Why a College Education is more than Just a Piece of Paper to Hang on the Wall

Douglas sat researching famous quotes on education for his first year English Composition course. He was actually a second year university student, but didn’t like to write so had skipped Writing 121 his first year. He typed in “education quotes” on the Internet and the first quote to show up was “education is what survives when what has been learned has been forgotten,” from B.F. Skinner (Creating Minds, 2011). That was the perfect quote for his paper on “The Importance of Education.”

He didn’t know why he was going to college; it just seemed like the thing to do. He hadn’t chosen a major yet, but was leaning towards Business Administration because his father claimed it was best; it would help him get a good job. But, he didn’t like his Intro to Business course; Psych 101 and English Lit were much more interesting and B.F. Skinner just opened his mind to a new idea he’d never even considered.

Why Go to College?

“If the primary end of higher education were merely the acquisition of the skills necessary for success in our particular economic system, then would we not better occupy the years of early adulthood in some form of technical school?” wrote Mark C. Henrie in his essay “Why Go to College?” (2010). That is a relevant question and the answer is no. Higher education is not meant to only prepare you for success in an economic system. Higher education is a tool for personal growth, which in turn helps your economic potential – but that should be of secondary importance if we lived in a utopian world.

- **Enhance Your Understanding**

After graduation, the piece of paper does look quite nice hanging on the wall. The purpose of education is not the piece of paper though; it’s the work it took to gain that paper. The path to becoming an educated individual goes in many directions, but without the hours, weeks and years spent reading books, researching papers, taking exams and pulling far too many all-nighters, then the end point of the journey is meaningless. Learning about psychology, literature, science, philosophy, business, sociology and the countless other topics teaches problem-solving skills, critical thinking and provides an expanded understanding of the world that a lack of education does not. It doesn’t matter if you remember that the Battle of Antietam was on September 17, 1862; what matters is an understanding of the events and effects of the Civil War on American society (NPS, 2006).

- **Increase Confidence in Yourself**

Douglas was never a great reader. He did enjoy comic books, graphic novels and he grew up reading his father’s collection of Louis L’amour westerns, but his English Lit class pushed his abilities. He liked his professor and the books were stimulating, so he studied for the course more than he’d ever studied in high school. He received a B+ and felt the pride well up inside of him like never before. Higher education is an opportunity to challenge yourself mentally (and physically during Finals Week when sleep is barely remembered). It’s much like building a house, or winning a tennis tournament or succeeding at any long
term goal - they are all apt metaphors. Confidence comes with completion and success through hard work.

- **Fosters Independence and Individuality**

The college experience is one often filled with long nights of partying with friends, weekend camping, skiing and hiking trips, hours spent studying at local cafes, spring break excursions and the joys of finally being independent of your parents. Those are fun and should always remain part of the experience. It is part of your life you will always look back upon fondly. But aside from the hangovers and bank overdrafts, college allows you to be your own person. Moving away from home and being on your own is a part of life teenagers dream about. It’s the drudgery that really fosters independence - learning to cook edible food, doing laundry, making a budget without any money, working a part-time job, creating a weekly schedule of homework and studying for exams. To become an adult, with a sense of oneself, it is necessary to do it by yourself, without your parents asking you when you will be home. Responsibility is a real pain when your alarm goes off at 8am and you've only had 3 hours of sleep before an important exam.

- **Financial Potential**

According to the U.S Department of Labor, college graduates with a Bachelor’s degree earned an average of $1,038 per week in 2010. People without a high school diploma averaged $444 per week, those with a high school diploma earned $626 per week and those with a Master’s degree made $1,272 (BLS, 2011). The point of higher education is not only earning potential - nor should it be. An increased average earning potential is a really nice by-product of becoming educated, one that allows you to sit back on the beach during vacations and be happy you went to college. The reason people with college degrees make more money isn’t because of the piece of paper, it’s because of the first three points and the perception of employers (who often also have college degrees) that educated individuals are better employees.

Douglas went on to get a degree in Psychology, with a minor in Computer Science. He ended up going to graduate school and eventually received his Doctorate in Psychology, wrote three books and raised a family. He was the first person in his family to actually graduate from college and it helped convince his younger brother to go as well, after he spent four years in the military. College may not be for everyone, but it is for anyone who wishes to better themselves in more ways than just going to work day after day ever can.

**Works Cited**


**Other Resources**


