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Does going to college make you smarter—or poorer?


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With top-tier colleges charging as much as \$50,000 per year, the idea that students may spend their first two years learning next-to-nothing is enough to make parents pause. How can you make that investment worthwhile? And does going to college really make you smarter?

It depends on what you study—and whether you study enough.

A ["Room for Debate" discussion](#) at the New York Times earlier this week tackled the issue, with several academics weighing in on whether college is worthwhile, and whether schools are dumbing down their curricula to appeal to more people. In their new book, ["Academically Adrift,"](#) sociologists Richard Arum of New York University and Josipa Roksa of the

University of Virginia found that 32 percent of the students they followed did not take "any courses with more than 40 pages of reading per week" in a typical semester, and half of the students didn't take any course in which they had to write more than 20 pages for the class." Using these criteria, they determined that 45 percent of college students make little academic progress during the first two years of a four-year degree.

Their research raises a few red flags. On the one hand: Is it any surprise that a public school system forced to "teach to the test" churns out students who are averse (or flat-out unable) to thinking analytically, learn on their own, or write a research paper? On the other: Does the number of pages read + the number of pages written = an accurate assessment of academic progress? A literature or history major, for instance, would have far more reading to do than a math major, but the math workload isn't lighter lifting just because it involves reading fewer pages per week.

And yet, the case for students learning less is a compelling one: A [March 2010 report](#) by two University of California researchers found that the amount of time students spend studying has dropped drastically over the past 40 years, from 40 hours a week in 1961 to 27 hours a week in 2003. One possible reason? Colleges are spending [less of their budgets on instruction](#) and more of it on recreation and student services, according to a July 2010 report by the [Delta Cost Project](#). Most colleges are businesses after all, and the pressure to attract new students (and more money) is intense.

So, if colleges are focusing on building spa-like rec centers and luxury dorms instead of improving their academics, is a college education even worth the money anymore? Many academics and experts still think it is.

"Yes, college is worth the money—if you choose your classes wisely, take advantage of campus activities that teach you hands-on, transferable skills, and attend a school that gives you the strength and courage to focus on what you enjoy doing," says Steven Roy Goodman, an educational consultant and admissions strategist at [Topcolleges.com](#).

"Going to college brings other important benefits, such as more developed analytical, numerical and communication skills, that will help you perform in the workplace and progress up the career ladder," agrees

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Danny Byrne, an undergraduate specialist and content manager for [TopUniversities.com](#) "College will introduce you to intelligent people from a huge range of backgrounds, and as your career progresses the value of this network of contacts may prove to be immeasurable."

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Those types of things are difficult to assess in a survey or on a test, though. Which may be why so many educators and students take issue with the idea that college freshmen and sophomores are slacking off instead of studying.

"Even if a student enters college with no career goals, college is the best place to discover those goals," points out Robert Neuman, former Associate Dean for Academic Development in the College of Arts and Sciences at Milwaukee's Marquette University and the author of "Are You Really Ready for College: A College Dean's 12 Secrets for Success." "The more education anyone has, the more advantages he or she will have in the job market."

Some point out that the skills you gain matter more than the degree you earn.

"For me, college is about a life experience," says Jim Joseph, president of independent marketing firm [Lippe Taylor](#). "Is it vital to getting ahead? Not sure anymore. With entrepreneurialism at an new high, you just need a good idea and some determination to make a name for yourself. Or if you have a specific skill set, there are many ways to build and exploit that."

University of Florida graduate Candy Keane now runs a business ([Three Muses](#), a clothing store) that has nothing to do with her degree (in magazine journalism). But still, "I could not have done all that I have without what I learned from college," she says. "I learned graphic design, layout, photography, Photoshop, PR, writing, web design—all the things that I was able to use and build on to start my business myself."

So what courses should a college-bound kid take in order to make the most of his or her (or your) time and money? The experts and students we talked to suggested that all students take these types of classes, regardless of their majors or grad-school plans:

- Public speaking or acting
- Sales
- Marketing
- Public relations
- Entrepreneurship
- Computer programming, especially HTML
- Introduction to psychology
- Introduction to economics
- Communication/Writing
- Internships that offer hands-on experience in a field

"Yes, college is certainly worth the money!" says David Reynaldo, co-founder of [College Zoom](#). "Had I not gone to college, I never would have found the network, inspiration, or know how to make my dream come true."

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