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WE SEND TOO MANY STUDENTS TO COLLEGE

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Among my saddest moments as a career counselor is when I hear a story like 1
this: “I wasn’t a good student in high school, but I wanted to prove to myself
that I can get a college diploma—I’d be the first one in my family to do it. But
it’s been six years and I still have 45 units to go.”

I have a hard time telling such people the killer statistic: According to the 2
U.S. Department of Education, if you graduated in the bottom 40% of your
high school class and went to college, 76 of 100 won’t earn a diploma, even if
given 8½ years. Yet colleges admit and take the money from hundreds of thou-
sands of such students each year!

Even worse, most of those college dropouts leave college having learned 3
little of practical value (see below) and with devastated self-esteem and a
mountain of debt. Perhaps worst of all, those people rarely leave with a career
path likely to lead to more than McWages. So it’s not surprising that when you
hop into a cab or walk into a restaurant, you’re likely to meet workers who
spent years and their family’s life savings on college, only to end up with a job
they could have done as a high school dropout.

Perhaps yet more surprising, even the high school students who are fully 4
qualified to attend college are increasingly unlikely to derive enough benefit to
justify the often six-figure cost and four to eight years it takes to graduate—and
only 40% of freshmen graduate in four years; 45% never graduate at all. Colleges
love to trumpet the statistic that, over their lifetimes, college graduates earn more
than nongraduates. But that’s terribly misleading because you could lock the
college-bound in a closet for four years and they’d earn more than the pool of
non-college-bound—they’re brighter, more motivated, and have better family
connections. Too, the past advantage of college graduates in the job market is
eroding: ever more students are going to college at the same time as ever more
employers are offshoring ever more professional jobs. So college graduates are
forced to take some very nonprofessional jobs. For example, Jill Plesnarski holds
a bachelor’s degree in biology from the private (\$160,000 published total cost for
four years) Moravian College. She had hoped to land a job as a medical research
lab tech, but those positions paid so little that she opted for a job at a New Jersey
sewage treatment plant. Today, although she’s since been promoted, she must
still occasionally wash down the tower that holds raw sewage.

Or take Brian Morris. After completing his bachelor’s degree in liberal arts 5
from the University of California, Berkeley, he was unable to find a decent-
paying job, so he went yet deeper into debt to get a master’s degree from the
private Mills College. Despite those degrees, the best job he could land was

teaching a three-month-long course for \$3,000. At that point, Brian was married and had a baby, so to support them, he reluctantly took a job as a truck driver. Now Brian says, “I just *have* to get out of trucking.”

Colleges are quick to argue that a college education is more about enlightenment than employment. That may be the biggest deception of all. There is a Grand Canyon of difference between what the colleges tout in their brochures and websites and the reality.

“Colleges are businesses, and students are a cost item.”

Colleges are businesses, and students are a cost item while research is a profit center. So colleges tend to educate students in the cheapest way possible: large lecture classes, with small classes staffed by rock-bottom-cost graduate students and, in some cases, even by undergraduate students. Professors who bring in big research dollars are almost always rewarded, while even a fine teacher who doesn’t bring in the research bucks is often fired or relegated to the lowest rung: lecturer.

So, no surprise, in the definitive *Your First College Year* nationwide survey conducted by UCLA researchers (data collected in 2005, reported in 2007), only 16.4% percent of students were very satisfied with the overall quality of instruction they received and 28.2% were neutral, dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied. A follow-up survey of seniors found that 37% reported being “frequently bored in class,” up from 27.5% as freshmen.

College students may be dissatisfied with instruction, but despite that, do they learn? A 2006 study funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts found that 50% of college *seniors* failed a test that required them to do such basic tasks as interpret a table about exercise and blood pressure, understand the arguments of newspaper editorials, or compare credit card offers. Almost 20% of seniors had only basic quantitative skills. For example, the students could not estimate if their car had enough gas to get to the gas station.

What to do? Colleges, which receive billions of tax dollars with minimum oversight, should be held at least as accountable as companies are. For example, when some Firestone tires were defective, the government nearly forced it out of business. Yet year after year, colleges turn out millions of defective products: students who drop out or graduate with far too little benefit for the time and money spent. Yet not only do the colleges escape punishment; they’re rewarded with ever greater taxpayer-funded student grants and loans, which allow colleges to raise their tuitions yet higher.

What should parents and guardians do?

1. If your student’s high school grades and SAT or ACT are in the bottom half of his high school class, resist colleges’ attempts to woo him. Their marketing to your child does *not* indicate that the colleges believe he will succeed there. Colleges make money whether or not a student learns, whether or not she graduates, and whether or not he finds good employment. If a physician recommended a treatment that cost a fortune and required years of effort without disclosing the poor chances of it working,

she'd be sued and lose in any court in the land. But colleges—one of America's most sacred cows—somehow seem immune.

So let the buyer beware. Consider nondegree options:

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- Apprenticeship programs (a great portal to apprenticeship websites: www.khake.com/page58.html)
- Short career-preparation programs at community colleges
- The military
- On-the-job training, especially at the elbow of a successful small business owner

2. Let's say your student *is* in the top half of his high school class and is motivated to attend college by more than the parties, being able to say she went to college, and the piece of paper. Then have her apply to perhaps a dozen colleges. Colleges vary less than you might think, yet financial aid awards can vary wildly. It's often wise to choose the college that requires you to pay the least cash and take on the smallest loan. College is among the few products where you don't get what you pay for—price does not indicate quality.

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3. If your child is one of the rare breed who, on graduating high school, knows what he wants to do and isn't unduly attracted to college academics or the *Animal House* environment that college dorms often are, then take solace in the fact that in deciding to forgo college, he is preceded by scores of others who have successfully taken that noncollege road less traveled. Examples: the three most successful entrepreneurs in the computer industry, Bill Gates, Michael Dell, and Apple cofounder Steve Wozniak, all do not have a college degree. Here are some others: Malcolm X, Rush Limbaugh, Barbra Streisand, PBS *NewsHour's* Nina Totenberg, Tom Hanks, Maya Angelou, Ted Turner, Ellen DeGeneres, former governor Jesse Ventura, IBM founder Thomas Watson, architect Frank Lloyd Wright, former Israeli president David Ben-Gurion, Woody Allen, Warren Beatty, Domino's pizza chain founder Tom Monaghan, folksinger Joan Baez, director Quentin Tarantino, ABC-TV's Peter Jennings, Wendy's founder Dave Thomas, Thomas Edison, Blockbuster Video founder and owner of the Miami Dolphins Wayne Huizenga, William Faulkner, Jane Austen, McDonald's founder Ray Kroc, Oracle founder Larry Ellison, Henry Ford, cosmetics magnate Helena Rubinstein, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Graham Bell, Coco Chanel, Walter Cronkite, Walt Disney, Bob Dylan, Leonardo DiCaprio, cookie maker Debbi Fields, Sally Field, Jane Fonda, Buckminster Fuller, DreamWorks cofounder David Geffen, *Roots* author Alex Haley, Ernest Hemingway, Dustin Hoffman, famed anthropologist Richard Leakey, airplane inventors Wilbur and Orville Wright, Madonna, satirist H. L. Mencken, Martina Navratilova, Rosie O'Donnell, Nathan Pritikin (Pritikin diet), chef Wolfgang Puck, Robert Redford, oil billionaire

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John D. Rockefeller, Eleanor Roosevelt, NBC mogul David Sarnoff, and seven U.S. presidents from Washington to Truman.

4. College is like a chain saw. Only in certain situations is it the right tool. ¹⁶
Encourage your child to choose the right tool for her post–high school experience.

➤ AT ISSUE: THE FOUR PILLARS OF ARGUMENT

1. Which of the following statements best summarizes Nemko’s position? Why?
 - “We Send Too Many Students to College” (title)
 - “There is a Grand Canyon of difference between what the colleges tout in their brochures and websites and the reality” (para. 6).
 - “Colleges, which receive billions of tax dollars with minimum oversight, should be held at least as accountable as companies are” (10).
 - “College is like a chain saw. Only in certain situations is it the right tool” (16).
2. Where does Nemko support his thesis with appeals to logic? Where does he use appeals to the emotions? Where does he use an appeal to authority? Which of these three appeals do you find the most convincing? Why?
3. List the arguments Nemko uses to support his thesis in paragraphs 2–4.
4. In paragraph 4, Nemko says, “Colleges love to trumpet the statistic that, over their lifetimes, college graduates earn more than nongraduates.” In paragraph 6, he says, “Colleges are quick to argue that a college education is more about enlightenment than employment.” How does he refute these two opposing arguments? Are his refutations effective?
5. Nemko draws an analogy between colleges and businesses, identifying students as a “cost item” (7). Does this analogy—including his characterization of weak students as “defective products” (10)—work for you? Why or why not?
6. What specific solutions does Nemko propose for the problem he identifies? To whom does he address these suggestions—and, in fact, his entire argument?
7. Reread paragraph 15. Do you consider the list of successful people who do not hold college degrees to be effective support for Nemko’s position? What kind of appeal does this paragraph make? How might you refute it?