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Is education a waste of time and money?

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Quad 136

Is Education a Waste of Time and Money?

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Is Education a Waste of Time and Money?*



Those of us in higher education have become used to criticisms of our work. Recent polls have shown decreasing public confidence in the value of education and even the recent tax reform bill had provisions that were implicitly critical of higher education. But some of the recent criticism comes from a surprising source: inside the **academy itself**.

Bryan Caplan, a George Mason University economist, has written a **book** whose title succinctly describes his criticism: *The Case Against Education: Why the Education System is a Waste of Time and Money*.

This criticism is particularly surprising coming from an economist because one of the most robust research results in economics is the positive impact education has on earnings for individuals and on GDP growth for countries. (See [here](#) and [here](#) and [here](#))

Caplan's basic argument is that a college degree serves primarily as a signal to employers of the types of traits a potential employee will bring, such as "brains, work ethic and conformity," rather than providing any real skills that will be useful on the job. Caplan writes that, "the only marketable skill I teach is 'how to be an economics professor'." In short, **Caplan believes** there is little value added in higher education.

Caplan starts from a pessimistic and ungenerous premise about students. "Most kids are philistines—they are that way deep in their souls." Therefore, he asserts, education is wasted on them.

While not every 18 year old is worldly and cultured when they enter college, surely they should be allowed the scope to grow and develop intellectually, emotionally and spiritually. Education is all about hope and possibilities. The transition from childhood to adulthood is a powerful and important time in the lives of most people, and a four-year college experience is often an important part of that transformation for young people.

This lack of confidence in education also comes from Caplan's view of education as a rote process. He says, "Most of the stuff [students learn], right after the final exam, they'll never need to know again." Needless-to-say, this is not how most faculty approach their subjects or their interactions with students. While students invariably forget specific details from courses, most faculty would argue that education changes the habits of mind and skills of students. Education can improve critical thinking skills and research skills, as well as writing and communication skills – all widely applicable in the job market and providing a payoff over a lifetime.

Caplan focuses almost exclusively on what happens between the professor and student while paying little attention to the significant learning that takes place outside the classroom. Athletes, student journalists, musicians, student senators and volunteers all gain valuable skills through their extracurricular activities. Furthermore, the informal interactions in residential settings also provide students with opportunities to learn from peers who have had other kinds of experiences or upbringings or hold different worldviews. The ability to listen and learn from others clearly benefits both the individual and ultimately society as a whole.



Are we in higher education successful in transforming all students equally? Of course not. Could we improve our teaching and add more value? Certainly. But to suggest that the whole educational enterprise is just a charade, that clever students "go through the motions" and cynical faculty play along simply to signal job readiness to narrowly self-interested

employers is an assessment that is deeply at odds with the experience of most educators and students I know.

I suspect that most students with college-educated parents will pay little attention to criticism

such as Caplan's, having experienced within their families an educational reality that is rather different from what he describes.

I worry most about another group who may hear criticisms such as Caplan's. He sends exactly the wrong message to those students and families who have not had the experience of college in their past. For students who are capable and ambitious, not attending a four-year college prevents them from achieving the well-documented economic benefits that accrue to degree holders over their lifetimes, to say nothing of the many other personal benefits of higher education.

Caplan's general thesis is certainly a view to be considered and some of his criticisms are fair, but I trust an application of sound critical thinking and some informed research will persuade students and their parents that a college degree is still an exceptional investment.

*A version of this post was published in the *St. Cloud Times* on February 25, 2018.

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Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).