

# THE CHRONICLE

of Higher Education

## The New York Times Blunder

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The New York Times made a huge statistical error in their overwrought article about higher education borrowing on Sunday. They reported that 94 percent of bachelor's graduates leave college with educational debt. The correct number is around two-thirds. Few people will see the correction tucked into Wednesday's Times – certainly not nearly the number who saw the lead sentence on the web version “Nearly everyone pursuing a bachelor's degree is borrowing money ...”.

Everybody makes mistakes, but this one is revealing in several ways. First, the “New York Times analysis” cited as the source was incompetently done. They actually calculated the following figure: among students who borrowed while in college, what percentage still owed money when they graduated? Not surprisingly, very few college students pay off their student debt while in college. Sarah Turner, a professor at the University of Virginia, seems to have been the first analyst to figure out how the Times managed to mess up. Obviously, the Times could use somebody who knows something about statistics checking these kinds of things.

Second, anybody with serious familiarity with higher education finance would immediately know that that 94 percent number was just way off – as indeed would anybody who just stopped and thought for a minute about the demographics of students who graduate from college.

Third, since any expert on higher education finance would know that number was way off, this mistake underscores the fact that the Times didn't see any need to cross-check this story with experts in higher education finance – an oversight that we suspect would be less likely to occur regarding a story in the business section or for that matter the sports section.

This is not just a minor factual error. The erroneous idea that nearly all students borrow for college is already being widely repeated. The context in which the statement was made may perhaps shed light on why the number was so appealing to the authors and editors. The story focused on a student who has more debt than almost every other college graduate and who chose to enroll at an institution, Ohio Northern University, where average debt levels exceed those at almost every other college in the country. The story seemed to be striving for maximum drama rather than for an accurate picture of student debt and the very real problems it creates for too many students.

The Times' reputation as the newspaper of record is a precious asset for the company and for the nation, and we hope they will guard it well.