

# A Prestigious Degree Doesn't Always Equal Success

By THOMAS SOWELL

One of the biggest fallacies about academic institutions is that attendance at a big-name college or university is virtually essential for reaching the top later in life. In fact students will not necessarily get better educations at more-prestigious institutions with higher-paid faculty — especially since a college's academic prestige depends primarily on its professors' research and publications. Various studies have shown students at small liberal-arts colleges doing as well as, and sometimes better than, students from prestigious research universities on tests like those for medical schools and a higher percentage going on to receive Ph.D.'s. That is not surprising in view of a study indicating that teaching takes up less than half the working time of faculty at research universities yet nearly two-thirds of it at liberal-arts colleges.

Small colleges dominate the list of the 10 institutions with the highest percentage of students going on to receive Ph.D.'s; a higher percentage of Grinnell College graduates, for example, receive their doctorates than those from Harvard or Yale. Of the CEO's of the 50 largest American corporations surveyed in 2006, only four had Ivy League degrees, and just over half graduated from state colleges, city colleges, or community colleges.

How much college adds to economic or other success is not easy to determine, and the methods often used can overstate the effect — especially that of the more-prestigious colleges. Such methods would be valid if the people attending those institutions came from comparable backgrounds, so that their differences in incomes after graduation could be attributed to what happened in college. But if affluent people tend to send their children to prestigious institutions, then the incomes of those students in later life may reflect greater career opportunities as a result of family connections, or higher income from the earnings of inherited assets, rather than what they may have learned at college.

The students themselves cannot be assumed to be comparable. If students who enter Harvard, for example, have higher qualifications than the students who enter Podunk State, then differences between graduates of the two institutions cannot be arbitrarily attributed to educational differences. If Harvard graduates are more likely to go on to medical school, law school, or other postgraduate study, then their later incomes are likely to be raised still further above those of the Podunk State graduates. Ideally, the comparison should be made between people who went to Harvard and those who were admitted to Harvard but chose instead to go to Podunk State. Unfortunately, that is likely to produce samples too small for statistical analysis, and the students who make such choices may not be typical of the ones at either institution.

Studies have been made of people with comparable test scores who attended prestigious

and nonprestigious colleges to try to determine the "value added" by the institutions. Some studies indicate that prestigious institutions add value, while other studies say they do not. But they seldom indicate that the value added is as great as the raw statistics might suggest without making allowances for the differences among the students.

Similar problems arise when trying to determine the value of going to college at all, as compared to going to work after finishing high school — or not finishing high school. It is common to compare the incomes of college graduates with those of high-school graduates and dropouts, and then attribute the higher incomes of the college graduates to the education received in college. But people whose education stops before college cannot be assumed to have the same orientation, values, priorities, or ability as people who go on to college. Income differences cannot be automatically attributed to what was taught in college. A further complication is that many — if not most — people who drop out of high school later resume some form of education, whether at academic institutions or by studying a trade or acquiring certification from courses given by Microsoft, Oracle, Adobe, or other companies.

Is the income of dropouts who later resumed their education elsewhere to be counted in the statistics on the incomes of dropouts? Are the incomes of dropouts who go on to earn a Ph.D. without ever getting a high-school diploma to be included in the statistics on the incomes of dropouts? Or is the term "dropout" to be reserved solely for those who never resume any further education? Given the difficulty and costs of following individuals over time, it is unlikely that the incomes of people who dropped out of high school and later received an academic degree without bothering to go back and get a high-school diploma are counted in statistics on the incomes of high-school dropouts.

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