash/Spotify. This episode is brought to you by Simply Safe Home Security. If you plan on squeezing one last getaway this summer, protect your home with Simply Safe. My wife and I went to Maryland for a few days this summer. We brought the dog. We brought some candy. I grabbed a bottle of wine. That's it. We left everything else to be looked after by Simply Safe, because that's what a good home security system does. It gives you the gift of just not having to worry about anything. With the new smart alarm wireless indoor camera, Simply Safe's professional monitoring agents can actually see and deter intruders in real time. It's all part of 24-7 live guard protection, the latest innovation from Simply Safe. The new smart alarm indoor camera is also the only indoor security camera that can trigger the alarm and instantly deter threats with a built-in siren. It can even sense the difference between potential intruders and cute and cuddly pets. For a limited time, get 20% off any new system when you sign up for fast protect monitoring at SimplySafe.com/slash/English. That's SimplySafe.com/slash/English. There's no safe like Simply Safe. This episode is brought to you by United Airlines.

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Something very interesting has happened among Republican attitudes toward higher education. Around 2009, where we began telling the story, a clear majority of Republicans said they had very high confidence in higher education. By 2015, when Trump entered the scene, that was down to 56% and you saw a really clear decline in Republican confidence in higher ed compared to Democrats. Now it's down to 19. So among this roughly half, let's say 40% of the country, they have essentially gone from seeing this major American institution from being broadly a credit to the U.S. economy to being essentially a reputational drag or civic toxin to the United States. What do you think has happened among Republican attitudes toward college?

Well, like all political shifts, it's hard to pin down exactly what is the driving force, but I think it's a few things. So yeah, if you look at what happened starting in around 2015, you know, not that different from the, I mean, exactly the moment where Trump rode down the elevator, the escalator into our lives, that is when this real shift started to happen. In between 2015 and 2023, the shifts have been absolute. So some of that, I think, is just about rhetoric, right? Like, it's a populist moment in the Republican party. If you're going to be a good populist, you should hate pointy-headed intellectuals, right? That's a sort of a populist tradition going back a long way. So I think that there, you know, so we have this situation where we have lots of graduates of Harvard and Yale Law School telling us about how higher education, elite higher education is a toxin, right? So I think some of it is just that kind of rhetoric. I think the other thing that shifted that is significant, well, two things. One is there was this shift in how people were voting. So, you know, if you look at the Obama Romney election in 2012, it was Romney, it was Romney, sorry, who won the folks who just had a BA, right? That was his constituency. And it was Obama who was winning the less educated folks, people who only had a BA. By 2016, in the Clinton-Trump election, that had switched entirely, and Trump had gotten everyone without a college degree, and Clinton was doing great among everyone

with a college degree and higher. At the same time, there was this shift on college campuses, which, you know, like young people of anywhere populated with a lot of young people have always skewed a little bit liberal. But that was really accelerating, I think, over the past couple of decades. So now, when you poll college freshmen, it's a three-to-one ratio, people who identify as liberal to people who identify as conservative. Other polls have shown the same thing even more so among college faculty, where over the past few decades, it's shifted from a two-to-one liberal ratio to a five-to-one liberal ratio. And one other poll looked at student-facing administrators and found that it was a 12-to-one ratio, liberals versus conservatives. So, you know, conservatives are not crazy when they say that colleges are these institutions of liberal mindset. It's true. There is a lot of liberal thought there. And I think when you take those two shifts, at once, where the Democrats start becoming identified as the party of higher education, and colleges themselves become such concentrations of liberal progressive left-wing thought, I think it doesn't take a whole lot of populist rhetoric to convince

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working class people that this is where the ideas that are sort of out to get you are hurting your life. This is where they're situated. I have like four follow-up questions that I have written down here on my little Apple notes, and you checked all of them. You went through all of the follow-up questions. You went exactly interview over. You went exactly to the intersection that I wanted us to get to, which is that these are nested shifts. You had this economic shift, where Democrats have gone. You said you mentioned the last 10 years. I would say in the last 40, 50 years, they've gone from being the party broadly of labor to the party broadly of the diploma, those with college degrees, and then also non-white Americans. So you have this sort of interesting coalition, sort of the cosmopolitan urban voter. And many of America's cities are this interesting combination of non-white Americans and white Americans with college degrees, also non-white Americans with college degrees as well. But then the campus shift, I think, is so amazing. And it was preparing for this podcast that made me really look into it. One stat I saw from another source, as I was researching for it, found that in 1970, half of academia self-identified as liberal. No field was more than 80% liberal. Today, all of academia, every single domain and discipline, sociology and communications, basically, except for engineering, all of them are 90% liberal or more. Most academic departments surveyed by these researchers have zero Republicans. That is amazing. So you have the situation where those who go to college are more likely to vote for Democrats and where I think college campuses themselves, I think, have clearly become more liberal. Do you have a clear explanation of why college campuses seem to have become, I don't know, if it's more liberal or more transparently liberal? Because college campuses, I think, have always had the reputation of being more liberal than the general American electorate. But it does seem like we've seen some shift in terms of the willingness of college professors to call themselves Democrats, combined with the unwillingness of them to call themselves Republican. It does seem like a rather real shift. Do you have any theories about how that's happened over the last few decades? I think it's partly just, yeah, this sort of sense of momentum and groupthink that when you have that kind of numbers, when you have a department that doesn't have a single Republican and everyone you're around is a Democrat, you just stop thinking about the exchange of ideas as something where, yeah, Democrats have some good ideas and Republicans have some good ideas. Everyone you know is a Democrat. Everyone you know is progressive. And I think that that can lead to some of the excesses that appeared on college campuses. Talking about this timing, there were a lot of them in around 2015, 2016. Fox News and other conservative media outlets, when a bunch of progressive students would shout down a conservative speaker or yell at a professor on campus for not respecting their feelings, like that video would get played over and over on Fox News. So it all got amplified that way. But it really was happening. And I think it was happening especially in those years. Yeah, so my explanation is that it is about that sort of critical mass, that when you're in an environment where everybody thinks like you, you tend to push those ideas even further. And so I think some of the progressive excesses that got a lot of conservatives negative attention came out of that critical mass. Yeah, I don't want to necessarily have a huge segment here on the state of wokeism. I do my very, very best to not talk about it on the show. But I just want to name check it here because I'm sure that there's some listeners saying like,

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how can you talk about, you know, liberalism and conservatism on college campuses and not mention Ron DeSantis? How can you talk about it and not mention, you know, various attacks on academic freedom and debates about, you know, college liberal kids on campus, you know, throwing pies at conservative speakers? To my mind, this all emerges from the dynamic, from the dynamic that you have identified, that in a world with more hyperpolarization, where colleges become more liberal and where liberals become, excuse me, the college educated, become more likely to vote for Democrats, you're going to have this contentious situation, I think, where Republicans see that they can profitably identify themselves as being anti-college in a way that liberals and Democrats can similarly identify themselves as being pro-college. And so that sort of cultural conversation, I think, deepens the divides that might have already been emerging for various economic and sociological reasons. So, wanting toward a conclusion here, it's always nice when we can ask a really big, naughty question like, why are Americans falling out of or seeming to fall out of love with college and arrive at something like an answer, because I think there's a pretty clear from this episode, from this interview, two-part answer to the question. Part one is economic, the median college experience, which used to be more like a T-bill, more of a guaranteed ticket into the middle class has become something more like an economic gamble due to the rising cost of college and the flatlining nature of the college wage or college wealth premium. And second, we have an unavoidably obvious situation where college campuses are becoming more liberal and Republicans are starting to identify themselves as being against the cathedral of college interests. Any other ingredient you want to throw into the jambalaya here about why you think Americans seem to be falling out of love with college, both in their attitudes with Italian Gallup and in terms of the moderately, slightly declining share of high school graduates who are actually going to college?

Yeah, I would put in one more ingredient into the stew, and that's the inequality of higher education. And so, to talk about one more economic study, I'd talk about Raj Chetty, John Friedman and David Deming, their recent study and their series of studies over the last few years that have showed that, especially at highly selective institutions, there is a thumb on the scale for the rich and powerful, the children of the rich and powerful. And I think that study is incredible and incredibly important and goes a long way to not only explaining higher education, but explaining a lot about how American society and especially the elites of American society function right now. Higher education is a part of that perpetuation of the upper classes in this country right now, and that feels unfair. It is unfair, right?

And I think that that gets tied up with both the financial issues and certainly the political issues in ways that are kind of complex, but in the end, just come out to a sort of a simple answer of like, this system does not feel like it is working for me, right? And so, I think a lot of Americans feel that way, even Americans for whom the system is literally working for, right? Because they're still having to send their kids to 17 SAT tutors, and it still feels stressful, even to those for whom the game is really rigged. But if you are a low income, working class American,

you can see in this data or just in the feel of these places that the system is not set up for you. And I think if you're a conservative, that all sort of meshes together, right? The idea that this is a system that is set up to perpetuate a kind of educated elite, and that that happens to be an educated liberal elite, there's a lot of evidence that can support the way you are feeling.

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And again, when you've got certain media outlets telling you that this is a conspiracy, that these folks are really out to get you, I think that inequality, that we, that these institutions have allowed to develop and have perpetuated in many cases, that is a huge element in what has turned Americans against some parts of higher education. Paul just mentioned the economist David Deming, who has worked with Ross Chetty and others, Friedman on a raft of studies showing that among other things, elite college admissions really do seem to be biased toward the super rich by, for example, continuing to give a preference to legacy students and students who play what I call fancy sports. If you want to know more about that, we have an August 1 episode of Plain English called, Why Elite College Admissions Are Bias Toward the Super Rich. The guest of that episode is the economist David Deming, so that is an episode that I would encourage you to listen to if you're interested to know more about this. And I would just say as a tagline, I mean, you nailed it, elites have to a certain extent rigged the game, and I would argue that they've created a game that is also making them kind of crazy. The anxiety rates among these elite parents about all the different things they have to do for their kids in order to give them a 0.5% extra likelihood of getting into Harvard is beserking their lives, even it is beserking American society. So this is a bargain that is working out for just about nobody. Very last question for you, Paul. We did a few episodes months ago about the dawn of the generative AI moment, and I think that a lot of people are looking at technology like AI and wondering, what does this mean for the future of the labor force? What can we predict about the labor force 10, 20 years from now, if we're going to have these kind of breakthroughs that can seemingly write papers and write reports and do Excel work and program websites, if the technological sort of impediments to the workforce continue, what happens to the value of college? I have to imagine that you're in a lot of these conversations with students and colleges thinking about, what do we even make of this oncoming wave of technological change that could really force colleges to change what they do or change the way that students think about like, hey, maybe I should just become an electrician. Maybe Google in 15 years is just going to be like a bunch of generative AIs talking to each other, and we're still going to need people to fix the solar panels in the wind turbines. I'm going to become an electrician and make a million dollars rather than try to become a product manager at Google and end up not being able to get a job because the competition between human and machine is going to be too much. This is a crazy complex question to force you to conceive of some incredibly nuanced answer to, but you have to be in some of these rooms where people are talking about this. What thoughts do you have about the role of college in a world of accelerating technological change? Yeah, I think obviously it's a huge and important shift in all parts of American life right now, but I think it has the potential to change things in higher education. I'm just not quite sure how it's going to change things. There are comments on the New York Times magazine article online that say, yeah, it's all going to, all this disadvantage, this college wage premium is going to disappear because these folks who have BAs and are doing this knowledge worker jobs, they are going to all be replaced by AIs. It's certainly possible. I do think that there's potential that this will interrupt the general trend of the last 100 years or so towards new technologies, biasing rewards in terms, in favor of those with more skills, but every new technology

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that's come along for 100 years has done the opposite, has meant that more skill, the people with more skill, more skill at using these new technologies are the ones who are earning more money. And my guess is the same thing is going to happen. And it may, you're right, it may turn into tonight to be a shrinking pool, which I think would be disastrous for the concept of American equality. But I would be surprised if this technological shift doesn't also benefit those with more skills, more degrees, more education, just like all the previous ones did.

Good answer. Paul Tuff, thank you so much.

Thanks very much.