**Readers' Comments** “Even for Cashiers, College Pays Off”

[79](http://community.nytimes.com/comments/www.nytimes.com/2011/06/26/sunday-review/26leonhardt.html?permid=79" \l "comment79). [Seeing with open eyes](http://timespeople.nytimes.com/view/user/40343536/activities.html) usa June 26th, 2011 9:43 am

The plumbers in my town get $100/hour and are booked 3 months ahead except for real emergencies such as your toilet is overflowing.

Not one has a college degree but most all speak well, can talk about books and politics from knowledge.

Then there was my father. He started work on farms at age 8 to help his widowed mother support the family, left school during 8th grade (age 13) because he got a fulltime job loading coal for delivery.

He spent 4 years in the navy on s-boat submarines, then spent his life working in factories.
He read at least 2 hours EVERY DAY, studying topics further at the area libraries if it interesed him (usually math or science). He taught me to read when I was 3, perfom all basic arithmatic by the time I was 4. When he retired from his factory job, his company called him back as an engineering consultant because the PHD engineers on staff could not understand how he had modified his machine to be 3 times more efficient while producing 1/4 the scrap as all others.
College is NOT the panacea we have been brainwashed to believe. What will help our nation is to respect all work and all workers and encourage, admire and reward self education.

[53](http://community.nytimes.com/comments/www.nytimes.com/2011/06/26/sunday-review/26leonhardt.html?permid=53#comment53). Scott Seattle June 26th, 2011 6:41 am

America's decision to provide a high school education to everyone was indeed a great investment in our future. It was also funded by tax dollars.

As business has abandoned its obligation to provide training for those that it derives its profits from and expects that candidates will come to them fully prepared to start performing on a high level from their first day on the job they have come to value them less and less and view employees as merely a commodity that is easily replaced.

A college education is a wonderful thing and more Americans earning degrees would vastly improve us as a society. The problem with the premise is that the well off, well prepared students will, more often than not, succeed in completing their studies while the poor kids will rack up loans while working at low wage jobs just to pay for their room and board and are much less likely to complete their education.

If the new expectation is that all citizens have to have a college degree to compete for jobs in America, businesses had better start providing for free universal college educations to all through increased taxes.

You simply can't have it both ways.

[60](http://community.nytimes.com/comments/www.nytimes.com/2011/06/26/sunday-review/26leonhardt.html?permid=60#comment60). Oleditor Magnolia, Texas June 26th, 2011 8:37 am

Despite the fact that my college teaching career was spent in an applied, professional field, I think the real value of the college education lies in the broad education acquired and the enhanced ability to think, solve problems, and appreciate a wider perspective on many subjects. I taught generally in mid-range universities where a high proportion of the students were first generation in college. I saw hundreds of students grow up intellectually in their four years there, in a manner that would have been unlikely had they stopped at high school and remained in their communities. I saw students who broke the cycle of poverty by going to college, sometimes by going to grad school as well. I saw working class families celebrate joyously the success of their children in earning a bachelor's degree. No, not everyone should attend college, but I would maintain that it benefits even many who do not finish, or who may not finish until later in life. That being the case, we should make every effort to a) make it affordable and b) assure that attainment standards are maintained, so that the college experience is not undercut by mediocrity.

[38](http://community.nytimes.com/comments/www.nytimes.com/2011/06/26/sunday-review/26leonhardt.html?permid=38" \l "comment38). Real Texan Dallas, TX June 26th, 2011 6:41 am

When did the value of education come down to a question of financial gain? I am in my 50's, have practiced law for 30 years, and realized long ago that my undergraduate liberal arts education was worth far more than an admission ticket to law school (vocational training). Education makes the life you live infinitely richer.
I just can't believe that Americans no longer understand that there is value that is unrelated to money and that education has an intrinsic value that is to be cherished. (And no, I'm not some fat-cat lawyer - I've worked in public service my entire career and made less than some plumbers I know. I paid off student loans until I was 35, and I'd do the same thing all over again).

[2](http://community.nytimes.com/comments/www.nytimes.com/2011/06/26/sunday-review/26leonhardt.html?permid=2" \l "comment2). Reader In Wash, DC Washington, DC June 25th, 2011 8:37 pm

"It’s clear who made the right decision. The educated American masses helped create the American century, as the economists Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz have written. The new ranks of high school graduates made factories more efficient and new industries possible." One of the biggest stretches and hype I have ever read. It was the free market and profit motive that propelled the US economy to first place. That said college is fine for delaying people's entrance into the employment market (keeping unemployment low) and helping people become more rounded individuals. BUT get the government out of the student loan business. Just as Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac created the housing bubble, government guaranteed student loans are what's driving the insane tuition hikes. If the students could not borrow the money the schools would not be able to charge what they do and tuition costs would fall to what students and their parents could pay in cash rather than what they could BORROW. Recommended by 63 Readers

[34](http://community.nytimes.com/comments/www.nytimes.com/2011/06/26/sunday-review/26leonhardt.html?permid=34" \l "comment34). Concerned Citizen New York, NY June 26th, 2011 6:41 am

I look at the comments above mine and see such animosity towards the simple idea that college is not only good for the individual but good for the country. I see statements like the following:

"The college selection process and competition both pre-select people that are either more skilled OR more motivated." - Please note that many community colleges and state colleges will accept anyone who applies that meet certain minimum standards, like graduating high school.

"One of the biggest stretches and hype I have ever read. It was the free market and profit motive that propelled the US economy to first place." - No, it was very creative people with a solid education behind them UTILIZING a free market that propelled the U.S. economy to first place. A free market doesn't help much if your population consists of uneducated barbarians.

"A college degree is a positional good. It's worth depends on its scarcity. " - I have to ask, should we believe an elementary education is worthless because everyone in this country is entitled to one for free?

I see these comments and I wonder if most of the people responding negatively to this article ever went to college. Due to my life circumstances I have been to both an Ivy League school and a local city run college. The students are different, the professors and their expectations are not as consistently good at your local colleges, but the curriculum for a variety of classes are surprisingly similar and in both situations students are exposed to information and ideas that are not common to daily life.

No, college may not teach the plumber how to build a better wrench. But it may teach him how to more efficiently run his business, how to find reliable sources of information for running not only his business, but his life, or he may learn that plumbing is not for him, he'd prefer to be engineer.

[136](http://community.nytimes.com/comments/www.nytimes.com/2011/06/26/sunday-review/26leonhardt.html?permid=136#comment136). Jaime United States June 26th, 2011 1:26 pm

I agree. I didn't get a degree and now at 28 years I've returned to community college, I'm getting my associates in general studies and then I'm transferring to a state to get my accounting degree. I think a college education is worth it if you study something that the market values.

I also think it's also elitist and hypocritical when people say that not everyone goes to college or even needs it. If you look at the upper middle class and the wealthy, they all send their kids to college.

Maybe not everyone wants to go to college some people have skipped college but the majority of people need college or technical training at community college. I know that I don't want to work forever for minimum wage forever. I regret not getting a college degree immediately.

I now wish I would have sucked it up when I was 18 and gotten it over with. An education and a degree will benefit you in the long run. Even if you change fields years later, you will still have your education.

My mom was an English professor who changed paths and opened her own small business. Thankfully I can turn it all around, I'm single with no debt and no kids and I have a lot of time between work to go to college, but still I should have gotten my degree when I was younger.

I wouldn't had to struggle so much like I'm right now. Go to college. Few people end up like Bill Gates, anyone who is 18 years old, please don't skip college. I wish everyone the

[27](http://community.nytimes.com/comments/www.nytimes.com/2011/06/26/sunday-review/26leonhardt.html?permid=27" \l "comment27). [Linda](http://timespeople.nytimes.com/view/user/17808045/activities.html) Oregon June 25th, 2011 11:01 pm

I applaud this counter to the "don't bother" crowd. As a recently retired high school principal in a high poverty school, our students desperately needed a push for post-secondary education.

I would lump trade programs at our community colleges, pre-professional programs and liberal arts programs together in my definition of "college". Few of our students' parents had college experience. One of our primary missions was to get kids on college campuses, talk often about college (including its social benefits--after all, they are teens) and encourage all students to take rigorous high school (in our case, AP) courses to prepare.

Maybe middle class and upper middle class kids with tons of advantages going into the gate can jump-start their careers without college. But that doesn't happen in our community. Thank you for challenging the dangerous word now on the street that college is a waste of time. Sadly it will, as you suggest, hit the poor hardest.

[18](http://community.nytimes.com/comments/www.nytimes.com/2011/06/26/sunday-review/26leonhardt.html?permid=18" \l "comment18). [Rima Regas](http://timespeople.nytimes.com/view/user/52131820/activities.html) Mission Viejo, CA June 25th, 2011 9:57 pm

I think what we need to think about is revamping high school, with the knowledge in mind that much of the first two years of college at a four-year, or the two years kids spend in community college, are a rehash of what should have been learned in high school. I also think that high school curricula should include far more social studies than offered, with world history, religions, philosophy, and anthropology being necessary additions. Many, I'd like to say most, high school graduates don't really know how to write a basic, college-grade, research paper. If that is not a skill that should be mastered by the end of high school, then I don't know what is. I won't even bother talking about science and math, where we score very low when compared to other nations.

That's for what we should have in place and don't right now, in all states.

Now, where we could innovate is by offering the opportunity to learn vocational skills, maybe even with an Associate's Degree equivalency, to those who know they don't want to go on to college, complete with apprenticeships at sponsoring corporations. Vocational schools have existed for a very long time in Europe, and in countries like France and Germany, are the gateway to very good careers for those who are not college-bound. Those need not be only in areas such as auto-mechanics, but skills that are required in industry, without the engineering degree.

Most of all, we need a Federally-mandated national curriculum that ensures that a child in Louisiana acquires pretty much the same font of knowledge as a child in California or New York, with the same standard of excellence being required of each state.

[33](http://community.nytimes.com/comments/www.nytimes.com/2011/06/26/sunday-review/26leonhardt.html?permid=33" \l "comment33). zefelius seattle June 26th, 2011 6:41 am

"None of this means colleges are perfect. Many have abysmal graduation rates. Yet the answer is to improve colleges, not abandon them."

I'm afraid I don't see any concrete evidence that colleges will be improving anytime soon. I teach at a top 10 masters university after procuring a Ph.D. from a top 20 national research university, but do so as a full-time lecturer. I am one of the lucky ones as half of all faculty today are part-time. 75% of all faculty are NTT (Non-Tenure Track). This is a complete reversal compared to half a century ago. And most U.S. universities are pursuing this trend as opposed to rectifying it.

I'm not complaining at all about my own position, but I do worry for the students. I've seen colleagues fired because they were "hard" graders and thus received poor student evaluations. Most faculty I know have learned the lesson quickly and inflate grades. This is no secret within the halls of academe, but parents and students are not aware of the problem. Obviously if grades are inflated, the students suffer. Moreover, when faculty teach part-time for very low wages (often much less than $30,000) they are compelled to teach a large amount of classes thereby further eroding their potential to provide students with thoughtful advice and feedback.

As long as the university system perpetuates this status quo, I think many students will learn at a higher rate if they dropped their classes and studied for free at home. I tell my students every quarter they they shouldn't trust the A's and B's on their report cards: they need to at least supplement their official education with hard work and discipline during their free time.

[70](http://community.nytimes.com/comments/www.nytimes.com/2011/06/26/sunday-review/26leonhardt.html?permid=70" \l "comment70). Domingo Tavella San Francisco June 26th, 2011 8:39 am

The main advantage of education is not what accrues to individuals, but the benefits to society as a whole. If the American population were much better educated, it would make decisions based on a measure of logical thinking rather than on blind dogma and prejudice - the impact this has on who leads the country and the direction of the nation is enormous. The vast swaths of utter ignorance that prevail in many areas of the US are not only the cause of colorful nonsense like the rapture, but of far more dangerous things ranging from the rise of the likes of Palin or Limbaugh to disdain for science and obesity. The not-so-hidden costs of ignorance are huge, as the Iraq war clearly shows (no GW Bush would have been elected in a well-educated nation.) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_For the rest of the 210 comments, visit this site: <http://community.nytimes.com/comments/www.nytimes.com/2011/06/26/sunday-review/26leonhardt.html>