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Sharri Hall

An Analysis of Luke Redd on Free Higher-Education

The debate on free higher-education presents significant polarization. In his article on *Tradeschools, Colleges, and Universities*, Luke Redd seeks to present arguments for and against free higher-education and have readers decide upon which side of the debate they will stand. He believes the topic deserves “an open mind and a balanced exploration of the potential benefits, drawbacks, and alternatives.”

Luke Redd gives arguments for and against free higher-education and offers arguments to a middle-ground which he calls “alternatives.” Unfortunately, Redd does not present arguments for any side well. Though he offers some valuable insight on the debate, the majority of his arguments are unsubstantiated and oversimplified, and reveal his clear bias.

To begin, Redd presents that “America’s future is at stake.” Before he has even begun to present the arguments, Redd presents readers with a logical quandary. Here, Redd attempts to use pathos to draw readers in and refocus the issue on education’s greater effect on the nation and not its costs. However, he gives us no evidence to support this claim. He offers no data or backing to support his warrant. He expects readers to simply understand that and how the nation’s future is inherently tied to how well education is presented and received. He compounds with “nearly everyone agrees that education is one of the biggest factors that will determine the nation’s fate going forward.” “Nearly everyone” is not a strong ethical claim. Is “nearly everyone” educators, politicians, policy makers or others who would have an informed opinion about the nation’s fate? Even so, Redd offers no evidence to prove that the nation’s future is at stake or that education is the main solution. Until readers have a definitive answer on “everyone’s” credibility, they cannot be expected to make decisions based upon those opinions.

In the very next paragraph, Redd presents his bias for free college through pathos. He says the cost of higher-education leaves “many [students] ill-equipped to find good employment, let alone attain the American dream.” Redd does not give us any measure of how ill-equipped students are. He uses loose terms such as “good employment” and “the American Dream.” Neither have clear definitions or interpretations. One can achieve what is commonly considered “good employment” without going to college. For example, someone may choose to become a mechanic or open a restaurant. Those are two forms of gainful employment which do not require a college

degree. Arguably, neither is forfeiting their claim at the American Dream. Additionally, Redd is removing focus from the issue at hand and presenting that achieving the “good life” is really what is at stake here.

Redd continues by presenting the background on publically funded higher-education and how it became necessary for higher-education to come at the expense of the students. He adds to the credibility of the argument that something needs to be done about the monetary demand for students. He presents clear and valuable data about collegiate attendance, higher-education costs, financial aid and scholarship grants, student debt, and post-graduate employment.

Next, Redd presents his first argument for free higher-education. He asserts that free higher-education will “benefit the entire nation” because it provides both “private and public benefit.” He continues that because many of today’s employers require advanced knowledge or special technical skills, a better educated workforce would “fill many of the skill gaps that prevent America’s economy from growing faster.” These claims are weak and unsubstantiated. Where exactly are these “skill gaps?” Are we certain these “skill gaps” are what is preventing the growth of American economy? How does Redd reconcile unemployment, especially among college graduates, if there is apparently a surplus of “skill gaps?” Furthermore, free higher-education does not immediately beget a better educated workforce. That citizens need to be better educated does not mean that college should be free. There needs to be greater data linking under-education to the cost of education.

Redd continues that more educated people would be able to fill the “good-paying jobs that often go unfulfilled.” Where is the data to support this? If this is the case, why is unemployment so high? And either way he creates a false dichotomy; suggesting that more people need to be able to go to college and receive “employer-desired credentials” does not require that higher-education be free.

Redd proceeds to call the debate, not an economic one, but a “moral and philosophical one.” He uses pathos to draw readers in and excite by using words such as “reaching potential.” Once again, he makes the concern that of the good of the nation and draws away from the issue at hand. However, though calling the issue a moral and philosophical one is not inherently incorrect, it is a gross over-simplification of the debate. The debate is not simply whether or not college should be free, but rather, who should pay for college. As such, the debate cannot only be considered moral and philosophical; readers must also consider the economic side.

He summarizes the arguments for free higher-education through several unsubstantiated points. He uses phrases such as “might be,” and “would be able to.” However, neither of these

phrases are specific enough to make judgments upon. Targeting that the existing financial aid system fails does not immediately suggest that free higher-education is the answer. It only suggests that something about the current system needs to change. Either way, readers cannot cite this as a valuable point, unless readers know for certain that the system is failing. Redd does not provide us with the information or data to say that the financial aid system is failing. Redd's points about better decision-makers, focused students that can graduate on time, graduating with student loan debt, and the widening gap between wealthy and poor families, even though there is no evidence making any of these claims true, all assert that something needs to be done about college affordability, but not that free higher-education is the answer.

Redd finally attempts to consider the feasibility of free higher-education by considering both how the government could pay for public college, and providing information on where it has worked in other nations. Immediately, he fails because he cites "some economists," as having valuable and worthwhile ideas for which the government might pay for public college. However, readers cannot speak to the economists' credibility until readers know who the economists are, and their level of mastery and influence in the field. Redd continues by suggesting several means by which the government may procure the funds necessary to remove the financial demand from the students. However, none of the suggestions are as simple as he is suggesting, or likely to come in the near future.

Redd continues by offering information about other countries where tuition is free, or of relatively low cost. He cites that schools in Europe have employed tuition-free higher education. However, Redd does not give any information about these tuition-free systems other than the amount of loan debt students graduate with. Readers have no information on the relative value of the education, employment after graduation, length of studies, or if it even seems to be working well. Readers have no information on how these programs are affecting the government in these nations or taxpayers. Even if these programs are working well abroad, there is no means to know that these programs would work well in the United States considering its population, which is considerably larger than that of the European nations.

Redd cites programs in the United States that provide free tuition for college students. He cites programs such as the *Kalamazoo Promise*, which makes students who have been continuously enrolled in a Kalamazoo public school system eligible to have one hundred percent of their higher education paid for at any public university or college in Michigan. He also cites states such as Minnesota, Oregon, and Tennessee where there are already free community college programs. However, though Redd has given us examples of where free higher-education exists in

the United States, he has not given us any information about the programs. He does not tell us how much the programs are affecting taxpayers or give any indication of how they might work large scale.

Next, Redd begins to present the arguments against free higher-education. Primarily, there is an issue in that his arguments for free higher education amount to nearly thirteen hundred words, where his arguments against free higher-education amount to only about six hundred.

Redd presents that the main opposition to free higher-education is because it would “simply be too expensive for the federal and state governments to maintain long-term” leading to higher taxes, and a hurt economy. This is an oversimplification of the argument. If the government is going to pay for students to attend college for free, it must be able to say where the money to do this is coming from. It is not a question of maintenance specifically, but of funding.

Redd continues to state that “Canada, South Korea, and Japan have already proven that free higher-education isn’t necessary for building some of the world’s most educated workforces.” This is beside the point. Just because free higher-education isn’t strictly necessary does not necessarily follow that it is not worth the pursuit of free-higher education. Redd also states free higher-education would not “be enough to promote the big improvements in social mobility that are needed throughout America.” Once again, Redd is removing focus from the issue and putting the focus on the betterment of the nation. Even if it were a valid point, that free education by itself would not be enough does not conclude that it should not be instituted at all, or that it wouldn’t be even a little beneficial.

Redd presents a few more arguments against free higher-education. Some are well thought out and defended with reasonable data. However, Redd states that “many students would still have to borrow money for their living expenses” and would not be able to leave school completely debt free. That students may not be able to leave college completely debt free does not mean that the government shouldn’t try to subsidize at least some of the cost. After all, isn’t it valuable that students be able to graduate with only a couple thousand dollars of debt, rather than tens of thousands? Red also states that “students may not learn to be financially literate.” While the concern is admirable, arguably, it’s not college’s job to teach students how to become mature adults. It’s the parents’ job. If a parent chooses to teach their own child financial literacy by having them assume the responsibility of their college payments, that is their own choice. However, college itself cannot be made responsible.

Finally, Redd presents his arguments for the alternatives. Redd suggests a loan repayment system based upon income. Firstly, he asserts that the “problem is that this option is only available to low-income people that can prove that they are experiencing financial hardship.” With this statement, he indicates a clear bias: that college should be free or as cost efficient as possible. His concern for this arrangement is not whether or not it will succeed, but that it does not succeed in the way he would like for it to. Secondly, his arguments on this point are vague. He mentions “some former college students in the US.” He continues to formulate this argument through pathos, building on readers’ excitement. However, he does not give any indication of which state this program is being enacted in, how well it’s working, and what it is costing the local and federal government and subsequently, taxpayers.

He also cites Australia’s *Higher Education Loan Program*. He explains the program well and gives an explanation of how it is working and the effect is having on Australian government. He even gives an indication of how its shortcomings are being overcome. However, he merges into a pathos argument that this program is particularly good for artists, musicians, and writers and that the United States should take on a program like it because the world “needs” them and that “our future would be bleak without them.” One cannot say for certain that the world “needs” any one person. That creates a value system whereby society decides what people are needed more than others. Couldn’t one make the argument that since society also need doctors and lawyers, arguably more than society need artists and musicians, that this help should go only to aspiring doctors and lawyers? One cannot say that the future would be bleak without a certain group of people. Since it cannot be objectively rendered or calculated, readers cannot trust this point. What is the measure of bleakness? How can one say that our future wouldn’t be *better* off without them?

Redd concludes this argument saying that though taxpayers would still help fund, the “tax requirements *would likely* be much lower...” Until Redd can provide something more concrete, definitive evidence perhaps, that taxes will be lower, readers cannot take this into account when deciding upon their opinion.

Redd argues a few more points of alternatives. Most are oversimplified in that enacting them would not directly lead to the outcome he desires, or at least would not be as simple to enact as he is presenting. In particular, Redd says individuals should discourage “the distribution of merit-based financial aid to wealthy students.” If a scholarship is “merit-based,” by definition, the only thing that should be considered is a student’s merit, not their social status or wealth, or rather their parent’s wealth.

Redd does not present the arguments for and against free higher-education well. He presents a clear bias towards free higher-education. On both sides, he presents arguments supported by unsubstantiated evidence, over-simplified arguments, and weak analogies. He leaves us asking more questions than he answers. Redd cannot be considered a valuable source of information upon which readers may figure out upon which side of the debate they fall.