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Changing Attitudes Toward Education?



When you live in the academic world (or some might say bubble), there is a natural tendency to assume the value of higher education. Not only is it our daily mission, but academics also have lived their lives in an era where education has been increasingly important to the nation and world, as well as millions of individual students. There is little consideration given to the idea that this would change in the near future. But of course our future students and their parents do not necessarily live in this world, and they must make the choice to devote the time and treasure it takes to get a bachelor's degree or more.

There is some recent evidence that the confident assumption the academy makes about its value might be inaccurate. The *Washington Post* reported that a recent [PDK/Gallup](#) poll found that, “Most Americans no longer think a college education is ‘very important’ ... Amid a national debate about the worth of a college education, a respected annual poll about the education views held by Americans has found that only 44 percent of Americans now believe that getting a college education is ‘very important’ — down from 75 percent four years ago.” (The complete poll is [here](#).)

Of course this is a single poll for a single year, but the fact that a minority of those surveyed do not find a college degree to be very important and that attitudes seem to have shifted abruptly in a four year window is worrying.

What might account for this result? I would suggest two possibilities, not mutually exclusive:

1. College costs: student loan hype.
2. College benefits: underemployment silliness.

On the cost side of the ledger, the press has been filled with articles about the student debt crisis and its impact on students' post-college lives. I have written before about the fact that a third of graduates leave college with no debt and that among those that do, the median debt is about \$30,000, [equivalent to the average car loan](#).

But the press cannot resist a good, if anecdotal, [sob story](#), finding examples of graduates who have put off

marriage or [home buying](#) due to student loans. The most recent worry is having student debt follow you into [retirement](#). Some writers have called for [civil disobedience](#) in response to the “crisis.”

Despite careful, sober analysis from places like the [Brookings Institute](#) or [Forbes](#) noting little change in real debt burdens over time, it is not hard to understand why many students and their families might be looking at college and the associated debt differently than in recent years. Suddenly the costs of college seem particularly daunting as these hard luck stories become everyday reading.

There are similar stories on the diminished or non-existent benefits of college. Many recent stories have focused on unemployment – as in [Slate](#) and [National Review](#) – or [underemployment](#). The [Federal Reserve Bank of New York](#) and even our friends in [Britain](#) are noting this phenomenon.

Of course the benefits of a college education happen over a career, not just in the first job, and the Federal Reserve study notes, “...while it appears that the labor market has become more challenging for recent college graduates, it is much worse for young people who do not have a college degree.” But again, for students and families these stories potentially change the college cost/benefit calculation and might account for the changing attitudes toward a higher education.

Such attitudes are likely subject to change, of course, but they are still worrying both at a macro and micro level. We are a nation whose economic success is predicated on our significant investment in human capital, particularly since the Second World War. We are not going to return to a blue collar, manufacturing-based economy. Without continued and even growing investment in higher education our continued prosperity and economic leadership in the world are at risk.

At a micro level, the concern is about who is hurt by these changing attitudes toward education. It is not the children of college educated poll-takers or reporters or college administrators who might be influenced into taking a pass on college. It is most likely first generation students, who are disproportionately students of color, who could well believe that the cost/benefit calculus no longer argues in favor of a college education. This group (and their families) is exactly the demographic that can and does benefit disproportionately from the economic returns to education, boosting first generation graduates from the working class to the middle class and beyond.

If we as a nation care about opportunity and equity for future generations, we should be taking every opportunity to make the case that a college education *is* “very important.”

By [Michael Hemesath](#) | November 3rd, 2014 | Categories: [Economics](#), [Higher Education](#) | [2 Comments](#)

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