**Understanding *Cause and Effect* in an Argument: Readings**

**Directions**: In addition to reading the cause/effect chapter in the text, read the op-ed piece by Sarah Fidelibus (below) and two of the short op-ed pieces from the list of “debate club” arguments—on “yes” and one “no”—that appears below the op-ed piece. If the links imbedded in the title don’t work, use the URL to the site (at the bottom of this 3-page sheet).

Be prepared for a quiz and/or an in-class writing on these readings. The focus, obviously, will be on the cause/effect core of these arguments. Read the text first; then apply its principles as you read the op-ed pieces. Consider what strategies the writers are using to make their cause/effect arguments, and consider what you might say to support and/or challenge their arguments.

Media coverage misunderstands the value of a college education

by [Sarah Fidelibus](http://www.poynter.org/author/sfidelibus/) **Published** June 17, 2011 **Updated** Nov. 24, 2014

College is a huge waste of time and money — that’s the conclusion one might draw from a recent rash of stories and columns that cast higher education as an institution that is robbing young adults and their parents of their hard-earned or borrowed cash and leaving them with little return on the investment.

A [recent opinion piece](http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-oe-arum-college-20110602,0,1981136.story) in the Los Angeles Times, for instance, declared college “too easy for its own good,” arguing that schools are not preparing their charges for the complex tasks they will encounter in the real world.  Meanwhile, Bloomberg News boldly and misleadingly announced, “[U.S. College Education Isn’t Worth Price, Pew Report Says](http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-05-16/u-s-college-education-isn-t-worth-price-pew-report-says.html).” Business Insider also went with a misleading headline: “[Is college worth it? 57% of Americans Say Nope](http://www.businessinsider.com/is-college-worth-it-2011-5?op=1a).” And [a recent Wall Street Journal story](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703509104576325611317227614.html#articleTabs%3Darticle) delved into the divide between college presidents and the rest of America over who should bear the heaviest financial burden. (The presidents vote for families, everyone else thinks that’s an impossible task.)

All of this coverage distorts the truth by inaccurately representing the surveys’ findings and by calculating the value of a college education in terms of monetary value alone.

Many of the recent stories spring from two events: the release of data from a [Pew study](http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1993/survey-is-college-degree-worth-cost-debt-college-presidents-higher-education-system) that asked the question, “Is college worth it?” and the [assertion from PayPal founder Peter Thiel](http://techcrunch.com/2011/04/10/peter-thiel-were-in-a-bubble-and-its-not-the-internet-its-higher-education/) (himself a college graduate with two degrees from Stanford) that we are living in a higher education “bubble” in which a post-secondary education is over-valued and unnecessary for many people.

In their zest for reporting on this topic the [essay writing service](http://essaywriteronline.org/), many outlets took information out of context, making it seem as though the researchers concluded that college is over-valued. Bloomberg’s aforementioned article opens: “Higher education fails to provide students ‘good value’ for the money they and their families spend, more than half of U.S. adults said in a survey.” But this framing is misleading.

Sure, [57 percent of survey respondents told Pew](http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1993/survey-is-college-degree-worth-cost-debt-college-presidents-higher-education-system) they agreed with the statement, “the higher education system in the United States fails to provide students with good value for the money they and their families spend.” But [chapter five of the same study](http://pewsocialtrends.org/2011/05/15/is-college-worth-it/#fn-7679-18) concludes that college grads actually earn a median salary of nearly $20,000 more annually than their non-college-grad counterparts. College grads make more money than they would without a college degree, but that fact is lost in an article claiming that a college education “isn’t worth the price.”

Further, buried toward the end of the Bloomberg article is the information that, “86 percent of college graduates said that [college] had been a good investment for them personally.”

It’s not uncommon for studies to turn up contradictory information. But it’s misleading to disproportionately focus on one part of the study simply because it supports the preordained narrative that a college education isn’t worth the sticker price.

What’s more, those 86 percent of graduates who found their college experience to be worth the money are smart to think so, as Kevin Carey explains in his excellent piece for The New Republic, “[Bad Job Market: Why the media is always wrong about the value of a college degree](http://www.tnr.com/article/economy/89675/bad-job-market-media-wrong-college-degree?page=0,0).”

As the Pew study points out, even those [who have graduated with student loan debt](http://pewsocialtrends.org/2011/05/15/is-college-worth-it/4/#chapter-3-public-views-and-experiences) rate their education as a solid investment, feeling they have benefited both [financially](http://pewsocialtrends.org/2011/05/15/is-college-worth-it/6/#chapter-5-the-monetary-value-of-a-college-education) and [personally](http://pewsocialtrends.org/2011/05/15/is-college-worth-it/2/#chapter-1-overview) from their degrees.

And it is perhaps this second, less tangible benefit — the personal value of college — that the media are least likely to explore. But it is the one that matters most.

At [San Francisco State University](http://www.sfsu.edu/), where I teach, students arrive on campus from a variety of cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Having the opportunity to listen to one another, collaborate and problem-solve together enhances the lives they will live after college.

What’s more, their classes — in philosophy, the humanities, ethnic studies — shape them into better thinkers who can sort through a wide variety of texts, information and perspectives. These skills will be useful to them in the workforce. More importantly, these skills allow them to participate fully in the work of democracy: when they are called upon to serve on a jury, or when they vote, or when they make decisions about where to work and how to spend their money.

There are serious flaws with the American education system. And part of the media’s job is to shine a light on those flaws and prompt the powerful to fix the problems. But perpetuating a tired and false narrative that teachers and schools do such a poor job that one need not bother with college in the first place does nothing to inform the public. Instead, it perpetuates misinformation and makes it harder to involve the community in embracing and improving American education.

<http://www.poynter.org/news/mediawire/136205/media-coverage-misunderstands-the-value-of-a-college-education/>

## About the forum: The Poynter Institute is a global leader in journalism. It is the world’s leading instructor, innovator, convener and resource for anyone who aspires to engage and inform citizens in 21st Century democracies.

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## Is a College Degree Still Worth It? A Debate Club Forum

**The Arguments**

**No –** [You Can Lead Kids to College but You Can't Make Them Learn](http://www.usnews.com/debate-club/is-a-college-degree-still-worth-it/you-can-lead-kids-to-college-but-you-cant-make-them-learn) By [Naomi Schaefer Riley](http://www.usnews.com/topics/author/naomi_schaefer_riley) Author of 'The Faculty Lounges ... And Other Reasons Why You Won't Get the College Education You Pay For'

**No –** [With College, Only the Motivated Need Apply](http://www.usnews.com/debate-club/is-a-college-degree-still-worth-it/with-college-only-the-motivated-need-apply) By [Craig Brandon](http://www.usnews.com/topics/author/craig_brandon) Author of 'The Five-Year Party: How Colleges Have Given Up On Educating Your Child' and 'What You Can Do About It'

**No –** [Going to College Is a Mistake for Many](http://www.usnews.com/debate-club/is-a-college-degree-still-worth-it/going-to-college-is-a-mistake-for-many) By [Richard Vedder](http://www.usnews.com/topics/author/richard_vedder) Director of Center for College Affordability and Productivity

**No –** [Government Is Behind the Curve](http://www.usnews.com/debate-club/is-a-college-degree-still-worth-it/government-is-behind-the-curve) By [Lindsey Burke](http://www.usnews.com/topics/author/lindsey_burke) Senior Policy Analyst in Domestic Policy Studies at the Heritage Foundation

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**Yes –** [With College Degree, One Size Does Not Fit All](http://www.usnews.com/debate-club/is-a-college-degree-still-worth-it/with-college-degree-one-size-does-not-fit-all) By [Peter Konwerski](http://www.usnews.com/topics/author/peter_konwerski) Senior Associate Vice President and Dean of Students at George Washington University

**Yes –** [College Is a Safe Bet](http://www.usnews.com/debate-club/is-a-college-degree-still-worth-it/college-is-a-safe-bet) By [Julie Margetta Morgan](http://www.usnews.com/topics/author/julie_margetta_morgan) Policy Analyst with the Postsecondary Education Program at the Center for American Progress

**Yes –** [Some Career Pathways Require a Four-Year Degree, Many Don't](http://www.usnews.com/debate-club/is-a-college-degree-still-worth-it/some-career-pathways-require-a-four-year-degree-many-dont) By [Robert B. Schwartz](http://www.usnews.com/topics/author/robert_b_schwartz) Francis Keppel Professor of Practice in Educational Policy and Administration at Harvard University

**Yes –** [K-12 Education Should Take a Lesson from Colleges](http://www.usnews.com/debate-club/is-a-college-degree-still-worth-it/k-12-education-should-take-a-lesson-from-colleges) By [Tom Carroll](http://www.usnews.com/topics/author/tom_carroll) President of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future

**Yes –** [College Graduates Earn Higher Pay](http://www.usnews.com/debate-club/is-a-college-degree-still-worth-it/college-graduates-earn-higher-pay) By [Anthony P. Carnevale](http://www.usnews.com/topics/author/anthony_p_carnevale) Director of Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce

**Yes –** [Economy Puts a Premium on Postsecondary Skills](http://www.usnews.com/debate-club/is-a-college-degree-still-worth-it/economy-puts-a-premium-on-postsecondary-skills) By [Kevin Carey](http://www.usnews.com/topics/author/kevin_carey) Policy Director of Education Sector

**Yes –** [More, Better Jobs for College Graduates](http://www.usnews.com/debate-club/is-a-college-degree-still-worth-it/more-better-jobs-for-college-graduates) By [Chris Farrell](http://www.usnews.com/topics/author/chris_farrell) Economics Editor of 'Marketplace Money'

**Yes –** [A Degree Is Well Worth the Time, Cost, and Effort](http://www.usnews.com/debate-club/is-a-college-degree-still-worth-it/a-degree-is-well-worth-the-time-cost-and-effort) By [Cecilia Elena Rouse](http://www.usnews.com/topics/author/cecilia_elena_rouse) Katzman-Ernst Professor in the Economics of Education and Professor of Economics and Public Affairs at Princeton University

<http://www.usnews.com/debate-club/is-a-college-degree-still-worth-it>