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## Caps and Gowns: A Growth Industry?

This is the season for caps and gowns. Today Columbia University holds its commencement, and tomorrow New York University will award 7,000 degrees. Unlike the Christmas season, which blends religion with retailing, or Memorial Day weekend, when we honor the war dead by opening the beaches, the graduation ceremony remains untouched by government, commercialism or fake sentiment. It is a pure celebration of individual achievement. In the coming weeks, New York City's 85 colleges and universities will come alive as parents and children honor the results of their work and sacrifice.

Higher education is not considered one of New York's distinctive industries. However, our colleges and universities, unlike so many banks and brokerage firms, have not fled the city for the suburbs or Sunbelt. Learning, even in the computer age, still relies on interaction between teacher and student, no matter how boring the professor or how dull the student. Like churches and synagogues, colleges are tied to specific locations, but unlike religious institutions with their diminishing congregations, college attendance is thriving. From 1990 to 1993, the number of students enrolled in the city's colleges and universities grew by 7.5 percent, to approximately 400,000.

New York is not considered a college town, however, because no college or university dominates nor is there one neighborhood where all the students hang out. Campuses are spread across the five boroughs, hidden by expressways, office buildings and even trees. Some, such as Lehman College, an oasis in the northwest Bronx, anchor residential communities. Others, such as LaGuardia Community College, are situated in the middle of factories and warehouses.

Colleges and universities are not unique to New York, but what makes this city special is their sheer variety, from two-year community colleges to preeminent research centers, such as Rockefeller University, which has maintained its luster while the better-known Rockefeller Center has just entered bankruptcy. There's even an abundance of theological seminaries, proving that even the faithful can flourish in a city so tolerant of sin.

A century ago, most colleges were located in small towns, far from the distractions of cities. Knowledge was fixed, to be found in the great books, and the academy was walled off from society, like the monasteries of the Middle Ages. Today, students flock to New York, where they can be exposed to the real world as they earn a degree.

Since higher education is such a fragmented business in New York, carved up between the public and private sectors (and among two- and four-year institutions and professional schools),

its economic contribution is not greatly valued. But as the source of energy and talent for the financial, cultural and health-care industries, higher education is as important to the city as agriculture is to North Dakota. And without local colleges, how would the urban poor move out of poverty? Just look at Hostos Community College, where 64 percent of the students are single parents and more than 90 percent have incomes below the poverty line.

Students, however, don't vote unlike the elderly, who have plenty of time and money to fight for the tax-free portion of their Social Security. Therefore, politicians protect Social Security as they cut fellowship and student loan programs. In fact, House Republicans in an effort to balance the budget on the backs of the young want to shift student aid from grants to loans, and would start charging interest from the first day of class.

Perhaps, in the next week or two, a commencement speaker will have the guts to tell elected officials that survival in the global economy depends on knowledge and innovation and that without the creativity that emerges from colleges and universities. there would be no New York.

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