

The Wrong Debate About College

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A recent Intelligence Squared debate tackled the proposition that “Too Many Kids Go to College.” Arguments in favor: the cost of higher education is rising out of proportion to its value; it stifles entrepreneurial creativity (because Plan B is to found a million dollar software company, natch); and the bachelor’s degree is a “false credential” that doesn’t accurately signal what a college graduate knows and can do. Arguments against: Post-secondary education is the best hedge against poverty, unemployment, and dead-end jobs.

It was a lively discussion, but as the debate progressed, the terms got fuzzier and it wasn’t clear what they meant by “college”: A four-year college or university right after high school? Community college leading to an associate’s degree? A proprietary school? On-line courses? Ivy-covered buildings?

A better proposition to debate would have been: “Too many kids go to the **wrong college for them.**” That would have gotten to the heart of the matter --we have created a caste system with academic four-year baccalaureate programs on top, and we view programs that provide applied learning, occupational skills training, and employer engagement as second-best.

By granting the B.A./B.S. a sort of exclusive “most-favored nation” status, we’ve constrained ourselves from developing a diverse, robust set of educational pathways through post-secondary education and into the labor market. (We’re also overly focused on prestige and ivy, but that’s another topic.)

The dominant “college for all” approach leads to the mainstream ideal of completing an academic program of study in high school and then immediately attending a residential four-year college. But the field of post-secondary education is much broader, also including two-year degrees, certificates, apprenticeships, and occupational training. While it’s clear that a high school diploma alone is likely to lead to low-wage jobs, research shows that not everyone needs a four-year degree to support themselves. Depending on the field, certificates and associate’s degree holders can out-earn those with four-year degrees. A wide swath of jobs in the labor market--good jobs, with good earnings--does not require a bachelor’s degree. In 2018, almost equal proportions of jobs are projected to require some college or an associate’s degree (30 percent) as are projected to require a bachelor’s degree or more (33 percent).

But the four-year degree also carries cultural significance. The question of who should go to college, and what exactly do we mean by college anyway, taps into conflicting currents in U.S. culture: 1) We're a meritocracy and education is a tool for social mobility; and 2) race and class limit individual choices, and education reproduces inequality via tracking and segregation.

The "college for all" approach does not come out of a cultural vacuum. As one debater noted, people are very supportive of non-college options for other people's children, but they want the best for their own offspring. And the best equals the prestige and self-determination that comes from a four-year college degree. Career and technical education (previously known as vocational education) has been disparaged and seen as a dumping ground for students not deemed "college-ready" because in fact many times it HAS been inferior to academic college-preparatory classes. And pretty typically, the kids assigned "non-college-ready" status have been poor, black, or Latino. It's unquestionably the right thing to overturn decades of discriminatory behavior toward schoolkids and to stop tracking them into second-class educational options.

"College for all," however, is not translating into the desired outcomes: Only about 30 percent of Americans earn a four-year degree by their mid-twenties. Dropout and attrition rates are high. We need to broaden our definition of educational success so that it includes more than the high school college-prep program leading to a four-year college degree. We should see equal worth and dignity in high school and post-secondary programs that include apprenticeships and contextual learning and that do not rely solely on the bachelor's degree as a sign of skill mastery. The ultimate goal of education should be for individuals to discover things they love to do, and learn how to do them well. That's the process and outcome we should value. We should stop assuming it only comes via a bachelor's degree.

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