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Elitists, crybabies and junky degrees

A Trump supporter explains rising conservative anger at American universities.

Story by Kevin Sullivan, Mary Jordan
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COCHISE, Arizona

rank Antenori shot the head off a rattlesnake at his back door last summer — a deadeye pistol blast from 20 feet. No college professor taught him that. The U.S. Army trained him, as a marksman and a medic, on the “two-way rifle range” of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Useful skills. Smart return on taxpayers' investment. Not like the waste he sees at too many colleges and universities, where he says liberal professors teach "ridiculous" classes and indoctrinate students "who hang out and protest all day long and cry on our dime."

THE FORGOTTEN: THE ISSUES AT THE HEART OF TRUMP'S AMERICA

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"Why does a kid go to a major university these days?" said Antenori, 51, a former Green Beret who served in the Arizona state legislature. "A lot of Republicans would say they go there to get brainwashed and learn how to become activists and basically go out in the world and cause trouble."

Antenori is part of an increasingly vocal campaign to transform higher education in America. Though U.S. universities are envied around the world, he and other conservatives want to reduce the flow of government cash to what they see as elitist, politically correct institutions that often fail to provide practical skills for the job market.

To the alarm of many educators, nearly every state has cut funding to public colleges and universities since the 2008 financial crisis. Adjusted for inflation, states spent $5.7 billion less on public higher education last year than in 2008, even though they were educating more than 800,000 additional students, according to the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association.

In Arizona, which has had a Republican governor and legislature since 2009, lawmakers have cut spending for higher education by 54 percent since 2008; the state now spends $3,500 less per year on every student, according to the progressive Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Tuition has soared, forcing students to shoulder more of the cost of their degrees.

Meanwhile, public schools in Arizona and across the nation are welcoming private donors, including the conservative Koch brothers. In nearly every state, the Charles Koch Foundation funds generally conservative-leaning scholars and programs in politics, economics, law and other subjects. John Hardin, the foundation's director of university relations, said its giving has tripled from about $14 million in 2011 to $44 million in 2015 as the foundation aims to "diversify the conversation" on campus.

People across the ideological spectrum are worried about the cost of college, skyrocketing debt from student loans and rising inequality in access to quality degrees. Educators fear the drop in government spending is making schools harder to afford for low- and middle-income students.

State lawmakers blame the cuts on falling tax revenue during the recession; rising costs of other obligations, especially Medicaid and prisons; and the need to balance their budgets. But even as prosperity has returned to many states, there is a growing partisan divide over how much to spend on higher education. Education advocates worry that conservative disdain threatens to undermine universities.

In July, a Pew Research Center study found that 58 percent of Republicans and GOP-leaning independents believe colleges and universities have a negative effect "on the way things are going in the country," up from 37 percent two years ago. Among Democrats, by contrast, 72 percent said they have a positive impact.

A Gallup poll in August found that a third of Republicans had confidence in universities, which they viewed as too liberal or political. Other studies show that overwhelming numbers of white working-class men do not believe a college degree is worth the cost.

A single year at many private universities costs more than the median U.S. household income of $59,000. Though most students receive financial aid, a four-year degree can cost more than a quarter-million dollars. Tuition at public universities has soared, too, and a degree can easily cost more than $100,000.

It's not just the money: Dozens of the most prestigious schools reject more than 80 percent of applicants, and the admissions system often favors the wealthy and connected.

WHICH STATES HAD LARGE FUNDING CUTS AND TUITION HIKES

Since 2008, Arizona has cut per-student funding more than any other state, according to an analysis of changes since the recession. At the same time, the state increased public-school tuition more than all but one state, Louisiana.

Source: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities

"The new upper class has nothing to do with money. It has to do with where you were educated," said Arizona State University President Michael Crow, who is pushing to make quality degrees more accessible to lower-income students.

Antenori views former president Barack Obama, a Harvard-educated lawyer who taught at the University of Chicago Law School, as the embodiment of the liberal establishment. Antenori said liberal elites with fancy degrees who have been running Washington for so long have forgotten those who think differently.

"If you don't do everything that their definition of society is, you're somehow a knuckle-dragging Neanderthal cave man," Antenori said.

Antenori was drawn to Trump, he said, because he was the "reverse of Obama," an "anti-politically correct guy" whose attitude toward the status quo is "change it, fix it, get rid of it, crush it, slash it."

Even though Trump boasts of his Ivy League degree from the University of Pennsylvania, Antenori said he "had a different air about him." Unlike Obama, Trump has not emphasized the importance of Americans going to college.

During the campaign, Trump said many colleges "have gone crazy" and that young people were "choking on debt." He criticized universities for getting "so much money from the government" while "raising their fees to the point that's ridiculous."

Hillary Clinton trounced Trump in the nation's most educated counties, but Trump won white voters without a college degree by 37 points.

Though Trump has largely ignored higher education during his first year in office, his son Donald Trump Jr. recently excoriated universities during a speech in Texas, for which he was paid $100,000. On college campuses, he said, "Hate speech is anything that says America is a good country. That our founders were great people. That we need borders. Hate speech is anything faithful to the moral teachings of the Bible."

Trump Jr. went on to say that many universities offer Americans a raw deal: "We'll take $200,000 of your money; in exchange, we'll train your children to hate our country. . . . We'll make them unemployable by teaching them courses in zombie studies, underwater basket weaving and, my personal favorite, tree climbing."

Antenori, who served as a delegate for Trump at the 2016 National Republican Convention, loves that kind of talk.

Finally, he said, people in power understand how he feels.

"The establishment has created this thing that if you don't go to college, you're somehow not equal to someone else who did," says Frank Antenori, a former GOP Arizona state legislator and 2016 Trump delegate to the Republican National Convention. Photo by Carolyn Van Houten/The Washington Post

'Go out and generate revenue'

Antenori was born in Scranton, Pa., and dreamed of playing football at Pennsylvania State University. But he started partying and his grades slipped in his senior year of high school. His father balked at paying for college.

"I'm not paying for C's," Antenori recalled his father saying. "You want to go? You pay for it."

So at 17, he joined the Army, which promised him $20,000 toward college if he enlisted for three years. He stayed on, joined the Green Berets and became a medic. He didn't get around to college until he was 32.

Still on active duty, he enrolled in a pre-med program at Campbell University in North Carolina, a Baptist school a few miles from Fort Bragg. He earned a bachelor's degree taking classes four nights a week and on weekends.

After he retired from the Army in 2004, he moved to Tucson, where he works as a program manager for a major defense contractor. Earlier this year he completed an online MBA through Grand Canyon University, a for-profit Christian school in Phoenix.

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"I got functional degrees that helped me move up in the corporate world," he said, crunching through the parched grass on his 40-acre ranch in the southeastern Arizona desert. Compact and muscular, wearing a red T-shirt and dusty work boots, he speaks with jackhammer bluntness.

Antenori said many young people would be better off attending more affordable two-year community colleges that teach useful skills and turn out firefighters, electricians and others. Obama promoted that same idea, launching new efforts to boost community college and workplace training. But Antenori said he believes Obama pushed young people too hard toward four-year degrees.

"The establishment has created this thing that if you don't go to college, you're somehow not equal to someone else who did," Antenori said, sitting with his wife, Lesley, at the dining room table in their modest one-story ranch house.

Antenori said when he was in high school in the 1980s, students were directed toward college or vocational training depending on their abilities.

"The mind-set now is that everybody is going to be a doctor," he said. "Instead of telling a kid whose art sucks, 'You're a crappy artist,' they say, 'Go follow your dream.' "

The Antenoris did not steer their two sons, 23 and 22, toward college, and neither went. One helps at home on the ranch, and the other is enlisted in the Army.

Antenori is just as happy his sons aren't hanging out with the "weirdos" he reads about on Campus Reform, a conservative website with a network of college reporters whose stated mission is to expose "liberal bias and abuse on America's campuses."

In a sign of the intensely partisan climate on campus, its recent headlines include: "Prof wants 'body size' added to diversity curricula," "Students cover free speech wall with vulgar anti-Trump graffiti" and "College Dems leader resigns after declaring hatred of white men."

The federal government spends $30 billion a year on Pell grants, which help lower-income students, including a large number of minorities, attend college. But studies show that half of Pell grant recipients drop out before earning a degree.

The overall college dropout rate is also high. Only 59 percent of students who start at four-year institutions graduate within six years, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. That leaves millions with debt but no degree.

More than 44 million Americans are paying off student loans, including a growing number of people over 60, according to the Federal Reserve. The average student loan debt of a 2016 college graduate was $37,000. At $1.4 trillion, U.S. student loan debt is now larger than credit card debt.

Antenori said taxpayers should help pay only for degrees, such as those in engineering, medicine or law, that lead directly to jobs. If a student wants to study art or get a "junky" degree in "diversity studies or culture studies," they should go to a private school, he said.

And he said dropouts who have received government aid should pay it back: "That would be awesome," he said, flashing a big smile.

"You want to create someone who's going to be a contributor, not a moocher," Antenori said. "Go out and generate revenue; that's what it's all about."

"Public education at every level is the only tool we've ever invented to effectively allow people to lift themselves from poverty," said Arizona state Sen. Steve Farley, a Democrat who frequently sparred with Antenori in the

legislature and who is running for governor.

‘It’s my crusade’

Steve Farley could not disagree more.

“This whole idea that government should be run more like a business is so profoundly morally flawed,” said Farley, a Democratic state senator who is running for governor and used to spar regularly with Antenori when the Republican served in the state legislature from 2009 to 2013.

“Government should be run like a family. We should be raising our children to be the best people they can be,” Farley said. “We should not be manufacturing them to be products to be consumed. That is a basic ethical and moral flaw in this whole argument, that everything’s got to have financial payback so we can reduce taxes for the Koch brothers.”

It was Politics and Pizza night at a community center in suburban Phoenix, and Farley was speaking to 100 people in folding chairs listening to Democratic candidates running in 2018. They cheered when Farley, in a crisp white dress shirt and a yellow tie, blasted Republican cuts to education funding.

“We choose to give our money away in corporate tax cuts and corporate sales tax loopholes,” said Farley, 54. “It’s my crusade to get rid of those loopholes and fund our public education system at every level.”

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The views of many conservatives are being fanned by Trump, he said, including a vilification of universities that is “corrosive to our democracy and our society in general.”

“The whole liberal bastion idea is just absurd,” Farley said, noting the growing amount of money on campuses from conservative donors.

A graduate of Williams College, a highly selective private liberal arts school in Massachusetts, Farley is an artist and graphic designer who invented a process for turning photographs into images on ceramic tiles, which he sells across the country.

Farley said music and art are critical to education, invention and creativity “that can lift us from all these problems that we seem surrounded with these days.” He noted that Apple founder Steve Jobs credited a college calligraphy course with helping spark the design of the first Macintosh computer.

Farley worries that the withdrawal of public funds to colleges is widening the class divide. Public universities have long been the surest route to a degree for those who are not wealthy. But as tuition rises, they are beyond the reach of more people. A recent study by New America, a Washington think tank, found that since the 1990s there has been a sharp decrease in low-income students at the nation’s top public universities and a sharp rise in wealthy students.

Trump hit higher education hard in his first budget proposal, which called for sharp cuts to the federal work-study program, the National Institutes of Health and other programs that fund university research. The House recently approved a tax overhaul that would cut corporate rates while imposing a new tax on the endowments of many of the nation's wealthiest universities and eliminating the deduction for student loan interest.

"Public education at every level is the only tool we've ever invented to effectively allow people to lift themselves from poverty," said Farley, the son of two public school teachers. "In Arizona, one in four children live in poverty right now. If you take away that tool there is no hope for our future—none."

Arizona State University President Michael Crow says universities must change because "the standard model is elitist," and "if we don't learn how to communicate better and work with the community, there are going to be pitchforks and tar-and-feather buckets waiting outside the gates for us."

'What are you doing for me?'

Crow, the president of Arizona State University and one of the nation's leading voices on higher education innovation, agrees that it is critical for universities to change because "the standard model is elitist."

"The system is creating social disruption," he said. "It is creating this dynamic where people are not connected" and parents think, "Oh, my kid can never get into one of those great universities."

Crow is working with 11 other public university presidents to bring more low-income students to campus and increase graduation rates.

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He said there is an indisputable return on investment for a college degree. College graduates earn more, pay more taxes and are less likely to need government assistance, he said.

"A lot is at stake," he said. "Education is the single most important predictor of social mobility for the last hundred years; it drives the economy."

But, he said, "There is fear and angst about the future. People are looking around and saying to universities, 'What are you doing for me? You guys at the universities are building robots that are going to replace my job.' "

Jobs that require only a high school diploma are disappearing fast, he said: "The old way where a guy like my dad or my grandparents — really smart people, but not educated — could do almost anything is just not going to work anymore."

When Crow arrived on campus in 2002, the state provided about half of ASU's budget. That has since been slashed to 10 percent, he said. So Crow spends much of his time courting private donors and looking for ways to lower costs and connect his school to the changing workplace.

"If we don't learn how to communicate better and work with the community," Crow said, "there are going to be pitchforks and tar-and-feather buckets waiting outside the gates for us."

ASU President Michael Crow said Arizona's share of the ASU's budget was about 50 percent when he arrived in 2002, and that's been slashed to 10 percent now.

'Crybabies and spoiled brats'

Two years ago, Antenori moved out of Tucson to rural Cochise because he "couldn't take the hippies anymore. They were raising my taxes for every stupid little thing, like bike paths and puppy palaces."

He lived in a tightly packed subdivision, with a homeowner's association that gave him grief because his pick-up truck was slightly too big for the driveway.

So now he and his family live in a low-tax patch of desert in the shadow of the Dragoon Mountains, in a county that voted for Trump. He can bow-hunt for deer on his own land, keeping one eye out for mountain lions.

"The only noise I hear is the damn coyotes howling at night," he said, looking out over the mesquite trees under perfect blue skies. "My blood pressure has dropped 20 points since I moved here."

He and his buddies often gather at Silver Saddle Steakhouse, a Tucson lunch spot frequented by sheriff's deputies ordering $12 mesquite-grilled steaks. Antenori said "95 percent of the people I hang with" share his views.

A year after Trump's election, Antenori gives the president "a B, maybe a B-plus." He has been disappointed with Trump's failure to repeal Obamacare but thrilled with his conservative judicial appointments.

And he loves that Trump's White House is less "snobbish" and more welcoming to people like him. Antenori is tired, he said, of being condescended to for thinking universities should be more practical, not havens for "damn crybabies and spoiled brats."

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