



Column: Yes, a college education is worth the costs

By Rodney K. Smith

Updated 12/6/2011 5:29 PM

Recommend

291

60

0



I can imagine a frustrated graduate in an [Occupy Wall Street](#) protest carrying a placard reading, "Worthless degree. Will not repay my student loan debt."

A recent [Pew Research Center](#) survey revealed that 57% of Americans [rate the job](#) that our higher education system is doing in providing value for money spent by students and their families as only fair (42%) or poor (15%); only 53% of families report that they are saving to help pay for their children's education. More than half of those ages 18 to 34 who do not have a bachelor's degree say they would rather work and make money than pursue higher education.

Concerns regarding student indebtedness and educational quality are legitimate, but we are losing our appreciation for education as an investment and stewardship. Many are more inclined to spend money on a fancy car or on a less-than-modest home than to invest in education. Many in the rising generation fail to see education as a stewardship worthy of investment on their part.

We face major unemployment in the [United States](#) today. We talk of jobs bills but fail to see the value of education in this calculation. Who populates the ranks of the unemployed? According to Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) [for 2010](#):

- 14.9% of those without a high school diploma
- 10.3% of those with a high school education
- 7% of those with an associate degree
- 5.4% of those with a bachelor's degree
- 2.4% of those with a professional degree
- 1.9% of those with a doctoral degree.

See a trend here?

We talk about stimulating the economy by increasing the tax base. Once again, educational attainment correlates with income, according to BLS. Here's the average weekly income for those who have jobs:

- \$444 for those with less than a high school degree
- \$626 for those with a high school degree

By Butch Dill, AP

Tough entry into the job market: The national unemployment rate is 5.4% among those with a bachelor's degree and 4% for those with a master's degree.

Ads by Google

College Degrees

Online and Campus Degree Programs.
University of Phoenix®. Learn More.

[Phoenix.edu](#)

ITT Tech - Official Site

100+ Locations & Online Programs
Official ITT Tech Site. Get Info!

[www2.itt-tech.edu](#)

Medical Billing & Coding

Get Certified in Medical Billing & Coding. Online or On Campus.

[www.topcareerschools.com/MedBilling](#)

USATODAY OPINION

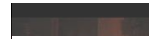
Columns

In addition to its own editorials, USA TODAY publishes a variety of opinions from outside writers. On political and policy matters, we publish opinions from across the political spectrum.

Roughly half of our columns come from our Board of Contributors, a group whose interests range from education to religion to sports to the economy. Their charge is to chronicle American culture by telling the stories, large and small, that collectively make us what we are.

We also publish weekly columns by Al Neuharth, USA TODAY's founder, and DeWayne Wickham, who writes primarily on matters of race but on other subjects as well. That leaves plenty of room for other views

Videos you may be interested in



Claudia's return
Athens suicide



proper role of
sports in higher ...



Sponsored Link
inside a Heart
Attack
[newsmax.com](#)

by **Taboola**
[More videos](#)



Most Popular

Stories

- Newsman Mike Wallace dead at 93
- Senator appears to call Obama 'stupid'
- Report: 1 dead, 3 wounded in Texas beach...
- California teen breaks up with teacher...
- 2 suspects arrested in Oklahoma shootings

Videos

- Raw Video: Tebow draws crowd to Easter service
- Raw Video: Coast Guard Sinks Ghost Ship
- Raw Video: Nigeria car bomber kills dozens

Photos

- Editorial Cartoons
- Mike Wallace 1918-2012
- Titanic - A hundred years later we are still in awe

Most Popular E-mail Newsletter

Sign up to get:

Top viewed stories, photo galleries and community posts of the day

Most popular right now:

[Tiger's week anything but masterful](#)



Sign up for USA TODAY E-mail newsletters

- \$767 for those with an associate degree
- \$1,038 for those with a bachelor's degree
- \$1,550 for those with a doctoral degree

To worldly wealth, education adds richness. As president of a small liberal arts college with a strong core curriculum, I remember when one of our football players stopped by my office to complain about having to take music history. I urged him to give it his best effort. He was required to attend four concerts. I observed him at each one. At the first, he was disengaged. At the second, he was mildly attentive. At the third, he was enjoying the music. At the fourth, he approached me during intermission and said, "Wasn't the dissonance in the third movement of that last piece wonderful?" Today, as an investment banker, his education provides him with a job and the love of music fills his home.

Graduates enjoy increased opportunities for employment at higher rates of pay, providing them with the wherewithal to pay off debt, if they are wise stewards of that debt. It also brings joy into lives in a world that is increasingly stressful.

Our family views education as an investment and stewardship. My father grew up in Oklahoma during the early years of the [Great Depression](#). He was the only living child of a hardworking farmer and a devoted mother. When Dad completed eighth grade, my grandfather believed his only son would work on the farm. My grandmother, however, understood the door that an education could open even in tough economic times. She persuaded Grandfather to permit Dad to finish high school.

Dad worked hard and completed high school at the age of 16. At last, Grandpa was to have his wish. Dad would work on the farm, easing the economic and physical burdens Grandpa carried.

But Grandmother intervened again. She begged Grandpa to permit my father to go to college.

After reflection, Grandpa made the most difficult walk of his lifetime. He walked to the chicken coop, where he did his banking. Taking a shovel in his work-worn hands, Grandpa dug up a mason jar that held all the family's savings. He offered the jar and its precious contents to Dad, saying, "Here boy, go make something of yourself."

Realizing that his family was sacrificing all their savings by investing in his education, Dad became a steward of those funds. He received his bachelor's degree and then went on to the [University of Oklahoma](#), where he graduated second in his law school class in 1936. Dad flipped hamburgers to ensure that the family savings would suffice for him to obtain his education. Jobs were hard to come by when Dad graduated, so he opened his own practice and lived in a home with a dirt floor. He worked long hours, but I remember him sharing the great books he discovered in the course of his education with me.

Our family was changed by the long walk Grandpa took to the chicken coop. Education is more than an investment in our family. It is a treasure. I followed my father to college and law school, and my children have sought higher education. We have been transformed by a sacrifice made two generations ago by a loving, if not fully convinced, grandfather and a persistent grandmother.

Rodney K. Smith is a law professor at [Thomas Jefferson School of Law](#) and formerly served as president of [Southern Virginia University](#).

