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Does College Have a Purpose?

What is the purpose of college? This is a complex question, and the answer might be different for everyone. Many may be questioning if it is even worth it anymore. It is worth it; the purpose of college is for political, economic, and personal development. First, this essay will discuss the history of college and what the old purpose was. Then discuss how its purpose is now to help people to be able to practice skills useful in politics which affects the entire country, help people gain higher paying jobs which will help our economy overall, and is a step towards adulthood for most people. Next, how some may believe the purpose is different. Lastly, how colleges should proceed towards this purpose.

To begin, Universities began as a group of scholars who got together to better their education. When they were first formed not many people attended, it was a few upper-class white males. As explained by Delbanco in “Ivory Tower” college began as a commitment to students that they could live lives of meaning and purpose (Delbanco). Many movements toward education have happened in history constructing the way things work now. Beginning with the Morrill Act passed in 1862. In the article “The Morrill Act as Racial Contract: Settler Colonialism and U.S. Higher Education” written by Rosalie Fanshel, she explains the history of the Morrill Act. The Morrill Act put in place land-grant institutions with the idea of equality and opportunity for education for all American citizens, which sounds great but during that time it only included white, Christian, men so it was not equal (Fanshel p. 1). There were multiple

waves of the Morrill Act constantly trying to improve these land-grant institutions. The second wave was in 1890 which granted access to black Americans, and the third wave in 1994 gave land-grant status to tribal colleges, but as stated by Fashel, the last two waves did not “benefit from the same opportunities” (Fashel p.1). This Act that was meant to bring equality did not fully meet its goal.

Moving forward in history the Higher Education Act of 1965 was passed which intended for universities to be all access and inclusive, education was meant for everyone. This worked for a while, but it was not sustainable with America’s changing economy. Pell grants were introduced to help lower-income families be able to still attain education. In the journal *Pell Grants and Student Success: Evidence from the Universe of Federal Aid*, written by Amanda Eng and Jordan Matsudaira published in the *Journal of Labor Economics* they state that one hope of Pell Grants is that with help with income and college payments students would focus more on studying and less on work (p. S414-415). Eng and Matsudaira did a study to see if students with Pell Grants had a higher completion rate for their degrees. The results of this study showed that having a Pell Grant did not show higher results in completion and one reason for this could be that Pell Grants don’t cover enough of the expenses anymore. As stated in the film *Ivory Tower* “In the 1970s, a Pell Grant was more than enough to pay for tuition at an average state institution. But today a Pell Grant pays for a fraction of tuition”. With college being so pricey now, many people wonder if college is even worth attending.

Next, College can help people greatly with the skills they need for politics. In the U.S. politics affect most aspects of our lives and each vote counts. It is important for voting citizens to be educated and be able to have rational thinking skills. Some of these skills you may learn in high school but in college, they go even more in-depth and fine-tune all these skills. In the film,

Ivory Tower by Andrew Rossi, Bennet Bergman, a second-year student at Deep Springs College, says “the college classroom is perhaps the best rehearsal for democracy” (Bergman). This describes how people learn how to properly engage in political ideas while in college and properly respond to others’ ideas if they don’t agree. College does not just help with adjusting to democracy and being able to express ideas, but also helps with critical thinking skills. In college, they teach how to pick out fallacies and process information given to you so you can make better decisions. This is how college will help you to make better political decisions that will overall affect the entire country.

Next, college helps better our economy. Studies show that people with college degrees make more money than those without one. Andrew Delbanco states in his article “3 Reasons college still matter” in *The Boston Globe* “Some estimates put the worth of a bachelor of arts degree at about a million dollars in incremental lifetime earnings” (Delbanco). Making more money is not only beneficial for the person but the country’s economy. America mostly runs on capitalism and our money running through the country. If citizens can make more money and be consumers, they benefit the flow of money through the economy.

Next, College serves to be a step into adulthood for most. A lot of people enter college right after graduating high school when they are around 18. This is usually their first step away from their parents and getting to live on their own. This is a critical step towards growing up because it allows you space from your parents and to have to start to learn things on your own while still being in a lightly controlled environment. While in college you are mostly surrounded by others around your age probably going through similar situations as you so this can be a good support system for your development. People grow and develop a lot in the year they are in college. It helps you to realize some things on your own and make new friends in a new

environment. Many people may not view college for this purpose, but this is an important reason to go. Delbanco says, “What he meant was that college had opened his senses as well as his mind to experiences that would otherwise be foreclosed to him” (Delbanco). This describes how attending college could shape you to be an entirely different person. You get presented with different scenarios and get to slowly grow rather than be pushed out in the world with no preparation.

Now, how the purpose of college could be viewed differently. Some people argue that the purpose of college is entirely for job preparation. Drew Faust, the president of Harvard, states in the film “Ivory Tower” “We aren’t educating students for a first job. We want to give them the abilities to think and reason and question for a lifetime” (Faust). This shows that college is not just meant to be job training and proves the point that it is for critical thinking skills. Many people also believe that college degrees are essential and feel forced to attend. This is not the case though, while for a while it seemed that you were likely to get a good job with a degree it is turning around. Written by Steve Lohr in the article “A 4-year Degree Isn’t Quite the Job Requirement It Used to Be” published in *The New York Times*, more and more big companies are no longer requiring a college degree. You no longer need to force yourself to go to college for this reason which could make the experience dreadful but if you go for your own reasons and development, you could enjoy it.

Proceeding from here colleges should continue to educate students on critical thinking skills. The purpose of college should continue to provide people to grow and develop. One problem a lot of people struggle with today and why many must question if college is worth it is because of tuition cost. This is a problem in America that may not be reversible but working forward there are things to improve it. Stephen Lehmkuhl the chancellor at the University of

Minnesota at Rochester states in his book *Campus with Purpose: Building a Mission-Driven Campus*, “in order to create and sustain a campus with purpose, I would manage change in relation to the past history of higher education and anticipate change in an uncertain future” (p. 28). Lehmkuhl had hoped he would be able to start from scratch when becoming chancellor and build a good future from the start, but he quickly realized he would need to work with past mistakes. Colleges are on the right track to improving people’s lives, but we could make them better by trying to find a solution to tuition costs. Lehmkuhl’s idea to solve this problem was for each college to serve a specific purpose instead of trying to be everything for everyone. By colleges having so many different degree programs and all competing to be the best it ends up making tuition much higher and unattainable. If each university focused on one or only a few specific things and have a few degree programs it could make them more affordable making it easier for everyone to be able to attend.

In conclusion, college is worth it! Its purpose is political, economic, and self-developmental. College is not only a good personal experience that you can benefit from but also helps everyone around you by improving the economy and allowing you to make better political decisions. Though you may think it has a different purpose these are three purposes you should consider. If you or anyone you know is deciding if they should attend college, you can inform them of these reasons to hopefully persuade them to go.

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