

# Is college education worth it

[Education](#)



Is College Education Worth It? Hailey Mulligan October 24, 2012  
Organization Communication MG320 Is College Education Worth It? Getting a “good” job is not straightforward as it used to be. In past generations, someone in an entry-level position could work their way up the ladder simply through hard work and determination; whether or not one had credentials or a diploma mattered very little. This is not the case today. Higher education is now critical to obtaining a better job because the demand for skilled labor is rising.

For this reason, the value that a degree offers is higher than that of one’s actual intelligence or merit. Furthermore, workers without college degrees will quickly be outpaced in position and salary by degree holders. Earning a college degree is no longer simply an option for potential job seekers, but a necessity for those wishing to advance in their careers. With the cost of postsecondary education rising in leaps and bounds, potential students may wonder if the college education system is still worth investing in.

Niall Ferguson (2012) states that at a sample of public colleges, average tuition and fees for in-state residents have risen by 25 percent since 2008; for private schools, these tuition and fees rose by 13 percent (p. 20). Similarly, over half (56 percent) of students are enrolled at four year schools with tuitions and fees of up to \$9,000 a year with high-ranking institutions reporting costs upwards of \$40,000 annually (Walker, 2010, p. 28). Although this cost has been offset for many students by the increase in government funding for education in the form of grants and entitlements, postsecondary expenses can be daunting.

Yet, findings discussed later in this report reveal the vital importance of a college degree, not only in short-term job hunts but as a long-term investment over one's lifetime. First, the demand for skilled labor has risen in America. According to Bound and Turner (2010), "collegiate attainment has not kept pace with increases in the demand for skilled workers in the United States" (p. 7). Although there has been a significant increase in the number of college attendees, the number of students actually completing a college degree has not increased proportionately (p. 7).

One possible argument for the rising demand of college graduates is the reduction of blue-collar jobs as this nation moves into a technology and information-based economic market (Carnevalle, 2006, p. 90). Bankston (2011) says this trend might be consistent with the argument that advances in technology have created a rising demand for advanced credentials (p. 337). Other authors cite examples of how "a new technology may require that people have a degree to provide a product or service for which a degree was unnecessary ten years ago" (Whitaker and Zenker, 2011, p. 21).

Others argue, however, that demand for jobs that require a college degree is simply a self-perpetuating result of the increase in college graduates. In 1940, barely five percent of Americans held a college degree; by 2008 that number had risen to 30 percent (Bankston, 2011, p. 326). One author credits the rise of degree requirements to the growth of government subsidies in the market of postsecondary education (Bankston, 2011, p. 336). As the government gives more money in the form of Pell grants (which has now been deemed an entitlement), more students attend college and obtain degrees.

Bankston reasons that “ one would expect that as credentials flood the market, they will purchase fewer opportunities” (p. 336). Over time this may mean that the value of a college degree may diminish and the gap in income and job opportunities between graduates and non-graduates will decrease. (p. 336). It may also mean that having only a bachelor’s degree will not be enough to secure a comfortable career. Debra Stewart, president of the Council of Graduate Schools, claims that “ over the course of a lifetime, people with master's degrees earn 18 percent more than those with baccalaureate degrees” (Loftus, 2012, p. 3). For now though, the rise of credentialed job seekers has led to the thought that higher education is an expectation for everyone.

Because having a degree has become so common, employers now use it as a way to eliminate people who would not make good candidates for employment—even if a degree isn’t a totally accurate determinant of one’s talent or work skills. The mass availability of college education may actually “ debase its intrinsic value” (Bankston, p. 338). Although someone without a degree may have more natural intelligence and ability than their credentialed counterpart, a degree is now worth more than actual capability in the job market. Bankston writes that “ the popular emphasis placed on higher education in a society in which higher education has become a broad expectation has heightened the importance of credentials as an asset for obtaining a job at the expense of other assets, such as demonstrated ability or experience in a field” (p. 337). A degree provides a form of merit that employers look for immediately because the degree marks the individual as

someone who can supposedly meet deadlines, fulfill obligations, and think critically.

Margolis (2007) remarks how “ it was the common practice of my colleagues to immediately sift out the [resumes] that didn’t have a degree and just throw them away” (p. 42). Because many employers are searching through high volumes of resumes, they don’t have time to thoroughly look at every single one; they speed up the process by simply filtering out non-graduates. This point is exemplified further in the case of Marilee Jones. The former dean of admissions at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M. I. T. ) quickly resigned after it was discovered she did not actually have the credentials listed on her resume (Kinsley, 2007).

Even though she started as a clerical worker and advanced in position over 28 years to become the dean at this prestigious school, her talent and loyalty meant nothing once her padded resume was revealed (Kinsley, 2007). She simply lacked the paper qualifications M. I. T. based itself upon. Although these qualifications are all “ artificial substitutes for real merit, sometimes the artificial substitute is unavoidable” (p. 34). The substitutes are unavoidable when employers, like colleges, do not have the time or ability to gather all the information necessary to determine who will be a successful employee.

Even though Ms. Jones “ demonstrated real merit” (p. 34), her paper merit—or lack thereof—ultimately determined her fate at M. I. T. A college degree stands in the place of ability when ability cannot be measured in a concrete way. Not only can the absence of a college degree inhibit one’s ability to obtain a job, it can also hinder one’s likelihood of advancement in a career. A

degree increases one's "marketability and maneuverability—without a degree, you're flying by the seat of your pants" (Kinsley, 2007). Although one might find a job without a degree (based on connections, etc.), the degree provides a cushion. If this job were to be lost, a new job could readily be found because of one's credentials. Furthermore, non-graduates "cap out" in their careers sooner than graduates. Kinsley notes that "you hit that ceiling where a high school diploma only gets you so far in a salary range" (p. 34). Bankston also documents the increasing gap since the 1950s in median wage incomes of Americans with and without college degrees (p. 337). The wage premium of a college degree over a high school diploma increased by 83% since 1979 (Carnevale, 2006, p. 90).

Non-graduates have less bargaining power in their positions because they are less valuable to their employer and may therefore be unable to take advantage of an increase in earnings or benefits (Kinsley, 2007). So stringent have the qualifications for employment become—arbitrarily or otherwise—that sometimes just having a diploma isn't even enough. For example, employers are still wary about the quality of online degrees. Lynn Gresham (2008) notes a survey conducted by Vault.com that revealed "nearly two-thirds (63%) [of employers] still said that they would favor job candidates with degrees from traditional colleges" (p. 4). One hiring manager said they didn't believe online degrees "reflect a serious commitment to education" (p. 24). Currently the perceived value of an online degree is less than that of degrees obtained from brick-and-mortar institutions. However, as more job candidates complete degrees online, employers' views on their validity are slowly changing. For some, the completion of an online degree shows that "

the person is highly self-motivated to learn new skills and acquire knowledge through rigorous self-study methods” (p. 27). Today, the average American changes jobs eleven times during their adult life (U.

S. Department of Labor: Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). For this reason, a person without a college degree would be devastatingly ill-equipped to survive in today’s job market because they lack the flexibility to move to new careers. In 2010, non-graduate workers experienced 10.4 percent unemployment, while workers with at least a bachelor’s degree were only unemployed at 4.7 percent (Whitaker and Zenker, 2011, p. 21-22). Employers still look to see if a job candidate has a degree, even if they exemplify significant intelligence.

Doors of opportunity that remain open to degree holders will be closed for non-graduates and the ladder of advancement will only reach so high. Diplomas are a form of meritocracy necessary in America, even if only arbitrarily. While the intrinsic value of a college education may be disappearing because of its mass production, its extrinsic value remains true. Despite its high costs, college is still one of the best investments a person can make in today’s highly competitive job market. Financially and opportunity-wise, obtaining a college education is still worth it.