Hire Education

Is education from kindergarten to college highly overrated?
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More than a century ago, Andrew Carnegie declared that “men have sent their sons to colleges to waste their energies upon obtaining a knowledge of such languages as Greek and Latin, which are of no more practical use to them than Choctaw…They have been ‘educated’ as if they were destined for life upon some other planet than this…Had they gone into active work during the years they spent at college they would have been better educated men in every true sense of that term.”

Bryan Caplan agrees. A professor of economics at George Mason University and the author of *Rational Voter: Why Democracies Choose Bad Policies*, Caplan believes that education from kindergarten to college is highly overrated. In *The Case against Education*, he argues that schools are valuable to employers because the degrees they grant “certify” that students are intelligent, disciplined and likely to conform to social expectations. Schools play only a minor role in creating or augmenting knowledge, skills and human capital. Given the $1 trillion cost of education, Caplan maintains that schools are much more valuable to individuals (who benefit from this “signaling”) than to society as a whole. He believes that access to high schools and colleges should be reduced, not increased; vocational programs made more available; and child labor “deregulated and destigmatized.”
Caplan cites a slew of studies that bolster the already well-established and widely acknowledged claim that credentials – high school diplomas, bachelors’ degrees, and Ph.D.s – account for a large percentage of the earnings premium awarded to sheepskin holders. *The Case against Education* includes data indicating, quite persuasively, that students do not learn all that much (other than literacy and numeracy) – and after a relatively brief period of time retain precious little knowledge in most subjects. Relying heavily, but not exclusively, on dropout rates (and lost opportunities), Caplan concludes that society waste billions and billions of dollars on education.

At times, Caplan imposes his thesis and his libertarian ideology on the evidence. Factoring in the impact of guesses on a true-false questionnaire about the ABCs of science, for example, he concludes that -3% of respondents “really know” whether the universe began with a huge explosion. He uses an inappropriate yardstick, bestseller lists for books and music, to make his case that schools do not foster high culture. Caplan maintains that “the only way to sharply raise completion rates is to slash academic standards.” By dropping out of college, Caplan writes, Bill Gates “struck a blow against credential inflation.” He asserts that awarding full scholarships to all poor youths (which, of course, has not happened) has resulted, “as we’ve seen,” in credential inflation. And he insists (again without elaboration) that private charity “apparently did a good job” of educating poor people in the United States in the nineteenth century.

The essential flaw of this book, it seems to me, is Caplan’s claim that his readers should judge the value of education exclusively by the direct, measurable impact of individual courses, requirements, and majors on creating and enhancing job skills. The humanities, creative arts, and social scientists, he repeats, over and over, are “comically – or tragicomically – useless subjects,” and/or “irrelevant fluff.” Pursuing a career in the arts “is a Hail Mary pass.” Foreign languages “are all but useless in the American economy” because “thanks to immigration,” employers “have a built-in pool of native speakers.” “Almost no one,” he repeats, “pursues a career in history or social studies – except teachers of history and social studies.”

Among the many, many factors ignored in this analysis is, of course, the contribution of many of these subjects to reading, writing, oral communication, and skills in textual analysis. In addition, *The Case against Education* creates false dichotomies between basic research and applied research, and traditional and vocational education. Caplan ignores the manifest defects of for-profit education. He acknowledges but shrugs off findings that well-educated people are far more likely to vote and participate more actively in politics, far more supportive of civil liberties, and far less racist and sexist.
Professor Caplan takes a contrarian’s pride in his candor. He admits that because “Social Desirability Bias rules government,” he does not expect that his policy prescriptions (“cut otherworldly education and spend the savings on something worthwhile, with no presumption that ‘something’ should be another form of education”) will be enacted anytime soon – or ever.

To that assumption, we can concur, with a sigh of relief; and an understanding of the very real dangers, never greater than they are now (when even President Obama mocks the job prospects of history of art majors and suggests tying government support for colleges and universities to the employment rates of recent graduates) of defining education too narrowly. And, one hopes, with a firm resolve to address the palpable defects of our primary and secondary schools, colleges and universities.