

9-26-2016

Disconnect on the value of college?

Michael Hemesath

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, mhemesath@csbsju.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/admin_pubs



Part of the [Economics Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hemesath M. 2016 Sept 26. Disconnect on the value of college? [blog]. Quad 136. [Accessed 2017 June 16]. <http://blogs.csbsju.edu/mhemesath/2016/09/26/disconnect-on-the-value-of-college/>.

This Blog Post is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Administration Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csbsju.edu.

Quad 136

Disconnect on the Value of College?

[◀ Previous](#) [Next ▶](#)

Disconnect on the Value of College?



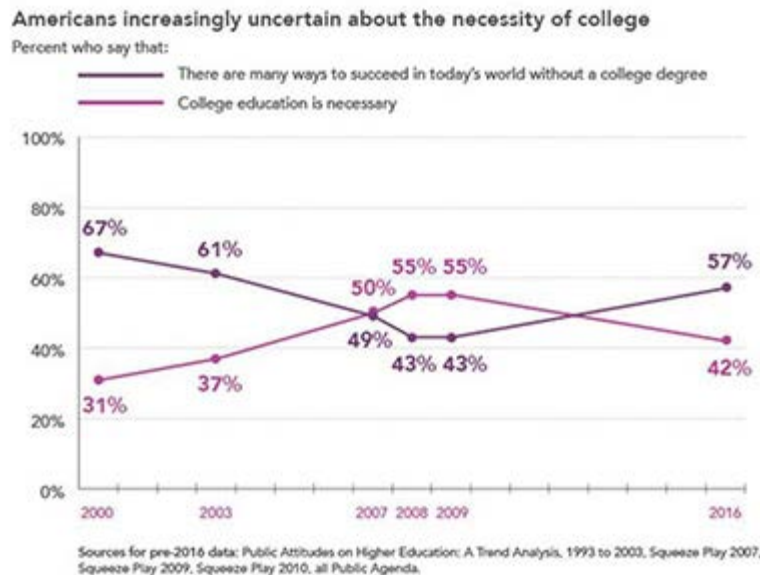
Photo: Steve Voit

For those of us in the academy, the value of higher education is rarely questioned. We are products of this world, and we believe in our educational mission. But every year we must convince students and their tuition paying parents of this proposition which we take for granted. Certainly the significant and consistent **data** about the returns on a college degree help make this case, but high school seniors do not necessarily read research reports as they consider their post-secondary options, so the “conventional wisdom” as conveyed by the media can certainly influence the beliefs and ultimately decisions of young people and their families.

Recent survey research by the non-profit, nonpartisan Public Agenda organization suggests some worrying trends in this “conventional wisdom.” As the researchers report in the summary of their research, “Our new survey suggests public confidence in higher education is waning.” Specifically:

*For many years, when **we asked the public the question**, “Do you think that a college education is necessary for a person to be successful in today’s work world,” an increasing percentage of Americans said yes. That trend has shifted since the Great Recession. Now, just 42 percent of Americans say college is necessary for workforce success, a 13 percent drop from 2009. Fifty-seven percent of Americans say there are many ways to succeed in today’s world without a college degree, a 14 percent increase from 2009.*

The graph below shows the significant drop in beliefs about the necessity of college in the last decade:



When researchers asked about the value of college as a good investment, the respondents were split. Slightly more than half of those surveyed, 52%, viewed college as “still the best investment for people who want to get ahead and succeed,” while 46% of respondents said “a college education is a questionable investment because of high student loans and limited job opportunities.”

These result stand in stark contrast to what alumnae of the College of Saint Benedict and alumni of Saint John’s University say about the value of their college education. Our Institutional Research office surveys CSB and SJU alumni three years after they graduate, after they have had time to get settled personally and professionally, to assess the outcomes of their residential, liberal arts experience. Below are some of the results from the most recent four years of data from the graduating classes of 2010, 2011, 2012 and 2013. The results are the range of outcomes over those four years.

1. The liberal arts education I received at CSB/SJU has contributed significantly to my personal and professional development.
Those responding: Strongly agree or agree
Between 86%-92%
2. Faculty and staff at CSB/SJU recognized and appreciated my talents and helped me to develop them.
Those responding: Strongly agree or agree
Between 86%-90%
3. My current paying job uses skills I developed as a CSB/SJU student.
Those responding: Very much or quite a bit
Between 67%-79%
4. How well did your CSB/SJU experiences prepare you to perform your work ethically and with integrity?
Those responding: Very well or quite a bit
Between 86-92%
5. How well did your CSB/SJU experiences prepare you to thinking critically about complex issues?
Those responding: Very well or quite a bit
Between 86-92%
6. How well did your CSB/SJU experiences prepare you to write clearly and effectively?
Those responding: Very well or quite a bit

Between 80-89%

7. How would you rate the quality of your overall experience at CSB/SJU?

Those responding: Excellent or good

Between 94-98%

The differences between the two groups of respondents is striking. Obviously one group is a random sample of adults whose experiences with college vary widely and likely includes some respondents with no experience with higher education. The CSB and SJU respondents all had a significant and largely successful college experience—they graduated. As Jon McGee, our Vice President of Strategy and Planning, notes, “The survey is our own and is unique to us. Therefore it is not comparable to other institutions. That said, by nearly all of the measures included in the survey, our alumni describe tremendous outcomes. They attribute extraordinary value to their CSB and SJU experience, value that we believe would surely be comparable to the best colleges in the country.”

I take two things away from these incongruous results:

1. I am very proud of the educational experience we provide our students. We promise them a great residential liberal arts experience that will serve them well personally and professionally throughout their lives and, according to them, we deliver.
2. The public perceptions about higher education seem unfairly and even dangerously pessimistic. While I know that not every college can deliver what we are able to do, the evidence on the value of higher education is beyond dispute. Yet the public has apparently come to view higher education as an increasingly optional path into the working world.

It may be optional for that first job after high school, but for the vast majority of individuals who seek a solid middle class life and a meaningful career with opportunities to grow and develop, college is essential. Most concerning to me is that those students whose choices might be swayed by this “conventional wisdom” are those who are most likely to be harmed by limiting their post-high school options. It is not the young man living with his college educated parents in an upper middle class suburb who will decide that “there are many ways to succeed in today’s world without a college degree.” But the young man in an urban center who would be the first in his family to go to college might well internalize this skepticism about higher education, seek other ways to succeed without college and end up limiting his possibilities for a lifetime.

Those of us working in higher education will naturally continue to stress the value of a college education, but to make sure that all young people can make a well-informed decision about what is best for them, all of us need to share our own experiences of benefits of college. Johnnies and Bennies are especially well-positioned to make this case, given the great experiences they report.

Not everyone should necessarily go to college, but every young person should take full advantage of their talents and a great four year college experience is the best path for many seeking to fulfill their potential.

By [Michael Hemesath](#) | September 26th, 2016 | Categories: [Economics](#), [Higher Education](#) | [0 Comments](#)

About the Author: [Michael Hemesath](#)



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](#).