



Eduardo Padrón

UPFRONT

IT IS QUITE POSSIBLE THAT ON NOVEMBER 4 WE WILL elect an African American, the son of an impoverished single mother once on food stamps, as the next president of the United States.

This particular single mother made a few waves herself, earning a Ph.D. in Anthropology, providing a “yes you can” example for her young son. And by now, most of us are well aware that Ann Soetoro’s son went on to graduate from Harvard Law School and stands at the edge of history today.

Barack Obama’s story, and Hillary Clinton’s campaign, are headlines in a season of change and upheaval for people across the country. Their achievements point to what is possible, to a dramatic breakthrough in the depth and scope of this iconic notion we call the American Dream. This is, above all, a time of transformation, not just in the U.S.

soaring and hopeful advances and unnerving contradictions in the same moment.

I see the possibility in the students of our country every day, yet I worry. I worry about how many minorities—Blacks, Hispanic and women among them—will have a genuine chance to follow in Barack’s and Hillary’s footsteps. How many poor residents of the richest nation on earth will fall prey to one too many obstacles on the road to this shiny new world?

Income inequality in the United States is more pronounced today than at any time since the 1920s. The top 1 percent of households took home 21.8 percent of all pre-tax income in 2005, more than double what that figure was in the 1970s. Further, in 2005, all the income gains went to the top 10 percent of households, while the bottom 90 percent experienced income declines.

Call it a coincidence, but this nation’s educational progress began to unravel around 1970 as well. Until that time,

the U.S. held what appeared an insurmountable edge in educational attainment. In 1950, 70 percent of teenagers were in school in the U.S. while no country in Europe enrolled more than 30 percent. But between 1975 and 1990, public education stagnated. Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz, in their book, *The Race Between Education and Technology*, note that our lead over other advanced nations has been entirely forfeited.

James Heckman’s research at the University of Chicago supports their findings, registering the peak of high school graduation in the late 1960s at about 80 percent. We’re running in reverse and fast; today, fewer than 70 percent graduate nationwide, with barely 50 percent earning a high school diploma in the nation’s 50 largest cities.

And here’s another frightening fact: The cost of attending college has risen 439 percent between 1985 and 2005, according to *Money* magazine.

You certainly don’t need to be an economist to string these numbers together and draw a reasonable conclusion. It adds up to this: As a nation, we are engaged in a profound misunderstanding of our national

priorities. How on earth will we compete in a global economy—and it is one whether you like it or not—when our people cannot keep pace with the educational achievement of 40 years ago?

Welcome to the 21st century, an age like no other. The body of knowledge is exploding but that’s only the first fruit of the revolution. We have gone through the looking glass now, and the world is bending and shaping in ways we could never have imagined.

This is no time to be wandering about without survival skills. Yet we are committing the most fundamental mistake imaginable: devaluing learning. A bachelor’s degree will yield an additional \$1.2 million in lifetime earnings beyond a high school diploma, but money is only one facet of survival. To prosper through the looking glass our young students will need a unique set of skills that allows them to adapt and contribute in a constantly shifting marketplace. In this time, how on earth can we afford to undervalue education? **H**

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but across the entire world. And in every such era, when the assumptions that guide our thinking and behavior are shifting, progress tends to be anything but tidy; quite the contrary, we will be witness to