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The Value of Education in Today's American Society: A Glimpse into the Current Way America Supports the Educational System

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Abstract

“A nation's brilliance and ability to prosper is directly dependent upon its people's edification. Without continuing to open one's mind and allowing oneself to be taught, a person becomes stagnant, ignorant, and frozen in time. The study of several civilizations throughout history has revealed the importance of education as it applies to society including its economic growth. While America prominently places value in education in today's society, including those views held by its citizens and governments, precise monetary value attributed to the varying tiers of the American education system is extraordinarily debatable. While many people believe that such subsidization is necessary for America to continue asserting itself as a leader in the international sense, some view the use of subsidization of the education system as ineffective and contradictory to that same effort. This article deems funding for public colleges as useless however, others fervently believe the opposite to this opinion. It is important to consider that there will likely never be a solitary resolution for the “best” way to fund the education system, if for no other reason than the needs for the educators and students will continue to be ever-changing.

Introduction

Exactly how important is education in the current culture of American society? Will Durant, great American writer and philosopher, once said, “Education is the transmission of civilization.” Durant delved into the study of several civilizations throughout history in some of his publications, and noted the importance of education as it applies to society, including its economic growth. A nation's brilliance and ability to prosper is directly dependent upon its people's edification. Without continuing to open one's mind and allowing oneself to be taught, a person becomes stagnant, ignorant, and frozen in time. As this work will further discuss, local studies have shown that economic factors are greatly attributed to the country's value of educational opportunities. America, as a nation, supports the imperative role that education plays in the continued growth of prosperity for its citizens as well as future generations. However, there are wide ranging views and noted political discourse with regard to the different areas of education that should be subsidized by the federal and local state governments within the U.S. While America prominently places value on education in today's society, including those views held by its citizens and governments, the precise monetary value attributed to the varying tiers of the American education system is extraordinarily debatable.

Value of Education

Citizens recognize the value of education, particularly during times of economic turmoil, which create an environment rampant with job insecurity. Each of the twelve districts within the Federal Reserve banking system is obligated to assess the requirements for its community in preparation for its meetings with the Board of Governors under the Federal Reserve, where members meet to discuss the state of the economy and decide about making adjustments that could assist in stabilizing the economy. Through these surveys, the Board of Governors has become aware that typical cultural behavior during times of economic turmoil results in displaced workers returning to community colleges after becoming unemployed, so they may

become retrained or skilled in a new trade and effectively re-enter the workforce. In 2010, an article from *Economic Review* examined the number of people within the tenth district of the Federal Reserve who enrolled into community colleges as observed by the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City, stating, "The recent recession and now the recovery have caused enrollment at many community colleges to soar as unemployed workers retrain for new occupations..." (Felix & Pope, 2010, p. 69). The article further discusses the importance of educational institutions (particularly during and after times of economic hardship), and the need for one to educate oneself so a person may be capable of re-entering the new workforce saying, "In the Tenth District, the importance of community colleges is likely to rise even further as the economy continues to evolve and industries demand workers with new skills" (Felix & Pope, 2010, p. 69). This new and improved workforce will pose difficult challenges to those re-entering the workforce because the job market has suffered forced alteration to survive in such a competitive era. Many workers may have been displaced for significant periods of time, and will require tutoring regarding the skills demanded for the enhanced job market. Fortunately, community colleges and trade schools provide these desperately needed services to aid in the retraining process.

Another fortunate aspect for American citizens' continued educational growth includes the government's expressed support of the schooling system via subsidized education programs. The government accounts for the funding of education programs in its annual budget. An article in the *Journal of Higher Education* remarked, "The federal government is an important part of higher education governance and finance. Federal decisions affect many aspects of how universities operate. The federal government spent approximately \$66 billion on public and private higher education in the year 2005 (U.S. Department of Education, 2006a), making it a one-third contributor to the total budget of higher education in the U.S" (Doyle, 2010, pp. 620-621). By providing financial support to the different tiers of the education system, the federal government makes schools better able to provide a good education for their students.

In addition, the student aid allocation of these funds allows students, who would otherwise be incapable of affording education post-high school, an opportunity to achieve higher learning and, hopefully, a better quality of life. While many people believe that such subsidization is necessary for America to continue asserting itself as a leader in the international sense, some view the use of subsidization of the education system as ineffective and contradictory to that same effort. Perhaps not every citizen should reach for goals in the higher education realm, and should rather focus on filling blue collar jobs within the U.S. One article from *Independent Review* addresses this topic noting the following:

“During the past half-century, the conventional view of American education has held that the nation needs more college graduates and that increasing the rates of college attendance and completion should be a national goal, advanced and subsidized by the federal government ... This idea has reshaped higher education in the United States in a very short historical period, turning what was a guild-like activity into an industry for mass-producing credentials. (Bankston, 2011, p. 325)

Bankston emphasizes that over the last century America has instilled increased expectations for its people to thrive through higher education. However, later in the article he also examines the notion that because the U.S. government subsidizes higher education programs, ultimately providing an elevated level of education for the masses, the country's citizens are not meeting the demands of the workforce and the overall economy. The question then becomes, "We agree education is important, but which forms of education are the most important, and how do we specifically support those different areas of education in the budget?"

Funding

To answer how the education system in the U.S. should be funded is to "open a can of worms." The topic of funding or providing financial assistance to education is one of intense political controversy. Doyle notes that, "Congress plays an important role in operation of colleges and universities and more research about how decisions regarding higher education are made by this institution would be useful. The study of the politics of higher education at the federal level has been primarily concerned with understanding the qualitative aspects of legislators' behavior (Cook, 1998; Rosenzweig, 1998; Slaughter, 1998)" (Doyle, 2010, pp. 620-621). The impact that Congress has on the education is gargantuan—so much so that "liberal" and "conservative" sides alike have clearly established their respective stances on the matter. As with any controversial topic, the vast majority of the population lies "in the middle" so to speak. The aforementioned article in *Journal of Higher Education* noted,

“The results of this paper suggest that senators fall along a recognizable left-right continuum in their ideal point preferences ... These differences fall along party lines as well, with Democrats and Republicans showing little overlap in their ideal points for this policy domain. "Left" or liberal senators are most likely to vote "yea" on issues

regarding the extension or expansion of financial aid, while “Right” or conservative senators are most likely to vote “yea” on issues regarding the efficiency of institutions of higher education.” (Doyle, 2010, p. 621)

While there is significant discourse over which area of funding should be paramount, the overarching concept of valuing education as a whole is not lost. One other example of the educational funding argument is the funding of public colleges. One article in *Research in Higher Education* states,

“...public colleges tend to favor appropriations because it is a relatively stable source of funding and colleges have discretion to use the funding to meet institutional and state goals. Nonetheless, the argument can be made that appropriating state funds to public colleges in order to offer lower prices to all in-state students is relatively inefficient and ineffective. (Toutkoushian, & Shafiq, 2010, p. 42)

This article deems funding for public colleges as useless; however, others fervently believe the opposite to this opinion. One online article from the American Association of University Professors website begins by stating, “Myths about how research is funded and why the humanities are impoverished need to be overturned if public higher education is to thrive again in the United States” (Newfield, 2010). Perhaps this “uncovered knowledge” that Newfield discusses could permit the right and left sides of politics to come to an agreement. These examples of debate regarding the funding of the education system portray the widely varying opinions on the matter. Also, it is important to consider that there will likely never be a single resolution for the “best” way to fund the education system, if for no other reason than the needs of educators and students will continue to be ever-changing.

Conclusion

While American society expresses an overall appreciation for the usefulness of education (particularly during and immediately following times of economic strife) and believes due support should be provided to the educational system, society simultaneously tends to associate different worth through the assistance it provides to the individual tiers and different needs within the system; and the amount of this attributable “worth” is an extraordinarily debatable topic. A nation’s brilliance and ability to prosper is directly dependent upon its people’s edification. America is considered a powerhouse internationally because its citizens recognize the importance of learning and the fact that continuing growth through knowledge is a powerful tool for maintaining such elite status globally. It is a vital responsibility to the citizens of America to relay this value in education to their posterity.

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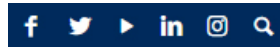
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