The Controversy over Higher Education

Dimitrius Graham is a music major at Morgan State University with a talent for singing. One day he might end up with a career singing on Broadway or he could spend years singing for community theaters for little to no money (Carlson). Mr. Graham’s talent offers him a very promising future; however, it is also incredibly uncertain. A career in singing often times is not very financially rewarding, so one has to ask: Is Mr. Graham wasting his time and money getting a degree in an area that might not pay off? Higher education has been evolving in the United States since colonial times, and today, children are raised to believe that obtaining a four-year degree is necessary in order to achieve a successful future. The benefits of obtaining a higher education are commonly acknowledged throughout society; however, due to rising costs and other negative factors, the debate over the worth of a college education is becoming ever more controversial.

Higher education has been evolving in the United States since the first college was built during colonial times. Nine colleges built in the 1600s and 1700s still operate today: Harvard University, Princeton University, Columbia University, Brown University, Dartmouth College, Rutgers University, and the University of Pennsylvania (“Is a College”). These universities were funded by England and most catered to specific religious denominations such as Puritans. Due to the not yet established primary and secondary school system, boys began attending these
colleges as early as fourteen years old ("Is a College"). These colleges focused on general education and moral character with a goal of producing faithful Christian gentlemen who would become responsible leaders in the new world. A college education during this time was unattainable for most families due to tuition costs and the inability to lose an able-bodied man from the family farm or business. Only one percent of men between the age of eighteen and twenty-one attended college, and students frequently left after their first or second year ("Is a College"). However, in the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, the Continental Congress wrote, “Knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged” (Billitteri). Even in early America, leaders stressed the importance of education for the well-being of the nation and its citizens.

The 1800s and 1900s saw a significant increase in the higher education institutions throughout the United States. The number of colleges increased from twenty-five in 1800 to two hundred and forty-one in 1860 ("Is a College"). There was also an increase in the variety of schools to include seminaries, scientific schools, military service academies, and teaching schools, as well as an increase in the programs offered including medicine, law, military science, and agriculture. In 1862, Congress passed the Morrill Act, also known as the Land Grant Act, which called for public land to be given to agricultural and mechanical-arts training colleges, therefore, allowing higher education to become available to millions of students (Billitteri). As the economy evolved from agricultural to industrial, education began to change as well, becoming more focused on job-specific vocational education as compared to the previous focus on general and moral education. The Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 distributed federal money to the states for vocational education in high schools in order to prepare students for occupations
that did not require a bachelor’s or advanced degree (Billitteri). This focus on vocational education served to ease unemployment in the 1930s and help with wartime industrial needs in the 1940s; however, it was viewed by some as an inferior education. Higher education expanded and evolved greatly throughout the early 1800s and into the 1900s.

Higher education became increasingly more prevalent in the United States from the mid-1900s up until today. The growing importance of a college education can be seen in the new government bills and policies that began to appear during this time. The government passed financial aid bills such as the GI Bill of Rights of 1944 which provided financial aid to veterans of World War II who wished to attend college and the Higher Education Act of 1965 which furthered monetary governmental aid for higher education (Billitteri). College enrollment increased from 2.3 million students in 1947 to a whopping 10.9 million in 1975, and, by 1990, twenty percent of Americans twenty-five years and older had at least a bachelor’s degree (Billitteri). As stated on one website, “The major shift in higher education during this time was the transition from mass higher education, expecting to educate 40-50% of high school graduates, to universal higher education, expecting to educate all high school graduates” (“Is a College”). From 2000 to 2010, the college enrollment rate increased by 37% along with an increase in tuition and board costs. In 1949, the number of students enrolled in colleges was 2.66 million compared to approximately 20 million students enrolled in colleges in 2013 (“Is a College”). This striking contrast in numbers shows the growing importance that has been placed on higher education in recent times.

While many have come to question the worth of a college degree due to rising costs and other negative factors, many people stand by the numerous benefits obtained through
attending a four-year institution. By earning a college degree, students are able to find better employment opportunities as well as economic security. It is statistically proven that the unemployment rates of college graduates are lower than that of individuals without a college degree. A study shows that college graduates twenty-five and older with at least a bachelor’s degree show an unemployment rate of only 3.6%, while those with an associate’s degree show a 5% unemployment rate (“Is a College”). In the same study, high school graduates depicted a 7.5% unemployment rate, while high school drop-outs depicted an 11.4% unemployment rate (“Is a College”). Additionally, more and more jobs are starting to require college degrees. In a study of economy and job projections, Georgetown University predicted that, by 2018, 63% of jobs will require some college education or a degree (“Is a College”). College graduates are also shown to earn more money than individuals who did not attend a university. The earnings gap between high school graduates and bachelor’s degree holders averaged $22,000 in 2010 (Attewell 93). Even students who did not complete their college degrees were statistically proven in 2010 to earn 17% more than high school graduates. College graduates also depict lower poverty rates. In 2008, the poverty rate for bachelor’s degree holders was 4% while the poverty rate for high school graduates was 12% (“Is a College”). Furthermore, attending college allows students to explore careers and aim for a job they find desirable. In a study, 58% of college graduates and people with some college or an associate’s degree reported high satisfaction with their jobs, while 50% of high school graduates reported similarly (“Is a College”). College graduates also obtain more and better job benefits, such as retirement plans and health insurance plans. While 70% of college graduates had access to employer-provided health insurance in 2008, only 50% of high school graduates did. Also, 70% of college graduates
had access to retirement plans in 2008 compared to 65% of associate’s degree holders and only 55% of high school graduates (“Is a College”). Overall, there is substantial evidence supporting the increased employment opportunities and economic security benefits of individuals who graduated college.

The benefits of a higher education are not limited to employment and economic concerns; graduating from a college or university also serves to create well-rounded, educated individuals. Education, throughout history, has been looked at as a way to better one’s self and to better the nation as a whole. As President Obama stated in a speech at Henninger High School in Syracuse, New York:

We’ve got to focus on our ability to make sure everybody who works hard has a chance to pursue their own measure of happiness. And in that project, in that work, there aren’t a lot of things more important than making sure people get a good education.

That is the key to upward mobility. That is key to a growing economy.

President Obama, as others before him, stresses the importance of learning and education in bettering our nation as a whole. Attending a university or college allows individuals to grow intellectually in an atmosphere that also promotes better interpersonal and social skills. As one article states, “Current research suggests that undergraduate education is not just about discipline specific knowledge or cognitive skills; instead, dispositions and cognitive skills that enable graduates to be effective citizens are also valued outcomes for students” (Chan).

Additionally, earning a college degree is viewed as a major goal or life achievement by many students and prospective students. Darrius Mind, a blogger, wrote about his graduation day,
describing it is the best day of his life as well as stating, “That was the day I finished my
challenge to myself” (“Is a College”).

In addition, students who attend college are exposed to diverse people and ideas.
College students are able to learn about different cultures, ideas, religions, and personalities
that they may not be exposed to in their home towns. Through this, individuals who attend
college are able to broaden their knowledge and perspectives. A study in 2004 found that 73%
of college graduates thought it “very important to try to understand the reasoning behind the
opinions of others” compared to only 64% of high school graduates (“Is a College”). On top of
economic and employment benefits, becoming a well-rounded, educated citizen is another
advantage to a college education. These stated benefits as well as various others are used by
many to argue the continued worth of a college education.

In recent times, children are raised to believe that obtaining a four-year degree is
necessary in order to get a good job and achieve a successful future; however, with the
exponentially rising costs of attaining a higher education, many have come to question the
“college-for-all” attitude that is so enthusiastically enforced in society today. Many students
come out of college with mountains of debt in loans which they must then spend their whole
lives paying off. The past three decades have seen a 250 percent rise in the average tuition of a
four-year public college (Obama). For a middle-income family, the cost of a public college
education now totals twenty-five percent of their annual income (J A T Productions). Affording
a college education without going into debt is nearly impossible for most college students of
today. Students and parents are now going into tens of thousands of dollars of debt in order to
pay these outrageous tuitions. Many people argue that these extreme rises in tuition do little to
improve the education provided by the universities; instead, many colleges build luxurious amenities such as new facilities and other features to appeal to prospective students. In a video titled “Scholarship: A documentary about the student debt crisis,” John Kavanaugh described his fight to stop an increase in tuition in order to provide a fitness center on the campus of Northern Arizona University. The administrators argued that they had to stay competitive in order to gain more students; Kavanaugh responded, “Why do you want all these extra students? So that you can build more buildings and increase tuition more to pay for them?” (J A T Productions)

When describing rising costs, Patrick Callan, president of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, stated, “It tells you that higher education is still a seller’s market. The level of debt we’re asking people to undertake is unsustainable” (Lewin).

As of 2011, the average college student graduated with over $26,000 in debt, and 10% of students graduated with over $40,000 in debt (“Is a College”). According to the Joint Economic Committee of the US Congress, around 60% of college graduates in 2011 have student loan debt balances equal to 60% of their annual income. Many students struggle with their loan payments which often results in lower credit scores and additional fees which only worsens the debt problem, jeopardizing future purchases and employment. Not only is this high level of debt crippling, it also cannot be forgiven even in bankruptcy. Additionally, student loan debt often forces graduates to delay adult milestones such as marriage, financial independence, and no longer living with their parents. When speaking about the $1 trillion now owed in outstanding student loan debt, President Obama stated, “It will put our young generation of workers at a competitive disadvantage for years” (Obama). The rising costs of
higher education and the accompanying high level of student debt has led to much controversy over higher education.

While there are many proven benefits to higher education, everyone does not achieve these benefits; not everyone is cut out for college and there are many alternative options to earning a four-year degree. More than half of recent graduates are unable to find employment after college or are in jobs that do not require a degree (McArdle). In 2012, one third of college graduates had a job that required at most a high school diploma; additionally, there are 16,000 parking lot attendants, 83,000 bartenders, 115,000 janitors, and 15% of taxi drivers with bachelor’s degrees (“Is a College”). These statistics have led many to question society’s “college-for-all crusade.” There are many alternatives to attending a four-year college such as community college, vocational programs, and apprenticeships. Mike Rowe, a strong advocate for these alternatives, describes the “skills gap” in American society today in which there is a need for trade employees such as electricians, welders, plumbers, or carpenters (MikeroweWORKS). Trade professions are necessary for society to function and generally do not require four years of training; however, a majority of young adults choose college over learning a trade thus creating the “skills gap.” According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, trade jobs will make up 45% of the projected job openings in 2014, but as of 2012 only 25% of the workforce had the skills to fill those jobs (“Is a College”). Rowe stated, “We need to stop promoting higher education at the expense of every other form of learning... We are so focused on getting into the corner office, we forgot how to build the corner office.”

Furthermore, many people question the value of a college education when so many people are earning degrees. A college degree is seen by many as a way to stand out to
employers; however, if everyone has a degree, how does one stand out? As Megan McArdle states in her article *The College Bubble*, “If employers have mostly been using college degrees to weed out the inept and the unmotivated, then getting more people into college simply means more competition for a limited number of jobs. And in the current environment, that means a lot of people borrowing money for jobs they won’t get.” In order to stand out, many students go on to earn their masters or doctorate degree only furthering themselves in debt. With these many negative aspects concerning higher education, many people have come to question the worth of a four-year degree.

Today, young people across the nation are raised to believe that they must attend college if they want to get a good job and find success in their future. As Dimitrius Graham stated, “I can’t not go to college” (qtd. In Carlson). The statistics prove that earning a four-year degree improves one’s chances of employment, attaining better job benefits, and making a larger salary. However, the costs of attending higher education institutions has risen so drastically in the recent times that many people have begun to question their true worth. High student debt, unemployment, underemployment, and other factors have also contributed to the growing concerns. This controversy over higher education is becoming a topic of ever increasing debate in the nation today. With a voice of optimism, Mr. Graham stated, “I can be an artist or an opera singer, or I can be a really good teacher who has a good life. Either way, it'll work out.”
Works Cited


