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## Four common lies about higher education

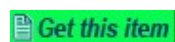
Strauss, Valerie.

*The Washington Post (Online)*, Washington, D.C.: WP Company LLC d/b/a The Washington Post. Jan 3, 2019.

# The Washington Post

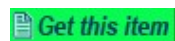
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### Abstract

None available.

### Full Text

It seems as though we now get a steady stream of reports, statements, musings and other expressions of the sentiment that college isn't worth the money.

In fact, a 2017 poll by the Pew Research Center found that 58 percent of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents said colleges and universities have a negative effect on the country, while just 36 percent said their effect is positive.

This post looks at some of the assumptions — or, as the author says, "lies," made about higher education that feed into this kind of thinking. This was written by Cathy N. Davidson, distinguished professor and founding director of the Futures Initiative at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York and the DeVarney professor emeritus of interdisciplinary studies at Duke University.

She is the author, most recently, of "The New Education: How to Revolutionize the University to Prepare Students for a World in Flux," winner of the 2019 Ness Book Prize from the Association of American Colleges

and Universities. This month, she will be speaking at the Nobel Prize committee's forum on the future of learning in Santiago, Chile.

*By Cathy N. Davidson* If it's January, you can be sure that high school students and their parents are sweating over their final college application deadlines — and pundits are busy penning articles and books proclaiming that "college isn't worth it."

Typically, the articles point to high prestige employers (Google, Amazon, Apple) that no longer require a college degree for their jobs or fabulously successful Americans (Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg) who dropped out of college. It all sounds good. Then you look at the jobs and realize they tend to be low-prestige, low-wage positions for which a college degree was probably never required in the first place. And you look at the demographic data and realize that billionaires (whether they have a degree or not) send their own children to college.

What's up? Here are the four most common lies you are hearing and some common-sense facts to keep you and your teenager on an even keel while considering and applying for college.

*Lie #1: For successful people, college is a waste of time.*

If this argument were true, you would assume that the nation's wealthiest and most powerful citizens would be keeping their own kids out of college. However, a whopping 92 percent of those in America's top 5 percent income bracket go to college. A 2015 study by the team of educational economists led by Harvard professor Raj Chetty reveals a straight line from the people least to most likely to attend college and that line correlates precisely with wealth. Even the economists were surprised to see such a clear correlation: The more money you have, the more likely you are to send your child to college. Although 50 percent of Republicans may report that they no longer believe college is worth it, the rich ones are making sure their own kids are filling out all those admission forms.

*Lie #2: Those who are not affluent don't need college.*

Wrong again. A degree ensures an even bigger boost in income levels for those in the lowest 20 percent income bracket. A college education remains the single best investment a family in the lowest income level can make to ensure its children rise to significantly higher income levels. College changes lives. College is the single largest determinant of social mobility for those with the lowest income. Period.

*Lie #3: Everyone should go to college.*

It may seem contradictory to point out that college isn't for everyone but it is not. Not everyone wants to go to college — but, in our highly technical, specialized world, just about everyone needs some form of advanced training even to fill out job applications these days. We need to do a far better job of reintroducing non-college vocational training in our secondary schools and supporting our community colleges which do offer such training.

Since the 1980s, almost everything about secondary and even primary schools has become implicitly "college prep"— which means "testable knowledge," narrowing offerings, career pathways, possibilities for those not interested in college but who desire training for meaningful lives. Too much vocational training has become the province of often predatory for-profit training schools with high tuition costs and low graduation rates.

Even if the robots are coming, there are many jobs that require human hands and human intelligence, judgment, care and style. We need hairdressers and firefighters, physical therapists and dental hygienists, mechanics and actors, sculptors and dancers and health-care workers.

*Lie #4: Many college graduates don't earn as much money as they expected or used to earn because college didn't prepare them for it.*

It is true, actually, that many graduates earn less than they used to, but not for the reason pundits stage: that college is "behind the times" and doesn't make students "workforce ready." The real problem is that the workforce itself no longer pays adequately for a wide range of formerly middle-class occupations that are vital to society and that require postsecondary education and even graduate training in some cases.

I agree that college is behind the times, and I've dedicated my career to making it as relevant as possible. But the most relevant education in the world cannot change a labor market rigged against the middle class. This is a social problem, not a higher education problem. For example, although we now have a teacher shortage in all 50 states, teachers make 17 percent less than median equivalent college-educated workers, whereas, two decades ago, they made 4 percent less than the median. What college student can afford to be a teacher anymore?

The underemployment of recent college graduates is as significant a social problem as soaring college tuition debt. The stereotype of the college graduate living in their parents' basement does not account for the radically changed workplace that under-compensates such professions as teacher, health-care worker, social worker or librarian (the "feminized" professions). We might add journalist, accountant and many other entry-level formerly middle-class occupations.

For those attending professional schools, say law or medicine, we have similar problems. Law school graduates with hundreds of thousands in debt cannot afford to be defense lawyers or district attorneys. Newly minted doctors, carrying an average debt of \$250,000, can no longer afford to be general practitioners or to practice OB/GYN, geriatrics or public health, or to work in rural or underserved urban areas.

In my own profession of college teaching, more than 75 percent of faculty openings across all institutions of higher education are for "adjuncts," part-time faculty, paid by the course, with no security and no voice in the institution.

Too many college students are being taught by part-time "uberized" contingent faculty — and face similar employment obstacles when they graduate. Yet, without a college degree, the economic obstacles are even worse.

Again, this is a labor problem in our society, not, as pundits will be telling you, the fault of a college education that does not "prepare" you for the labor market.

I am part of a growing cadre of educators working to redesign higher education for the challenges students face today. Some of us work on the problem of refunding public education: State cutbacks over the past two decades have resulted in soaring tuition rates and mounting student debt. Others work on food and housing insecurity for students who are at college. Others work on relevant curricular redesign and new ways of learning, in the classroom and beyond. Higher education can, and should, be revolutionized for the complex world our students are inheriting.

However, in the meantime, while we are working to innovate in our colleges, high school seniors and their parents need to close their ears to the false, even fraudulent, idea that "college isn't worth it." It is.

Credit: By Valerie Strauss

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