



# No, everyone doesn't need to go to college

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In his column last week, my good friend and esteemed colleague Gary Houchens asserted a reckoning is coming for higher education. And although we don't always agree on the relevant issues of our day – we do tend to be at opposite ends of the political spectrum – I do find myself in his corner when it comes to his basic premise.

Specifically, what caught my eye was not so much the ideological argument Houchens made; I'm not convinced there is an overarching liberal bias permeating everything we undertake at the academy. Certainly, I am not engaged in any brainwashing tactics aimed at making sure all my students pledge allegiance to diversity, equity and inclusion.

At the same time, I do believe we have essentially oversold the value of a college education, especially as it relates to a one-size-fits-all recipe for economic success. In the not-so-distant past, we seemed to understand and accept that our high school graduates had many options once they received their secondary diploma.

Some matriculated directly into the private sector, some entered the military, some took positions in the service industries, some started their own companies, some went to work for the family business. A select few, relatively speaking, decided to enroll in college.

When I graduated from Waverly Central High School in May 1976, I decided to attend the University of Tennessee at Martin. At the time, I wanted to be a high school biology teacher – and the only way to realize my ambition was to get a college degree.

For the record, only about 20-25 percent of my graduating class went to college. And therein lies an important distinction between then and now.

Society can support 20-25 percent of its high school graduates attending college. They can support them philosophically, logistically, and most importantly, economically. Compared to what colleges and universities charge today, I was able to go to college with very little out-of-pocket expense.

From 1976 until I completed my bachelor's degree in 1980, I accumulated a grand total of \$300 in loans. That's not a typo. Everything was covered by grants, scholarships, and other forms of financial assistance – including a job at the campus pizza place - that didn't have to be paid back.

And make no mistake, it wasn't just me who profited from the investment. Society benefitted immensely by supporting my pursuit of a college education. In the four decades since I earned my degree, I have used what was provided to me to help countless others achieve their life and career aspirations.

But this is not about me.

Simply put, society can't support 100 percent of its high school graduates attending college. The economics don't work and the job market isn't set up to handle such an oversupply of college graduates. Most students are forced to take out thousands of dollars in loans and there is no guarantee their investment will pay off in terms of a healthy future salary.

Think about this. If you spend \$40,000 or more to earn a college degree and then you end up in a job you could have gotten without a college degree, then it's debatable whether the investment was worth it.

But you might contend, college is not just about vocational preparation.

Yes, college is also fundamentally about becoming a more informed and sophisticated individual who can experience the world in a more qualitative manner; you'll be able to appreciate things you couldn't have had you not gone to college.

I'm the first to admit there is some truth to this line of reasoning. My college studies did open my eyes to a lot of realities that would have escaped my attention had I not spent four years on a college campus. Still, getting a good job was always in the back of my mind as I attended each class and completed each assignment.

The bottom line is you can be an enlightened human being and still be living under an overpass.

So I agree a reckoning is coming. The sooner higher education embraces its important yet inherently limited role in society and stops being so self-serving, the better off we'll all be.



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