

THE CASE FOR COLLEGE

By CollegiateParent

As you help your high school student plan for what comes next, do you find yourself wondering if college is the wisest choice?

According to the College Board's most recent Trends in Higher Education report, tuition continues to rise faster than inflation, financial aid and income. Housing and meals, class and activity fees, and textbooks add to the overall cost. In addition, for many students, time spent in college means time out of the workforce.

College is a big investment. What if the financial sacrifice you and your student make now doesn't pay off in the future?

THE EXCEPTION AND THE RULE

We've all heard about young people with \$100,000 history degrees working at Starbucks after graduation, worrying they'll never be able to pay off their loans. If you know someone in this situation, you know how very real and frustrating it is.

However, this kind of story is the exception to the rule. The "rule," as the 2016 College Board report outlines, is that a significant percentage of student borrowers (38 percent) owe less than \$10,000 in student loans. The "rule" is that those borrowing in the \$100,000 range are primarily graduate students, not undergraduates (and many of those grad students will enter highly paid, specialized fields).

In fact, the College Board discovered that the average student borrower pays off their loans and recoups the money lost from being out of the workforce by the time they're 34.

It's true that many good jobs don't require college degrees. Real estate agents, law enforcement officers, property managers, electricians and other mechanic, installation and repair occupations require on-the-job training, apprenticeships or certification programs in place of a traditional four-year degree.

Even in fields traditionally requiring degrees, you may know of marketers who never studied marketing, self-taught website developers, and entrepreneurs who created successful businesses out of trial-and-error and a little bit of genius.

It is possible to bring home a good paycheck without a college degree. But here are three important measurements of the value of a college degree:

1. People with a bachelor's degree make 67 percent more than those with just a high school diploma.

Even within the same company or industry, employees with four-year degrees are higher up on the pay scale than those without, according to the College Board report. Across ten different job categories (ranging from retail sales to sales reps and first-line supervisors), those with a bachelor's degree consistently made more than those with a high school diploma.

2. The unemployment rate for those with bachelor's degrees is significantly lower than for those with just a high school diploma.

The College Board reports that "in 2015, when the unemployment rate for 25- to 34-year-olds with at least a bachelor's degree was 2.6 percent, 8.1 percent of high school graduates in this age range were unemployed." Your chances of being unemployed are more than twice as high without a four-year degree.

Studies show that on average college graduates are also more likely to own a home and save for retirement.

3. The number of jobs requiring a bachelor's degree is growing.

The Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce predicts that "by 2020, 65 percent of all jobs in the economy will require postsecondary education and training beyond high school."

Rather than decreasing, it seems that the value of a college degree is only increasing. Why? What makes a four-year degree so beneficial?

COLLEGE PROVIDES UNIQUE RESOURCES

College provides skills and resources that set students up for career success. One benefit is the interaction with dozens of professors who are experts in their industry. Most professors have helpful contacts and are willing to write recommendation letters and offer advice about applying to and

working in their industries. As a networking opportunity alone, college could very well pay for itself.

Simply being a college student can open doors to internships, interviews and other career opportunities. Alexis Grant, staff writer for U.S. News, writes that many contacts — some of whom may be alumni of the college — are more willing to meet with and advise someone who is a current student. In addition, many schools either host or will help students attend conferences in their field, another excellent opportunity for networking. The potential to connect with influential professionals is rarely stronger than during college.

COLLEGE HELPS CULTIVATE ESSENTIAL SKILLS

Regardless of your student's major, college helps cultivate skills that will serve them well in any career. While some of these skills are developed by taking specific courses that emphasize writing, speaking and research, other skills are honed by the college experience as a whole:

- Managing time and meeting deadlines
- Responding to constructive feedback
- Being organized
- Working in teams and groups
- Learning to self advocate
- Thinking critically and creatively

Can these skills be learned outside of the college experience? Of course. But college provides a particularly rich environment in which to master them, and a college degree documents quality time spent in this environment.

There's no doubt that college is an investment. It requires a significant financial sacrifice up front. But the second aspect of an investment — the reward you expect to reap later — is equally true of college.

College places your student in a fertile networking environment, helps cultivate skills and habits that make them a valuable employee, and provides the baseline they need to apply for most high-paying jobs.

David Leonhardt, writing for the New York Times, heartily agrees: "For all the struggles that many young college graduates face, a four-year degree has probably never been more valuable."

