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Bill Maher and Higher Education

Bill Maher is a comedian and liberal social commentator known for his late-night TV shows. He discusses hot topics such as religion, politics, race, immigration, cancel culture, cannabis legalization, and higher education.

A week rarely passes in his current HBO show "Real Times with Bill Maher," without criticizing higher education for being often unnecessary, unproductive, and too tied to political correctness. On his October 20 show, he stated, "Do not go to college."

A graduate of Cornell University, he has experienced the politics of colleges. In 2014, he was invited to give a speech at the University of California at Berkeley for the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Free Speech Movement. Some students tried to prevent him from speaking on campus because he had joked about identity issues. Yet, he gave the commencement speech.

Why does he have such a bad opinion of colleges?

The main reason is the lousy image higher education has created for itself. Instead of exhorting its

contributions to society, colleges are viewed as expensive niches of

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Letters from Academia

incidents of political correctness, admissions, and sports scandals, and unexplained indulgences such as tenure. The responsibility for this bad press is shared between faculty (living in a bubble of privileges) and the leadership of institutions that concentrate on unscientific rankings and other gimmicks.

Public opinion polls have shown how the appreciation for the role played by colleges and universities in society keeps diminishing over time. According to a recent Wall Street Journal-NORC poll, most Americans think a college degree is not worth the cost. The reputation of higher education as a tool for improving society has decreased from 53% in 2003 to 42% in 2023.

Another factor influencing this bad rap is the cancel culture. How can there be an upbeat opinion

about institutions that exercise censorship against the American ideal of free speech?

The news and Hollywood propel this lousy image. In a recent book, I analyzed nearly 500 Hollywood-produced movies that dealt one way or another with higher education. I showed that Hollywood had given an inaccurate and distorted image of higher education to the detriment of college education values.

Higher education institutions should become more active in dealing with Hollywood. The National Academy of Sciences, through its Science & Entertainment Exchange program, connects entertainment industry professionals with top scientists and engineers to create a synergy between accurate science and storylines in film and TV programming.

Also, college leaders should educate their boards on the uselessness of college rankings, the financial waste of semi-professional athletic programs, and the need for higher education to elevate its societal position. If not, colleges and

universities will continue to gain enemies, translating into more political interference, less financial support, and the end of academic traditions that have given us significant advances in health, technology, and the spread of the human spirit.

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