

SUCCESS WITHOUT COLLEGE:

Why Your Child May Not Have to Go to College Right Now—and May Not Have to Go at All

by Linda Lee

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Reviewed by Claude Whitmyer

College is a class issue. Think about it. Chances are, if you're reading this review, you're a member of the vaunted middle class. What if your child decided not to go to college? How would that make you feel? What are your beliefs around the life without a college degree? What would you say? "You won't be able to get a decent job?" "People with a college degree earn more than those without." "The more education you have the greater your 'earning power'."

Put yourself in the shoes of a middle-class high school kid thinking about what to do after graduation? How cool is it to not go to college? What will your friends think of you when they hear you have other plans? Well, fortunately, it IS beginning to be okay to take a year off and travel or volunteer with a church or agency like Americorp.

But, as Linda Lee points out in "Success Without College," for the most part, we see college as the sacred destiny of the middle-class child.

Well, you ask, why shouldn't we want our kids to go to college? What's wrong with that?

Listen up. Lee gives us all the evidence we need to see college in a different light and to make clear decisions about when it is and is not a good idea for our children.

College has changed, she tells us. It's not what it used to be. It won't turn out for your kids the way it turned out for you. Many of today's high schoolers simply aren't ready for college, or worse, they have a host of odd ideas about what's important (like that they'll be able to room with their boy friend or girl friend or select a class schedule that won't interfere with their daytime TV viewing habits or their party schedule). And college is not the ticket to a job that our middle-class myth about employability would have us believe.

Example: there's no real evidence that the higher income level of previous college graduates is due to college at all. The strongest correlation turns out to be (you guessed it) that old social bugaboo that we're not supposed to talk about: class.

The facts: People from high-status families tend to earn more than people from low-status families, even when they have the same amount of education. And people who go straight into business tend to rise to upper levels of management slightly faster than those who go to college first. If that weren't enough to call the earning power myth into question, how about a list of some of the most successful people we all admire? People like Woody Allen, Bill Gates, Tom Hanks, Steve Jobs, Gary Levinsohn or Anna Winotour. Not one

of them has a college degree. Neither does 58 (15%) of the Forbes 400 (a yearly listing of the most successful business leaders). Ok, one last earning power myth-busting fact: 21 percent of all degree holders who work earn less than the average for high school grads.

Vocational school, technical training in a community college, or on the job certifications will lead to higher paying jobs more reliably than most liberal arts degrees.

Admittedly, if you want to be a “professional” (scientist, doctor, therapist, nurse, etc.) you have to go to college. Interestingly, for the highly motivated self starter, in many states you can still become a lawyer or accountant through an apprenticeship. (Professional psychology’s “lay therapist” track was only lost to us in recent times.)

But, as Lee tells us, college is very expensive. The price of a college degree from one of our wonderful Ivy League schools runs upwards of \$200,000. Think about the earning power of \$200,000 invested in a conservative portfolio for 30 years. You might be able to make a case for your children supporting themselves any way they choose during that 30 years and then retiring as millionaires on the earnings from that portfolio.

How about the teaching atmosphere? the learning experience that college provides? If you’re like the average baby boomer you fondly remember the days of students and teachers hanging together outside of class and carrying on stimulating intellectual discussions or activities about art, history, philosophy, or social action. Many of us report learning far more in those settings than in the traditional classroom. In today’s colleges, Ms. Lee points out, almost half of all classes are taught by over-worked part-time faculty. That’s almost double the level of part-time faculty in the 70s. And these poor folks have to teach at more than one institution to make ends meet, giving them very little time for hanging out with students. And students routinely complain that most of what they learn they will never use. Cheer up though. Less than half of all college freshman fill that learning void with binge drinking at least once a week.

What are a kid’s chances in college today? The emphasis on college has created a desire to attend in middle-class kids, but in 1993 the average length of completion for an undergraduate degree was 6.3 years. Nearly a third of those who start as freshman fail to return the following year. Why? Because they simply aren’t ready for college.

Clearly, college is not for severely learning disabled or those who are challenged by reading, writing, or math or those who see college as a chance to major in partying. The fact that everyone feels a need to go to college leads to half of all college students attending community colleges for technical training or remedial education before going on to a four-year school. It is important, though, to grasp the idea that college is just not a good place for those without either basic reading, writing, and math skills or a sense of direction that would enable them to apply themselves in a focused and disciplined way.

So what should these kids do. Lee gives us a whole host of possibilities. They can take time off and travel learning about the world. They can get involved in meaningful volunteer work, picking up valuable skills that will help them both be better students and

better employees. They can join the military and get paid to learn computers or other skills that make it easier to get a job (though how dangerous the military may become is more uncertain compared to the relative safety Lee describes prior to the September 11th World Trade Center disaster).

Lee includes good reviews of several specific programs kids should think about as interim alternatives to going straight to college. These include Dynamy (www.dynamy.org), a residential internship program in Worcester, Massachusetts, that kids are put into a situation where they are away from home and expected to do real work. They are treated like adults and helped toward their own goals, but with expert advisors to keep them on track.

Then there are experiential learning opportunities that offer college credits for doing good deeds like working in a homeless shelter or helping at a children's theater. Or service programs like Americorp, for kids between 18 and 24, who are sent out for a year to work in schools or day-care or environmental programs. There's Americorp's offshoot, the National Civilian Community Corp, which focuses on the environment and natural disaster relief. Other Lee describes include Habitat for Humanity, Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), and Public Allies or a myriad of Church mission possibilities.

Kids with learning disabilities or in need of remedial education in reading, writing, and math may want to take some time out to learn how to overcome, correct, or compensate for these. Lee reviews many good ideas about how to handle these and related issues.

Another obvious path is work. Even if a high school graduate is unsure of which career path to choose, they can begin their work life by getting a job, any job. As a vocational guide I often recommend to my teenage and 20-something clients to adopt a sampling strategy. Go out, I tell them, and try things you're interested in. Learn what's meaningful for you and what you can't stand. Do you like to work with people, animals, machines, data? Would you rather have indoor or outdoor work? Is it more rewarding for you to sit in front of a keyboard all day or use a set of wrenches to repair a car or motorcycle? I tell them to pick up as many skills and experiences as they can. These will be used later as a foundation to for creating a better, long-term commitment to personally meaningful work. Young people, in general, simply don't have enough real-life experience to choose a career path.

If you've been wrestling with the question of whether a high school age child you know should go to college or if this review has started you thinking about it, then you will learn a lot from Linda Lee's *Success Without College*.

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