

A college degree
should not be this
difficult



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A College Degree Should Not Be This Difficult Shelia Swanson is a high school senior in a small school in rural Iowa. She has aspirations of going to college and becoming a veterinarian. However, her working mother, a high school dropout, can't afford the expense of her daughter's tuition on her minimum wage job. Her family, lacking a tradition of higher education, can't help her seek out a college or encourage her in her quest for help. Her situation is further complicated by a high school that has failed to adequately prepare her for the required entrance exams and college level courses. For thousands of seniors like Shelia, college is a dream that will never be realized. The difficulties of access, expense, and preparation have become more than just obstacles, they have become barriers that have left a college education out of reach. To assure that all students have an equal opportunity for a college degree, the process needs to be made less difficult.

The most important tools an incoming college student can possess are attitude and motivation. These are only acquired by years of planning by the family for the student's eventual enrollment. Contacting schools, selecting a proper program, and preparing the student to move away and get an education may not be forthcoming from a family who has never experienced attending college. These students will have difficulty when they are faced with a new environment, new experiences, new cultures, and a lack of adequate expectations. Families that fail to encourage college will produce poorly motivated students that won't be able to develop the attitude necessary to succeed in college. Students need guidance and direction from an early age, either from home or school, to make the move to college life a smoother experience.

Yet, college is hard even for the most motivated students. The complex

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courses, lengthy reading and writing assignments, and the exposure to entirely new information can be daunting to even the brightest minds. Yet, for many students, this heavy workload will be in addition to the full time job that they are forced to take to supplement the expense of college. With a four-year degree costing between \$40, 000 and \$140, 000 student loans will only cover a small fraction of the total expense. These students who work full time and carry a full time school schedule run the risk of lowered grades and increase their chance of dropping out. According to Orszag, Orszag, and Whitmore, 2001, " After four years, college students who had worked 20 hours per week at an off-campus job were 8. 7 percentage points less likely to have graduated than non-workers". New ways of financing an education are needed to make attendance less grueling without forcing students out of school.

Affording the cost of admission is just one barrier that must be broken for many students. Once in college, they realize that the courses are too difficult and that they are ill prepared to handle college writing and mathematics. High schools have not been successful in providing students with the basic skills it takes to pass college level courses. A recent poll found that 84 percent of the faculty members surveyed said that, " ... high-school graduates are either unprepared or are only somewhat well prepared to pursue a college degree" (Sarnoff, 2006). An ill-prepared student will meet with initial failure placing their academic future in jeopardy. They risk losing access to the needed financial aid as well as being discouraged from continuing. This is not the fault of lazy and unmotivated students. This is a school system that has failed to keep up with the rapidly expanding demands of the writing, science, and mathematical skills that are required at

the college level. Public school systems should make the necessary changes that would result in students that would find college courses more understandable.

The need for continuing education in today's world can not be overstated and a four-year degree is essential in almost any career capacity. Yet, for many students, the requirements to obtain a degree will be too high a hurdle to overcome. A family history that has discouraged higher education places the student at a decisive disadvantage. In many cases, the exorbitant cost of an education makes the experience impossible. Governor James B. Hunt, Jr., of North Carolina, commented, " But even in a good economic time with some slowdowns in tuition increases, there is still great concern that college will be out of reach of many who need it" (cited in Americans in record numbers, 1998). Even when the student is encouraged to attend college and can arrange the necessary financing, they will be met by instructors and courses that they are unprepared to tackle. Many won't be able to write a five-page essay or complete a basic research report. There are many turns in the road to a college education and at every turn there is a difficulty to be overcome. Family attitudes, financial hardships, and poorly performing high schools are problems that can realistically be addressed as we work to make a college degree less difficult to obtain.

References

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