
The College Scam

Segment Length: 5:48 minutes

Lesson Description:

Should everyone go to college? If not, who should? And who should pay? Today, more and more students are encouraged to go to college—but should they be? This segment explores Bryan Caplan's book *The Case Against Education*.

Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- explain the signals a college degree sends to potential employers.
- discuss the value of a college education.
- summarize arguments for and against encouraging college for all
- explain Bryan Caplan's argument in favor of a world with less education.

Preview Activity:

Write this question on the board and have students answer in their notebooks:

Would you rather have:

- a) a degree from a prestigious university without the education, or
- b) the education without the degree.

Why?

Use Think, Pair, Share to have students answer the preview question. After a few minutes, poll the students. Ask the students to discuss their answers.

Viewing Guide:

We recommend that teachers show the video segment twice: once to allow students to view the video and focus on the issues presented, and once to allow them time to complete the viewing guide. After they complete the viewing guide, allow students a few minutes to work in pairs sharing and verifying answers.

Answers to Viewing Guide

1. tuition
2. higher
3. graduates
4. useful skills
5. distinguishes

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Viewing Guide

Name _____

Date _____

Class _____

Teacher _____

Directions: As you watch the video, fill in the blanks with the correct words.

1. People usually just want to talk about the _____, which is a big deal, but there's also all the years that people spend in school when they could have been doing something else.
2. All the politicians say, "go to college," and there is evidence the _____ you go the more money you make.
3. As more people got degrees, more employers insisted on degrees. The result isn't that _____ get better jobs, it's that employers require degrees for most every job.
4. If you're doing computer science or electrical engineering, then you probably are actually learning a bunch of _____.
5. I say, really, what we need to do is to go back to a world where college is not so accessible, where it really _____ you, and this way people are going to be able to start their lives years earlier.

Now, take a few moments to reflect on the video and answer the questions below:

What is the purpose of a college education? _____

Could something else perform this function at lower costs? If so, what? _____

What is the main point of this video? _____

Do you agree or disagree with that? Explain. _____

Discussion and Analysis:

1. Why do you suppose most people go to college?
2. What costs, other than tuition, are associated with attending college?
3. Bryan Caplan points out that people with more education typically have higher incomes. How is this usually explained? How does Caplan explain it?
4. John Stossel says that a diploma is a signaling device. What does he mean by signaling device? Do you agree or disagree with him? Why?
5. Bryan Caplan says higher education is lucrative for some individuals, but not for the country. What does he mean?
6. If college is not necessary to gain the skills for a job, why do people still pay lots of money to go?
7. Bryan Caplan uses a concert as a metaphor for the job market and a college degree. How so?
8. Why might employers require degrees for jobs that can be performed without a college education?
9. Why has the cost of college risen so much?
10. How have tuition subsidies affected the number of students applying to college? Why is this so?
11. John Stossel suggests that tuition costs have increased as a result of government subsidies in higher education. How might this be true?
12. The government even subsidizes majors that, according to John Stossel, are unlikely to help students get jobs. Can you name some college majors that seem unlikely to help students get jobs?
13. Besides preparing students for work, what is another argument in favor of college subsidies? Do you agree with this argument?
14. If those with a college degree tend to earn more than those without, why should workers who don't have college degrees subsidize college education for people likely to earn more than they do?
15. If college were to become less accessible, Caplan says people could start their lives earlier. What does he mean?

Discuss These Lines from the Video:

1. How many thousands of hours did you spend in classes studying subjects that you never thought about again?
2. You aren't saying, "You, individual, don't go to college." You're saying we as a country are suckers to push it and subsidize it.

3. When most everyone goes to college, that just raises the bar.
4. The result isn't that graduates get better jobs; it's that employers require degrees for most every job.
5. A tenured professor cannot be fired for almost any reason. You get a nice income, and there are almost no demands on your time.
6. The wisest solution, all things considered, would be if government just got out [of higher education].
7. It would be good if government got out of a lot of things.

Quotes for Discussion:

Despite the evidence that we already have too many students in higher education, the hot new idea among the political class is to double down by pushing for “free college tuition.” The problem with the “free college” idea is, however, not merely financial. It also reinforces the myth that college is appropriate or even possible for all students. – Charles Sykes

You have to stay in school. You have to. You have to go to college. You have to get your degree. Because that's the one thing people can't take away from you is your education. And it is worth the investment. – Michelle Obama

The more people who go to college, the more stigmatizing the failure to complete college becomes. Today, if you do not get a BA, many people assume it is because you are too dumb or too lazy. And all this because of a degree that seldom has an interpretable substantive meaning. – Charles Murray

We've got it into our heads that a college education is SO important, that the cost is irrelevant, along with the actual demand for whatever major a kid might wish to declare.... Thus, we've encouraged an entire generation to borrow whatever it takes to get whatever degree they believe will make them happy. Is it any wonder tuition has risen so quickly? – Mike Rowe

We know that when we open the doors to college, we open the doors to opportunity. When we make college more affordable, we make the American dream more achievable. – President Bill Clinton

Activities:

1. Have students complete the accompanying PMI chart in class or for homework.
2. Read and write a summary of one of the following articles:
 - A) “What Students Know That Experts Don't: School is all about signaling, not skill-building” by Bryan Caplan
<https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-caplan-education-credentials-20180211-story.html>
 - B) “How the ‘College-For-Everybody’ Agenda Harms Both Students and the Economy” by Tom Lindsay

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/tomlindsay/2014/11/28/unintended-consequences-how-the-college-for-everybody-agenda-harms-both-students-and-the-economy/#5c9d20643194>

C) “Employers Are Looking for Job Candidates in the Wrong Places” by Lola Fadulu
<https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2017/12/employers-are-looking-for-job-candidates-in-the-wrong-places/549080/>

D) “The Economics of College: Part III” by Thomas Sowell
<https://townhall.com/columnists/thomassowell/2008/04/23/the-economics-of-college-part-iii-n1111778>

E) “The Misguided Priorities of Our Educational System” by Oren Cass
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/10/opinion/college-vocational-education-students.html?module=inline>

3. Produce a “man-on-the-street” video in which you ask people which is more valuable in the job market: a college diploma or college education. Then ask them to explain their answers.
4. Watch “Econ Duel: Is Education Signaling or Skill Building” and write a summary of the arguments on each side. Then, explain your thoughts on the debate: which points you find most convincing, and how much of the value of a college degree you think is attributable to signaling effects.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MvWnyUT7vPk>

5. Research and write a report on how the prevalence and importance of a college degree have changed in the last fifty years. Explain how these trends could be interpreted as both positive and negative.
6. In a small group, visit a local college and interview students on camera about why they are attending college—and that college in particular.
7. In the video, Bryan Caplan asked, “How many thousands of hours did you spend in classes studying subjects that you never thought about again?” Interview on camera some students at your school and ask them what subjects they think have no current or future purpose to their life.
8. Using the internet, search for and read book reviews of Bryan Caplan’s *The Case Against Education* and write an essay explaining some of the criticisms of the book. Then, pretend you’re Bryan Caplan and address those criticisms as he might.
9. Research and create a slideshow presentation to explain the income-raising benefits of college. Consider how signaling, knowledge, hard skills, soft skills, etc., make a person a more valuable worker. Also look up the term “self-selection” and explain how that might come into play.
10. Argue *both sides* of each issue below using the statements provided. Then, explain which argument you find more persuasive for each and why.

A) Fewer students should go to college vs. More students should go to college:

Having a college degree is increasingly important in the job market.

B) The government should continue to subsidize higher education vs. The government should not continue to subsidize higher education.

Taxpayers fund years of study in subjects unlikely to help students get jobs.

C) Having more college graduates is bad for high school graduates vs. Having more college graduates is good for the economy, which includes those without a degree.

As more Americans earn college degrees, having a college diploma becomes less distinguished.

11. Conduct a classroom debate on one of the following topics:

A) Whether high school administrators should aim to send as many students to college as possible.

B) Whether the government should continue to support students pursuing a higher education with subsidies.

C) Whether too many Americans attend college.

12. Research and write an essay exploring the availability of jobs in technical fields (e.g., plumbing or electrical installation) and how this relates to Bryan Caplan's argument.

13. Watch "Signaling" or "Human Capital and Signaling" and write a report explaining signaling in a context other than education:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F8ZHZRMSxKg>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4AIG6I-JRw&t=352s>

14. Research and report on vocational-technical schools. What programs do they offer? What advantages do their students have over traditional high schools?

15. Research and write a biography of Bryan Caplan. Be sure to answer these questions in your report: What other books or articles has he published? What positions did he take in his other published work? Why did he become a college professor? What and where does he teach?

Name _____

Date _____

Class _____ Per _____

Teacher _____

College Scam PMI Chart

- P = Plus:** What might be some positive effects of attending college and earning a degree?
- M = Minus:** What might be some negative effects of attending college and earning a degree?
- I = Interesting:** What are some interesting aspects of attending college and earning a degree?

+ Plusses +	- Minuses -	I

What would you like to do after high school? _____

What do your parents want you to do after high school? _____

Imagine it is 10 years from now. What is life like for you? How did you achieve that? _____
