The Broader Societal Benefits of Higher Education

Authored for the Solutions for Our Future Project
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All of society benefits when more people have college educations.

The most widely recognized gains from postsecondary education are the economic benefits that individual graduates receive in terms of greater lifetime income. But it isn't just the individuals who have gone to college who benefit; the larger society also gains. Not only do graduates pay more taxes on their typically higher incomes, but they also tend to have better health, rely less on government social programs, are less likely to be incarcerated, and are more likely to engage in civic activities. In fact, each type of benefit leads to others, producing a cascade of benefits from postsecondary education.

Many studies underestimate the benefits of higher education because they do not include the societal benefits. In fact, analysts estimate that the standard rate-of-return projections used to measure the benefits of increased learning may capture only three-fifths of the full value of education. Even if some portion of the societal benefits can be attributed to characteristics of the people who tend to enroll in postsecondary institutions in the first place, higher education produces impacts beyond those that would be predicted.

Societal Benefits

Some of the broader benefits produced by college educated citizens are relatively easy to quantify; others are more subjective but equally or even more important. Quantifiable social benefits include many that are related to the economic advantages enjoyed by college graduates. Along with higher income, people with more education tend to have more leisure time, better health/life expectancy, better outcomes for their children, and improved quality of life in general. For example:

• They are more likely to have jobs that provide health insurance and retirement benefits than workers without college educations. As a result, they have better access to preventative health care, leading to longer and healthier lives. Even within income groups, individuals with more education report that they are in excellent or very good health.

• These healthier lives in turn lead to reduced public spending on these individuals in social programs, thus reducing the cost of government. Estimates suggest that the government spends between $800 and $2,000 per year less on social programs (including unemployment compensation, Medicare and Medicaid, food programs, welfare, and other social programs) for 30-year-old college graduates than for high school graduates, taking into account gender and race/ethnicity.

• College graduates are statistically more likely to have healthy children and to be involved with their children's education both inside and outside of school. For instance, more than 90 percent of preschoolers whose mothers are college graduates are read to at least three times a week, compared to 76 percent of their counterparts whose mothers are high school graduates. (See chart below.) College graduates are also less likely to have illegitimate births.

• The incarceration rate for adults with at least some postsecondary education is about a quarter of that for individuals whose highest educational attainment is a high school diploma. Nationwide, the average prison cost per inmate in 2001 was $22,650 – a rate that more than doubled between 1986 and 2001.

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1 Haveman and Wolfe 1983.
2 Joint Economic Committee 2000
3 Baum and Payea 2004, Page 18, Figure 9a.
4 Baum and Payea 2004.
5 College Board
6 Wolfe and Zuvekas, 1995.
### Family activities and cognitive skills of preschoolers, by mother's education level, 1999

By income and education level, 2001

- **Read to more than 3 times per week**
  - Less than HS: 30%
  - HS diploma: 40%
  - Some college: 49%
  - BA or higher: 65%

- **Counts to 20**
  - Less than HS: 40%
  - HS diploma: 62%
  - Some college: 67%
  - BA or higher: 73%

- ** Writes name**
  - Less than HS: 40%
  - HS diploma: 67%
  - Some college: 74%
  - BA or higher: 80%

### Percentage of US population 25 and older who reported ever volunteering for or through an organization

2004, by educational attainment

- **Less than High School**: 12%
- **High School diploma**: 21%
- **Some college**: 31%
- **BA or higher**: 36%
Percentage of adults reporting excellent or very good health
By income and education level, 2001

Note: Based on adults 25 and older. Source: Baum and Payea, 2004.
Civic Learning Outcomes

Harder to quantify, but arguably just as important or even more so than easily measurable benefits, are the civic learning outcomes of a college education. Public and independent colleges and universities have civic education embedded within their educational missions. One of their goals is the broad-based education of students to be effective and engaged citizens in our democratic society, and to be good citizens in our increasingly international world. Civic learning outcomes from higher education are difficult to document, but they are one of the most important social and civic contributions our colleges and universities provide to our society.

Research indicates that college education promotes civic engagement, including participation in community service, voting in local and national elections, and increased understanding of other racial and ethnic groups.8

• In 2004, 36 percent of people age 25 and older with a bachelor’s degree or higher reported having volunteered to perform some type of community service, compared to 21 percent of people whose highest level of education was a high school diploma.9 (See chart above.)

• In a measure of civic participation, 76 percent of bachelor’s degree recipients aged 25 and older reported voting in the 2000 presidential election, compared to 56 of those with simply a high school diploma.10 Among people age 65 to 74, only 56 percent of people without a high school diploma vote as compared to 96 percent of people with a bachelor’s degree or higher.11 Educational attainment has significant “spillover” effects on voter awareness of public events, stemming from more frequent reading of newspapers and journals, and increased awareness of community issues such as schools, city and county council activities, and state and local tax policies.12

The rapid changes in technology, the changing nature of work, and the demographic changes affecting the fabric of our society all require interpersonal and social capacities of citizens and workers. This means education needs to produce individuals who are able to work collaboratively in ethnically and culturally diverse environments.

National research on civic learning outcomes remains somewhat sparse; however, there are several studies that document in consistent and compelling ways the contributions of college education to the social and civic qualities of graduates. National research on the interpersonal, psychological, and broader behavioral outcomes of college shows a positive relationship between college attendance and a range of desirable social and civic capacities, including capacity for independence; less tendency toward authoritarianism, dogmatism, and ethnocentrism; growth in principled moral reasoning; interest in service to others; and interest in current affairs and domestic and foreign politics.

Research has shown that college graduates are more likely than other individuals to display such traits as active thinking processes reflective of a more complex, less automatic mode of thought; a broad range of intellectual and academic skills; motivation to participate in activities that affect society and the political structure, as well as to participate in community service; motivation to engage in activities that promote racial understanding; and belief that basic values are common across racial and ethnic categories.13

Of course, people from all educational and economic levels can and do live committed, moral, engaged lives, and contribute to their communities in a wide variety of ways. However, individuals who have had the opportunity to go to college have a greater probability of having the resources to develop into productive and engaged citizens.

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8 Wellman 1999.
11 Baum and Payea 2004, Page 23, Figure 14a; Dee 2004.
12 Dee 2004.
References


