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### College: the Value of Knowledge

College is the pinnacle of higher learning in America, and across the world. Many people each year apply and enroll in college to earn a degree, but few are afforded the unique and personalized college experience that the very wealthy are able to enjoy at private colleges. With increasing class sizes, tuition costs, and a more competitive job market after college some have begun to wonder what the point of a college education is. The purpose of a college education is the betterment of self, to be dedicated to learning and to aspire to higher levels of intellect and understanding.

A college education is now seen as the standard requirement for most fields in the workforce, and it can improve your quality of life through increased monetary value or understanding of the world. A college degree was not always necessary for entry into high-paying skilled jobs, but “a college degree long ago supplanted the high school diploma as the minimum qualification for entry into the skilled labor market,” and without it your options to support yourself are much more restricted and more difficult to attain”(Delbanco). With a college degree being sought after for the “minimum” in today’s society we must consider that there is inherent value in attaining one; you are predisposed to make more money and enjoy more luxuries during your life compared to most without one. This allows the degree holder to enjoy greater rewards for their work and have more time devoted to other pursuits. In one excerpt,

Delbanco's teacher describes how attending "college had opened his senses as well as his mind to experiences that would otherwise be foreclosed to him"(Delbanco). Delbanco's teacher talking about having the time to think and learning to enjoy yourself being the true purpose of attending college, you are exposed to so many different ideas and surrounded by so many different people that you have the opportunity to understand and embrace different values. Having this time in isolation from "the real world" can help you gain a sense of understanding about the human condition. Since an education is so fundamental to success in the modern era it is necessary to consider its ability to promote intellectual equality among all people.

Gaining higher education helps to level the playing field and reduce inequality across the world. In an interview with Jon Stewart on the Daily Show in 2013, Malala Yousafzai spoke about how "[she] realized that education is very important and education is the power for women and that's why the terrorists are afraid of education"(Malala). Malala points out that much of the inequality that women face in comparison to men can be rectified with education; knowledge gives them the power of independence and the freedom to think and express their beliefs and views. In this way, education has the ability to close the gap of disparity between genders, and establish a more equal social ground for all people. From her life in a war torn country, Malala offers that "the best way to fight against this war is education, because as we can see, the children are suffering from terrorism, they are suffering from child labor and child trafficking" (Malala). Stating that education is the answer to ending war is essentially also about power. Giving an education to the people allows them to create a better existence for themselves through changing the world around them with ideas; bringing an end to war with compromise and cooperation rather than militancy and stubborn ideology. Education, in this sense, has the ability

to eliminate our tendency towards war and end the power struggle between different groups of people, and unite the world. This can only be done if everyone is able to embrace the ideas of tolerance and acceptance through the determination of their mind and the ability to think rationally and independently.

Betterment of self through college education comes about through the act of thought, and one's understanding of the mind. David Foster Wallace spoke to the graduating class of Kenyon college in a commencement speech that is now known as "this is water." During the speech he analyzes the adage that a liberal arts education "teaches you how to think;" and clarifies this by adding "learning how to think really means learning how to exercise some control over how and what you think"(Wallace). This is both about being a member of society and an individual; learning how to control what you think about allows you to understand your emotions and thoughts and effectively communicate them with other people, and it betters you through understanding. Understanding others is a value so rarely possessed that gaining it through active thought is a true virtue. For the students that may, now on the cusp of entering the "adult world" and the workforce, be wondering what the point of all the schooling that they did and went through, Wallace poses that "what..education is supposed to be about: how to keep from going through your comfortable prosperous, respectable adult life dead" (Wallace). Not a literal death of course; but one in which the "dead" do not contain the capacity to understand or approach the human world as a member. The "dead" in this sense are devoid of human capacity, and thus run on their "default setting"(Wallace). This is about understanding the world to which everyone belongs; a college education will produce people that are emphatically aware of their lives and

are able to truly experience it instead of “float along.” Not only this, but college possesses a unique ability to guide eager minds toward knowledge.

College, in its intense academic isolation from the real world, has the ability to shape the minds of the students that attend. When speaking about Yale and the experience that college affords students, Richard Brodhead establishes that “[Yale] exists to offer a highly unusual experience of freedom”(Broadhead). Stating this demonstrates that this is the first outing that many people have “into the world” per say. Students have the chance to freely express themselves and pursue their interests without restriction, and this opportunity for a free mind cannot be experienced in many other places. Possibly for the first time, students have nothing placed in the way of their intellectual growth besides the limits they set for themselves. Many students spend their junior and senior years of high school preparing for college life and going through the rigorous application processes and have little time in this interim to think; Brodhead illustrates this by saying “[he has] known students upon arrival to make the amazing discovery that, in their preoccupation with getting into college, they had given virtually no thought to what one went to college for”(Brodhead). While it may seem counterintuitive, this is actually essential for every human, and at some point, everybody must go through the radical shift of self-definition. College allows people to define, or redefine, who they are: they are exposed to a myriad of different outlets for activity, study, and enjoyment. This allows them to take control of their lives and become the person they want to, they have the uninhibited chance to truly be “themselves”. It is also worth noting that studying at a high-level university and college opens the door for opportunity in terms of a rich, connected network of people and the ability to move into more prestigious areas of study and work with a college education.

Prestigious positions in life and social status can be gained almost exclusively through the attainment of a college degree. When looking at the occupied prestigious job positions it is quite easy to see that many people have earned their college degrees, with a high percentage going on to additional schooling and a devotion of their lives to their craft. These positions are inaccessible without the proper schooling, and “an advanced degree is usually perceived as a prerequisite to many desirable and prestigious professions with great economic rewards and high social status”(Zhang). This first point illustrates the value in pursuing higher education; without it many positions and professions in life are barred off to people. Attaining these degrees and positions makes you a member of a higher social group and you can gain more money as a result. This gives the people that choose to continue their schooling the opportunity for social mobility and prestige. Having a high-level education and going to a prestigious university are major factors in the average jobs earned after college, as Liang Zhang noted in a study that “students from high-quality institutions have more flexibility in determining the balance between their work and leisure time than would their counterparts from other schools”(Zhang). The second point is that having this degree and position allows you to have more freedom in your life after college; should you want to work less so as to spend more time with your family or doing recreational activities, the option is there because you have secured a higher wage level per hour than average. This system is certainly beneficial to those who are able to go to the most prestigious universities because of their wealth or performance in school, but many still find that the system is lacking efficiency and is incapable of delivering the same experience and purpose to everyone.

The college education system as it exists today is still in many cases seen as overbearing and inefficient, and tends to err on the side of a cookie-cutter model than true academic exploration. In the article titled *A College Education? Or Diminished Expectations?* Lenore Beaky investigates the CUNY community college system, and one point that surfaced was that “students will be graded not just by their teachers but by teams that will include faculty members who did not actually teach the students being evaluated”(Beaky). This is demonstrative of the lack of efficiency that can occur when trying to cut corners in this education; instead of providing for a more effective assessment of students, this creates an atmosphere of autonomy between student and grader, as well as shifting the focus from personal achievement to performance. In this sense, one could argue that the purpose of a college education is lost to a cold, mechanical system. The shift of concern for the public has been that their money is being used to subsidize classes and majors that aren’t valuable to the economy of the United States, and this has resulted in “one of the key features of the new CUNY community college is the limited number of majors that will be offered to students”(Beaky). Having a “limited major” system is designed to save public money on education, as some things are valued higher than others. This too is a dark trend for education in America; students are told that some of their fields of interest aren’t worth study, and hence fosters a system that only aims to push people into the workforce.

Though the new trend towards limitation and efficiency may seem to be the best way forward on many grounds, it is actually harmful to the students and should be carefully considered at all times. This has the effect of reducing students to statistics, which is far from the point of going to college. In the long run, it's evident that this system will not work and will be replaced, and that

care for individuals and students is really the aim of colleges; only this fulfills the purpose of education.

Even things that seem unrelated to your area of expertise have some inherent value in their study. Many students find that college can sometimes get caught up in the fray of general education skills rather than focus on what is important for the individual student's career and path ahead. At the center of much of this focus is mathematics: but "mathematics began as a way to describe and learn about the world. These low-stress, atypical, engaging tasks encourage students to use the world to describe and learn about mathematics"(Toher). Though mathematics is only a single example, it can be easily applied to any subject a student feels disconnected from or "doesn't apply to them." Mathematics will not be everybody's area of interest for study, but having the ability and experience with different kinds of math problems acts as a exercise for your brain, and promotes new kinds of thought about things you will have observed before. College in this sense exposes you to many different fields, and broadens your intellectual horizon as a result.

Education teaches skills that help you communicate with other people and brings about minds working at extremely high levels within the same subject. It is important to remember the value in application of the ideas that are learned at college. For example; "healthy knowledge-work relationships.. Depend upon a willingness to strike a productive balance [between] individual autonomy and group obligation to generate greater value than one could attain working apart"(Bowman). College-level academic groups and, later on, work groups have the ability to produce a sum greater than the value of its parts. Having an intense, devoted group of individuals working towards the same goal in an academic sense has the potential to far

surpass what an individual can do alone; college opens the door to meet these people and find your own group. In this same sense, humans are inherently social creatures, and “only in relationship can individuals be fully themselves. The instinct of community is everywhere in life”(Bowman). In recognizing the value of knowledge it is necessary to share it; without this crucial step there will be little potential for fulfillment on an individual basis. Humans are social creatures, and finding validation in other people is a powerful thing that a college education can offer to people should they be willing to meet others.

Though the purpose of a college education may seem, at times, clouded by the bureaucratic red tape, stigma, and social expectations that surround it, obtaining one truly is a transformative process and ultimately beneficial for the person. The betterment of self, a dedication to knowledge, and to aspire to higher levels of intellect and understanding are all paramount to the purpose of the college degree, and for each person brings about different opportunity and clarity. Though the flaws are undeniable and in desperate need of being addressed on a massive scale, the value of attaining a college degree still far outweighs the decision not to.



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