

A confederacy of dunces as a criticism of higher education

[Education](#)



Whether in an effort to become more educated and to obtain more lucrative jobs or due to the need for better education in an increasingly technological job market, the United States has seen a rising trend in the percentage of individuals who choose to attend college and graduate school. Not only has the number of individuals seeking higher education increased, but criticism of higher education has increased as well.

Common criticism has included the idea of colleges and universities being more concerned with financial aspects than with their students, as well as the idea of students using higher education not to become more educated individuals, but to increase their chances of earning higher wages after college or graduate school. A Confederacy of Dunces' satirical focus on education and learning provides examples of these and other criticisms of higher education.

More specifically, the characters of the story show the reader the educated are not always the ones who fare the best in terms of their emotional well-being and their ability to function in society. In looking at the characters in the novel there seems to be an inverse relationship in terms of the amount of education a character has received in comparison to that character's ability to function normally in society (to not cause others distress, to contribute physically and mentally, etc.) For example, Ignatius has the greatest amount of education and proves himself the most socially backwards, followed by Myrna, then by Mrs.

Levy, an overconfident psychologist with no more than community college experience. Also, the reader is shown that the most educated characters are

also the most satirized and laughable characters in the story. Two obvious characters, the characters of Ignatius Reilly and Myrna Minkoff, illustrate some of the possible detrimental effects of higher education. Although it is difficult to comment on Myrna, evidence is provided throughout the novel that portrays Ignatius as a much more sociable and pleasant individual before his days at college.

For both of these characters education has distorted their view of society in such a way that it makes them miserable to be part of such an "abominable and debauched" society. Ignatius complains throughout the novel about other's lack of intelligence and their supposedly "distorted" view of society. Not only has Ignatius and Myrna's view of society been affected by higher education, but their ability to function socially in society has been affected as well. Neither character is able to maintain a long lasting relationship with others than themselves.

Also, Ignatius has difficulty finding employment and has even greater difficulty keeping any job which he obtains. Myrna herself would undoubtedly face similar difficulty if she did not receive substantial funding from her father. Finally, Myrna's view on sex, one that clashes with the social norm, and her propensity to discuss this subject almost gets her raped by a university janitor. Another character who is highly involved in academia, Professor Talc, helps to illustrate the criticism of college being a business for those who run it and by those who work for it.

Professor Talc himself admits that he does not know or teach much at all- that his lectures are vague, that he is only popular because of his humor,

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and that he is not qualified to teach college level Social Studies. Talc's disinterest in educating his students supports the idea that many professors view their work only as a secure job with substantial benefits. Another example of Professor Talc illustrating criticism of higher education comes in the episode of his meeting with a female student.

While Talc originally believes that the student set up the meeting either because of her interest in his class or because of her interest in him, the actual motive of the student is only to find out the grade of her most recent project. This episode represents the common criticism of higher education simply providing a means to an end. While the primary goal of a college education was at one time to become a more educated individual, this goal has shifted to receiving good grades, obtaining a good job, making a lot of money, etc.

In the author's final attempt to satirize, and therefore criticize, higher education, Professor Talc, the novel's symbol of higher education itself, ends the story being mocked and ridiculed by both teachers and students. In comparing the less-educated characters of the story, the reader is shown that although these characters may not be the most materially well-off or have the greatest intellectual capacity, they do finish the story as the most emotionally, and in some cases financially, stable characters of the story.

Also, although they are not formally educated, these characters are able to function well in everyday, practical situations. One such uneducated character who finishes the novel better off than many of the educated characters is Ignatius' mother. By the end of the story, Mrs. Reilly is free of

Ignatius, who oppresses her social interests and forces her to cook and clean, and has a chance at marrying Claude Robichaux, a well-off and apparently sympathetic man. Mrs. Reilly has little education and therefore seems to expect and desire little. Unlike those who desire a good job and a good income simply because they attended college, Mrs.

Reilly is satisfied by more simple pleasures: the company of friends, dancing, bowling etc. Her simple pleasures illustrate the ideal of the Zen road to affluence-if you do not desire a lot, it takes very little to be happy. In comparing this to higher education, again many of those individuals who attend college and/or graduate school do expect and desire more: a more lucrative job, more socially affluent friends, a wealthier, more attractive spouse. Higher education may also perpetuate the need to be competitive-the need to work increasingly hard in order to get ahead.

Evidence of this idea can be found in the fact that an increasing percentage of the population attend college and/or graduate school than in years past. No longer is a high school education sufficient to secure a well-paying job. Both Darlene and Jones also prove to be less educated characters who end the story in better emotional and financial situations than many of those characters who have received some type of higher education. Both Darlene and Jones finish the story with better, more secure employment as well as newfound happiness. Darlene, who is portrayed in the novel as somewhat flaky, demonstrates the idea that "ignorance is bliss".

As a result of her lack of intelligence, Darlene expects very little, and her highest goal is only to be a well-paid exotic dancer. After reaching this goal

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at the close of the novel, Darlene's exuberance again shows that if one does not have a lot, it will not take much to become content. Although also appearing uneducated, Jones proves to have a great deal of common sense that allows him to function in society. In this way Jones provides the reader with evidence that knowledge gained through higher education is not the only type of knowledge one needs in order to be successful and achieve goals.

In comparing Ignatius with Jones the reader notices this difference between "book smarts" and "street smarts" and their use in functioning in society. Using his common sense, an intelligence that Ignatius clearly lacks, Jones can tell when whites are scared of him, and is also able to figure out Lana Lee's scam, using it to maintain job security and eventually to get a more desirable job. In an apparent attempt to both satirize and criticize higher education, John Kennedy Toole creates characters in *A Confederacy of Dunces* who offer proof that the business of higher education perpetuates competition and the desire to achieve more than others.

This increased competition in turn causes both stress and an increased likelihood of falling short of set goals, both eventually leading to unhappiness. Also, as seen in the character Ignatius, the intelligence gained as a result of college or graduate school may cause the educated to look down upon and even to dislike the members of society with average or below average intelligence. The author further mocks education by leaving each character in a particular position at the end of the novel. While the

uneducated characters tend to end up better off, the educated characters generally prove unhappy by the end of the story.