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Ideas Week squares off over need for college

By Michael Corio

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An audience member asks a question as part of the Q&A session of the Intelligence² debate 'Do too many kids go to college?'. Onstage from left: author Charles Murray, Pay-Pal co-founder and tech entrepreneur Peter Thiel, ABC News Nightline host John Donovan, Northwestern president emeritus Henry Beinen, and Washington Post/Bloomberg columnist Vivek Wadhwa.

The Intelligence Squared Foundation, which hosts and televises Oxford-style debates in New York, recently made its Chicago debut on Oct. 12 with the premise that "too many kids go to college."

Part of Chicago's Ideas Week, the debate featured PayPal co-founder and tech entrepreneur Peter Thiel and Charles Murray (author of the AEI article "Do too many kids go to college?") on the affirmative side. On the other side was Northwestern president emeritus Henry Bienen and the Washington Post/Bloomberg columnist and educational advocate Vivek Wadhwa.

Despite attending Stanford as an undergraduate and law student, Peter Thiel is a prominent critic of higher education and the "perceived" necessity to go to college. His "20 under 20" Thiel Foundation will pay kids \$100,000 not to go to college in exchange for receiving entrepreneurial training to pursue scientific and technical ideas.

He argued that college today is "90 percent credentialing and 10 percent learning," advocating that college, in many circumstances, is the wrong economic decision. He compared universities to subprime mortgage lenders, saying that these institutions want students to "pay no attention to price" despite a 300 percent increase in college costs over the past 30 years. The cost of college, as an institution, has "gone up more than anything else in our society".

"Questioning college is like questioning the existence of Santa Claus with 3-year-old kids," Thiel said.

Burton Cann, a junior history major at DePaul, believes that "society makes college a necessity ... when college is not for everybody."

"A lot of people complain about loans, but don't look at the other options, such as state or community colleges," he said.

In response, Northwestern president emeritus Henry Bienen asserted that there is a clear wage and social premium associated with college attendance and that everyone benefits from college education. He criticized Thiel for having "a highly stratified view" of the world, arguing that the majority of people are not Bill Gates or Steve Jobs, who were immensely successful outside of the university system.

"We shouldn't be so ready to consign [the youth] to their 'fate' of a low paying job," said Beinen.

Junior Leslie Munson, a political science and German major, said that despite the costs, college is worth it.

"College isn't just about getting a job right away. It's about enhancing your person," Munson said. "I would rather be intelligent rather than ignorant of the things happening around me. I would rather be a poor college student than to have a steady job and not be fulfilled as a person".

Thiel's debate partner Charles Murray, who attended Harvard University, reiterated, "The thesis of my argument really is that the B.A. is the work of the devil." Taking a stand against the "stigmatization" of students who do not obtain bachelor's degrees, he argued that the U.S. has created "a self-fulfilling prophecy" and that those without B.A.s are perceived as "dumb or lazy".

"Why is a professor giving a brilliant lecture to 150 kids in a hall and not millions?" Murray asked.

Sophomore Harry Schaefer, a political science and English major and economics minor at DePaul, agrees with Murray that those without a B.A. are unfairly stigmatized by society.

"Discrimination against technical/vocational degrees exists in the U.S. —we need plumbers, mechanics, etc., and they shouldn't be unfairly stigmatized," Schaefer said. "Much of the content [at typical 4-year institutions] has no practical application in the outside world, unless one has ambitions in academia for the future".

Vivek Wadhwa, the columnist and educational advocate, argued that Americans are "completely and totally unaware" that the U.S. education system is "by far the best in the world" and the model followed by the rest of the world. He argued that the answer to America's competitiveness is education.

"If we keep having silly debates on 4-year degrees, we're going to lose out," Wadhwa said. "The Indians and Chinese will be eating our children's lunch in the future."

Taylor Christensen, a freshman early childhood education major, disagrees with the premise that too many kids attend school.

"College provides a lot of opportunities to students, yet many people don't take advantage of what college has to offer."

Peter Thiel and Charles Murray were the victors by a close margin, managing to convince eight percent of the audience to favor their side. The opposing side, by contrast, received six percent, with the final results being a close 47 percent in favor and 46 percent against, with seven percent undecided. The results were the closest margin in the history of Intelligence Squared debates.

The audience was asked to vote two times, and the winner was calculated by the greatest percentage of people to switch their opinions to favor another side.

Students should be exposed to Oxford style debate to learn that there are mutually acceptable arguments on an issue, said Intelligence2 Executive Producer, Dana Wolfe.