

# The Human Cost

*The cost of educational failure is huge, in both economic and human terms.*

By Thomas F. Bertonneau

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When 20 Central Michigan University students from an upper-division humanities course were asked to report on a debate on the subject of declining standards at Michigan public universities, the students in question could make little out of what they had witnessed.

Asked to reprise the main points of contention and sketch the arguments on both sides, they unanimously failed to do so, falling back on random personal observations of the physical setting and tangential expressions of their own confusion.

In my capacity as a teacher of Michigan college students, I have come to suspect that between a third and a half of entering freshmen have considerable difficulty in comprehending an article from a news magazine such as *Time* or *Newsweek*.

The students lack knowledge of grammar, exhibit poor vocabulary, and have done little reading beyond assignments in the unchallenging textbooks that constitute the printed basis of their high school curriculum.

They find it extremely difficult to disengage from the deeply-lodged habit of relying on personal narrative and subjective opinion in their confrontation with facts and the world. They react emotionally to problems that can only be solved intellectually. They struggle to find the right words to articulate intuitions that remain nebulous and unstated.

It therefore should come as no surprise that I endorse the findings of Jay Greene's report on the cost of remedial education to the Michigan economy. Dr. Greene paints a stark picture of the problem. Using cautious numbers, he carefully concludes that educational failure — which is what the large and growing need for remedial education signifies — is costing

Michigan's economy at least \$311 million and perhaps (still conservatively) as much as \$1.15 billion yearly.

Because the actual extent of educational failure is difficult to determine and because the job of remedially educating students is likely spread throughout the economy in ways not amenable to analysis, Greene reminds us that the full cost of doing again properly what the schools have done badly is almost certainly in excess of his higher figure.

To put the numbers in perspective, \$300 million is more by a third than the cost of a space-shuttle mission. This is a big-ticket item. Let me underscore, as well, that the costs adduced by Greene are *yearly* costs.

The failure of our schools, however, is not only a dollars-and-cents problem. The failure signified by the need for remedial education in basic verbal and quantitative subjects is also a human tragedy, hard to measure under the dollar sign, but equally worthy of consideration.

It bears considerable repetition that the students who need remedial education need it in the areas of reading and writing and math. Their capacity for *precision*, for *precise thinking*, is insufficiently developed.

Education is supposed to have prepared the student not merely to enter the market with basic competency in verbal and numerical skills, but also for the lifelong endeavours of continuing his own education, of understanding the many and often bewildering manifestations of culture, both high and low, and of examining himself in objective terms.

Education is also supposed to give the student a basic package of *knowledge*, related to the traditions on which modern civilization rests, that provides him with a context for understanding life, politics, and society. One of the meanings of the word education

is the ability to think carefully about things in an objective way and according to abstract principles.

That students have trouble reading and writing means that they must continue to rely, as do very young children, on a sense of the world structured by oral rather than written language.

The primary deficiency experienced by the "more than half" of Michigan community college students who, according to Greene's findings, require remedial training, is a continuing dependence (by default, because they cannot do otherwise) on oral, which is to say on *non-literate*, linguistic resources.

We should not forget to imagine what life is like for someone who has been badly served by our education system. He or she must live with himself or herself, even when the system has bestowed a diploma.

A vast range of cognitive and expressive activities taken for granted by genuinely-educated people remains inaccessible to those whom education has failed. The failure in their education has *impoverished* them intellectually. The vast range of human achievement, the entire worlds of art and literature and philosophy, remains implacably closed to them.

To miss out on the basics of education is to suffer being cut off from the nourishment of written traditions. It is to be without history, without cultural context. Educational failure means that untold thousands have been cheated, and not merely out of their billfolds. It is one of the scandals of our time.

*(Adapted with permission from "Educational Failure and the Need for Remediation: The Human Cost" in "The Cost of Remedial Education: How Much Michigan Pays When Students Fail to Learn Basic Skills," Mackinac Center for Public Policy, [www.mackinac.org](http://www.mackinac.org), 517-631-0900)*