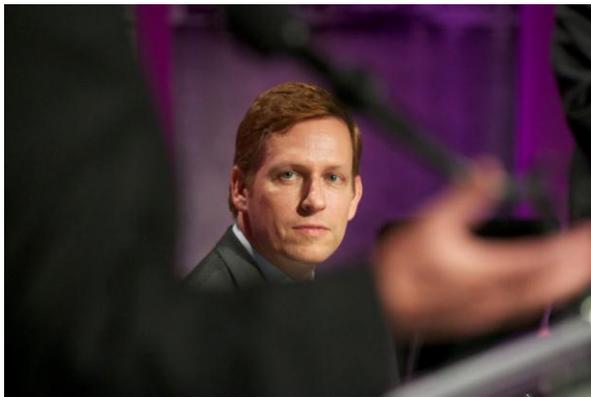


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# An open letter to Peter Thiel

By Vivek Wadhwa, Friday, October 14, 10:42 AM



Dear Peter:

I want to congratulate you and political scientist and author Charles Murray on winning the debate in Chicago Wednesday against Northwestern University President Emeritus and Rasmussen College Chairman Henry Bienen and me on whether too many Americans go to college. I should not have been surprised considering Washington Post readers declared you the winners even before the debate had started.

What surprised me was how much we agreed on.

We agreed that higher education improves a person's life-long earning potential.

We agreed that, for most professions, high school is not enough.

We agreed that countries we are now competing with, such as India and China, are investing heavily in educating their children in an effort to insure they have the same advantages as their American peers.

We agreed that, for a small number of genius children, such as the 24 Thiel fellows, higher education isn't necessarily an advantage.

My debate partner, Bienen, took serious issue with Murray's claims that 4-year undergraduate degrees should be abolished and that a Liberal Arts education isn't worthwhile. I stressed that children gain a lot more from college than just the education. They gain valuable social skills, such as how to interact and work with others, how to compromise, and how to deal with rejection and failure. Most importantly, kids learn how to learn. You said that if you had to do it again, you would go to college because you didn't have career goals at that stage in life. I pointed out that nearly all children are like you were. They don't know what they want to be when they grow up. They may start off as musicians,

artists, or waiters. But they gravitate to other professions as they age. Without the foundation that a college education provides, they could forever be trapped in the wrong, low-paying jobs.

Your key issue was that education has become far too expensive — that, in the past, the cost may have been justified but is no longer. You compare this to the most recent housing market bubble, which was a leading contributor to the recession. Bienen didn't agree. He argued that universities greatly subsidize education, offer significant discounts and subsidies for needy students, and provide far more value than what they charge. But I am willing to concede part of this point to you: We do need to improve the cost-effectiveness and productivity of education.

So, here is my challenge to you: Why don't you put your money and energy behind your convictions? If you indeed believe that we are headed for disaster, please work on averting it. Early in your career, you revolutionized the global exchange of currency by founding PayPal. You helped change the world by financing Facebook. The world is ripe for another revolution — this time in education. Technology has advanced so much over the last two decades that we can virtually change the way we educate.

Tablet-type devices such as the iPad have become ubiquitous. India recently rolled out a low-end tablet that it will sell for only \$35—making the technology even more widely affordable. The graphics capability of these devices is so advanced that we can teach students geography by taking them into virtual worlds. We can teach math using interactive games. Students from around the world can watch lectures from universities like MIT and Harvard. We can make it fun for American children to learn science by giving them virtual rewards. In other words, technology now makes it possible for us to change the teaching paradigm. Elite universities no longer have a monopoly on quality education.

We can do to schools what PayPal did to banks and do to college networks what Facebook did to friendships. We can now make education affordable and pervasive. All this requires is investment in the right technologies and the type of mentoring and support being provided to students, such as the Thiel fellows. You could impact the lives of billions. So rather than debating each other, let's work together on these lofty goals. I'll do all I can to help.