



College for All Would Set Many Up for Trouble

By [Neal McCluskey](#)

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Say not everyone should go to college, and you're heading for a world of rhetorical hurt. "How dare you consign people to second-class citizenship," you'll be angrily queried. "That's just an excuse to leave kids behind," you'll hear. But whether you think everyone is college material or not, reality is inescapable: The economy simply can't handle an America full of degrees. Not even close.

Some simple facts about college and the economy should cause everyone, no matter what they *want* reality to be, to pause and think.

The first reality is that huge percentages of people who enter college, for everything from [certificate programs](#) to [bachelor's degrees](#), likely don't finish. There are many reasons for this, but the end result is the same: millions of people have been encouraged to go to college who haven't gotten what they expected or wanted. And it has cost both the students and taxpayers a whole lot of money.

Okay. But if you finish, everything is Easy Street, right? Hardly.

In 2012, 44 percent of those who had just completed a four-year degree ended up in jobs that didn't require their credential, and typically a third of all bachelor's holders are underemployed. And while a degree may help the holder to advance farther or faster than someone without one, the New York Fed [recently reported](#) that the effects of "underemployment" have been getting worse, not better, over the last couple of decades. So on top of the millions who enter but don't finish college are millions more who finish but reap little benefit from having gone.

Then there's credential inflation. As the number of sheepskins has risen we've seen [declines in time spent studying](#), [dropping literacy](#) among people with degrees, and employers [calling for degrees](#) for jobs that haven't typically needed them or appreciably changed. Taken together, higher education appears to be delivering less learning per graduate while employers are increasingly using degree-holding as a basic signal of candidate value. And that signal appears to be more "there must be something wrong with this guy" for someone without a degree than "this person must be very good" for someone with one.

Of course, credential inflation is a strong economic argument for any given person to go to college; you have to just to keep pace. Economy-wide, however, it screams “stop the insanity!” It is essentially a huge time and resource sinkhole as millions of people pursue studies that confer few, if any, economically useful skills or abilities.

Perhaps the strongest economic argument against setting college-for-all as a baseline, however, is that most of the predicted job growth, at least in the near future, will be in occupations that do not require any college study. And that is even with serious credential inflation.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, of the [30 occupations](#) expected to see the highest total growth by 2022 – not the fastest growing, but producing the most jobs – only 10 typically require any formal postsecondary study to enter. Only five ordinarily require a bachelor’s degree. The vast majority typically require no more than a high school diploma or GED.

Are these the most prestigious and highest-paying jobs imaginable? No, many are retail, construction, medical service, and other generally blue collar positions – just the sort of employment often derided as consigning people to “second-class” lives. But starting at the bottom with these sorts of jobs can, and often does, lead to advancement, and several pay pretty well. And we have to answer the question: Is it better for students and taxpayers to spend time and money preparing for great jobs that don’t exist, or saving time and resources by dealing with employment reality?

For anyone with the aptitude and desire to pursue in-demand, college-level skills and knowledge, we need an education system that enables them to do so. But pushing everyone into college? That’s setting up millions of people, in the name of helping them, for failure.

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