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An oracle for higher education?

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Quad 136

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Kansas State University freshman Billy Willson created a kerfuffle last month when he announced that he was dropping out of college. Lots of students make this decision without attracting much attention beyond that of their families, but social media has created a new world, and Willson made his announcement on Facebook, naturally.

The other thing that drew more attention to Willson than would be typical was that he wrote critically of higher education, calling it a “scam,” and posted a picture of himself [flipping off Kansas State](#) . As [Inside Higher Education](#) reported, Willson posted:

“YOU ARE BEING SCAMMED,” Willson wrote on Facebook. (The wording, grammar and capitalization quoted here are verbatim from Willson’s Facebook post.) “You may not see it today or tomorrow, but you will see it some day. Heck you may have already seen it if you’ve been through college. You are being put thousands into debt to learn things you will never even use. Wasting 4 years of your life to be stuck at a paycheck that grows slower than the rate of inflation. Paying \$200 for a \$6 textbook. Being taught by teacher’s who have never done what they’re teaching. Average income has increased 5x over the last 40 years while cost of college has increased 18x. You’re spending thousands of dollars to learn information you won’t ever even use just to get a piece of paper.” He added: “Colleges are REQUIRING people to spend money taking gen. ed.

courses to learn about the quadratic formula (and other shit they will never use) when they could be giving classes on MARRIAGE and HOW TO DO YOUR TAXES.”

Other observers thought it was especially significant that Willson reported having a 4.0 GPA. At the blog *American Thinker*, under a post entitled, “Higher Education at the Precipice,” Bay-area blogger Thomas Lifson wrote:

A straight-A student at Kansas State University has boldly proclaimed that the college emperor has no clothes and bidden a public farewell to what he calls a “scam.” This could be a sign of what lies ahead for the left-wing propagandists who have taken over our colleges and universities. An entirely predictable cataclysm awaits the American higher education sector. Having jacked up their prices at roughly triple the rate of inflation for at least five decades, college education is no longer affordable without crippling debt for all but the richest families. The sole justification for spending a quarter of a million dollars on a child’s education at a full-price private school is that a prestige degree is the gateway to upper-middle-class work status.

Lifson concludes by writing, “The marks are wising up.”

What is most interesting in this episode is not the opinions offered by Willson, though his facts about the economic returns from college are **simply wrong**, and he has only the shallowest understanding of the benefits of a liberal arts education. But Willson is certainly entitled to his opinions and can make his own decisions about the relative benefits of starting a t-shirt business, as he intends to do, versus pursuing a bachelor’s degree.

What is striking is that some observers think Willson has made a thoughtful or even bold statement about the benefits and costs of higher education. Lifson, who lives in near Silicon Valley, seems to think that some classes on coding are all techies really need:

Willson's own first plan, a t-shirt business, will be only a stepping stone. But if this angry young man focuses and starts to acquire online education on demand, as is now possible, he can learn every skill he will need. I live in the San Francisco Bay Area and am exposed to numbers of Millennials working in the tech sector. Some have computer science degrees; others do not. All are pulling in enviable wages, and all of them are constantly acquiring new skills online. That is the nature of life today for techies. For this life, an online degree in computer science would be helpful, but a young person like Willson can simply pick up a skill set and get hired without ever paying outrageous tuition.

It is not clear what Lifson suggests for those who do not want to be techies or whether he'd recommend Willson's path to his own kids.

The reporting from *Inside Higher Education* is even more perplexing. Surely there are more important issues facing higher education.

As for Billy Willson, it is possible that he will turn out to be the next Bill Gates, Steve Jobs or Mark Zuckerberg, but the chances are much higher that he will be seeking some post-secondary education in the next few years as he discovers, either, that a little economics, accounting, marketing and design are useful for his business, or that a t-shirt business does not give him the career opportunities over a lifetime that a college degree does.

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