

# The American Conservative

## Why the ‘Case Against Education’ Won’t Fly

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His most recent book, *The Case Against Education: Why the Educational System is a Waste of Time and Money*, and [an essay](#) on the same theme in *The Atlantic*, “The World Might Be Better off Without College for Everyone,” make unmistakably clear what he thinks about our “glut of sheepskin credentials.” Caplan never hides his views about how worthless he thinks college is as a rite of passage for most students. And the journalistic establishment cannot dismiss him as a grumpy reactionary. An associate at the Cato Institute, he has publicly proclaimed his support for open borders.

Having been a professor for over 40 years at a number of academic institutions, I find Caplan’s main argument to be indisputable. The vast majority of my students, particularly those towards the end of my career, had little interest in the material I was trying to transmit, whether classical Greek, European history, or modern political theory. Those relatively few who gravitated toward my fields entered professional careers that paid them far less than those who majored in engineering or accounting. And that assumes, of course, that my majors managed to land decent jobs after graduation at all. Caplan also rolls out statistics showing most college students spend shockingly little time studying, and when polled express utter boredom with most of their courses. The overwhelming majority who graduate admit to having forgotten most of what they learned even before graduation. Although Caplan makes these points by citing multiple statistics, for me they are entirely self-evident, like knowing that my pet Basset will beg for food every time I open the refrigerator.

Caplan makes a number of interesting arguments before getting to his main point, and it’s possible to consider them independent of his overriding thesis about higher education as a waste of time and money. For example, Caplan shows that an individual who hopes to earn a decent living would be a fool not to try to acquire a bachelor’s degree. Whether or not a prospective employer overvalues “sheepskin credentials,” the bearer of that asset will earn on average \$20,000 more every year than those without such credentials. The degree-holder is “signaling” his higher capabilities to prospective employers. Further, someone with a bachelor’s degree has far better chances of finding employment than someone without that degree. Even a high school graduate will enjoy better job opportunities than a high school dropout: “High school and four-

year college diplomas are especially lucrative: crossing each of these thresholds boosts income by almost a third.” No wonder that in 2015, 69.2 percent of high school graduates went on to college. In 2017, 20.4 million students were enrolled full-time in college, up by 5.1 million since 2000. At present (and the number is growing every day) 30.4 percent of those aged 25 and above hold bachelor’s degrees, and 10.9 percent of these baccalaureates hold graduate degrees.

Caplan argues (not always persuasively) that those who can’t stand college classes would do better looking for employment after high school. But his statistics suggest to me that this might be a poor choice. Even students who hate their studies and major in fields that won’t yield high salaries do much better with a college degree than those who look for jobs after high school. Caplan proves incontrovertibly that it’s much harder to move up the wage ladder or marry a high earner without these credentials. Except for rising tuitions (at least partly caused by government loans), the “college experience” is not really a hassle. What’s not to like about sampling food court dishes, playing video games in one’s room, tweeting between classes, and meeting a significant other?

*The Case Against Education* is making in the end a moral case against what is often misleadingly described as “higher education.” Adolescents reside in designated facilities for four years or more and are flooded with “learning” they neither need nor want. Most college students (there are of course exceptions) could happily live without having to do any required reading. Indeed, these college residents wouldn’t get too upset if professors never showed up for class, providing they received their obligatory credits and personalized degrees. Why then should employers judge job applicants on the basis of these artificial credentials? Wouldn’t it be simpler if applicants were assessed based on their skill sets and whether or not they were a good fit for the workforce? Caplan is undoubtedly right to raise such questions.

But the overvaluing of empty degrees has some political and economic justification. One can imagine the outcry if the economy had to absorb those tens of millions of high school graduates who are now warehoused in colleges. Perhaps there would be an eventual economic adjustment as employers stopped looking for sheepskin credentials. But in the meantime the labor market would be glutted with frustrated job seekers.

The main reason I can’t imagine Caplan’s wish being fulfilled is that people are not likely to forfeit an entitlement already granted. Politicians have proclaimed college education to be a “human right,” which means the state is expected to provide more and more of the same stuff while paying for or hiding the costs. George Leef at the James G. Martin Center has documented the rage generated by Betsy DeVos, Donald Trump’s secretary of education, when she tightened the rules for those seeking release from student loans. Over 87,000 requests for debt release had piled up by the time DeVos began a critical appraisal of them. Not surprisingly, Senator Elizabeth Warren and a number of her colleagues went after DeVos for her supposed insensitivity to students who had been “defrauded” by colleges. Also not surprisingly, DeVos’s critics did not demand that we defund the institutions accused of this charge.

Given our political state, DeVos's action may be the best we can hope for in restraining the education racket, which only seems to disproportionately benefit Americans, particularly those struggling to find places in a new economy without drowning in debt in the process.