

The Problem With the Push for More College Degrees

In a 2009 speech, President Barack Obama [proclaimed](#) that by 2020, the United States will “once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world.”

As we near 2020, it is worth asking how close are we to reaching that lofty goal and what have been the results of focusing so intently on college graduation rates as a sign of success.

Based on my work as a historian of education and a [book I wrote recently](#) on the purpose of college, I argue that a focus on degree attainment discounts the value of what a true college education provides. It places more emphasis on the piece of paper and less on the experience of college. This is harmful because it creates an impetus to expand the number of degrees without necessarily devoting resources to increase access to college education.

State support declines

The number of Americans 25 years or older with a college degree [continues to rise](#), from [29.5 percent](#) in 2009 to about [35 percent](#) in 2016.

However, despite the Obama administration’s 2020 college completion goal, state support for public colleges has [fallen by about U.S. \\$9 billion](#) over the past decade. In addition, [large gaps](#) in degree attainment remain between wealthy and poorer Americans and between racial and ethnic groups. Moreover, despite a [steady increase](#) in college degree attainment, the United States remains [13th in the world](#) in the proportion of 25- to 34-year-olds who have earned a college degree.

In this context, elected leaders on both sides of the aisle, from [Obama](#) to former Wisconsin governor [Scott Walker](#), called for new institutions and programs to provide fast, easy and cheaper access to degrees, instead of the time, curricula and professors that define a college education.

New models emerge

Responding to the call to speed students' progress toward degrees, new nonprofit institutions such as [Western Governors University](#) and Southern New Hampshire University's [College for America](#) established online programs to award students credit for prior learning and meeting predetermined "competencies."

Simultaneously, public colleges such as [Arizona State University](#) and [Purdue University](#) partnered with private corporations such as [Pearson](#) and [Kaplan](#), respectively, to offer large numbers of online degrees without the kind of professorial oversight and interaction available to students on campus.

These approaches emphasize degree completion instead of the kinds of intellectual experiences that define a college education.

Elements of a college education

In my new book, ["What's the Point of College?"](#), I argue that what makes college distinct from other kinds of education is that a college education is not reducible to training.

I also argue that a college education does not just certify competency but expands the mind in unpredictable ways. A college education requires time and interactions with professors and peers. And most of all, a college education requires opportunities to think without placing a value or seeking a specific outcome on the thought. Colleges should,

ideally, encourage such reflection and insight.

I believe Obama's aspiration to increase the number of college graduates came at the cost of paying attention to the education that colleges should offer. The 2020 college completion goal shows that it is possible to increase the number of Americans with a college degree without necessarily increasing the number of Americans with a college education.

A degree's worth

Certainly, the United States should support good-faith efforts to increase job training for people with or without college degrees. Many of the [fastest-growing jobs](#), in such fields as [dental hygiene](#), [health care support](#) and [construction](#), require specialization but not a college education.

However, I worry that a focus on economic outcomes could go too far. Recently, for example, the Gates Foundation called for the evaluation of all college degrees based on their economic payoff. That is to say, the Gates Foundation wants to determine [which degrees are a worthwhile investment](#). This would repeat the mistake of the Obama administration by again emphasizing the short-term salary gains of a college degree, rather than the broadening of the mind that comes with a college education. The emphasis that the Gates Foundation is placing on the economic value of a college degree threatens what makes college worthwhile – not just intellectually but also financially.

A college education is valuable in the labor market precisely because it cannot be reduced to one set of skills. What makes college graduates desirable is their ability to think broadly about the world and their capacity to use language and numbers well. These outcomes are achieved by immersing people for a portion of their lives on campuses devoted to thinking as an end in itself.

As 2020 approaches, I see a need for the United States to abandon its focus on degrees and instead support Americans – whether young or old, first-generation or legacy, poor or rich – to gain access to a true college education. This requires transforming America's colleges to make them available to people in all stages of life.

Older people, often with mortgages, children or aging parents, need real and meaningful support to pursue a college education. If we Americans want more college-educated citizens, we must care about more than counting degrees.

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