

Should Everyone Go to College?

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Students learning technical and manufacturing skills as part of a high school program in San Antonio. Ilana Panich-Linsman for The New York Times



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What do you plan to do after high school? Do you plan to go to college, take a gap year, start a training program, begin working or something else?

Do your parents, classmates and teachers support your plan? Have they

helped guide you toward your post-high school goals? Or have you mostly had to figure them out on your own?

In “[The Misguided Priorities of Our Educational System](#),” Oren Cass writes that the United States spends a disproportionate amount on college-bound students and much less on those who seek an alternative path:

Consider two high school seniors — one who exhibits strong academic talent and one who does not. For one, December marks the homestretch of a yearslong effort, intensively supported by his school, to prepare the perfect college application. For the other, December is just another month on the path to, well, whatever might come after graduation. The former will likely proceed steadily toward a bachelor’s degree; the latter is unlikely to finish college if he enrolls at all. To whom does our education system owe what?

That second student, to be clear, has done nothing wrong. He probably clawed his way through his town’s standard college-oriented curriculum, though it neither targeted his interests and abilities nor prepared him for work force success. Looking ahead, he faces a labor market in which he may need to work harder than his college-bound counterpart for lower pay, with fewer options and slower advancement. Yet we celebrate the first student and lavish taxpayer funds on his education. To the second student, we offer little beyond a sympathetic “Sorry.” Our education system has become one of our nation’s most regressive institutions.

After high school graduation, the first student can access more than \$10,000 annually in public funds to support his college experience. Federal funding for higher education has [grown by 133 percent](#) in the past 30 years; combined with [tax breaks](#), [loan subsidies](#) and [state-level funding](#), the annual total exceeds \$150 billion. That funding will cover not only genuine instructional costs, but also state-of-the-art gyms, psychiatric and career counseling services, and whatever social

programming the student-life bureaucracy can conceive. At Ohio State, students living off campus get [free fire alarms](#).

The second graduate likely gets nothing. Annual federal funding for a non-college, vocational pathway, at both the high school and postsecondary levels, [totals \\$1 billion](#). Certainly, he will need to buy his own fire alarm.

Students, read the entire article, then tell us:

— Do you think everyone should go to college? Or should our society offer students more alternatives to higher education? Why?

— Is what Mr. Cass describes in this Op-Ed article true in your school? Is it mostly focused on preparing students for college — by, for example, emphasizing academic achievement, providing college counselors, offering trips to college campuses and giving application help? Is there any support for students who don't plan to attend college? Or are they mostly on their own in figuring out what they will do after high school?

— Mr. Cass writes, “We spend too much money on college students and not enough on everyone else.” Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?

— Mr. Cass offers one idea for a non-college pathway that includes a combination of traditional high school, a vocational program, a subsidized internship and paid work. What do you think of this model? If you were to design a high school that prepared students for the range of post-high school options, not just college, what would it look like? What classes, extracurricular activities, work opportunities and other resources would the school offer and why?

— One reader wrote in a [letter to the editor](#) regarding this Op-Ed article:

Few, if any, parents who send their children to elite private schools do

so with the expectation that they will not go on to college. These parents fully understand the economic advantages that a college degree confers and the social capital that the college experience helps to build.

Why should this be any different for students from less privileged backgrounds? We have an obligation to ensure that every one of our children has the very same opportunities. And our expectation should be that all students, regardless of background or circumstance, graduate from high school prepared for success in college and with at least one acceptance letter in hand so that college is a genuine option for them.

This is an equity issue, even more than an economic or social one.

Do you agree with this argument? Is a college degree a key to social mobility? If there were more alternatives to college, do you believe it would make society more or less equitable? Why?

Students 13 and older are invited to comment. All comments are moderated by the Learning Network staff, but please keep in mind that once your comment is accepted, it will be made public.