

THE EDUCATIONAL DILEMMA

Casey Snyder and Tom Sedoric

December 2016

Never has the need for education been so great, yet never have the majority of options consumed such a high percentage of gross income, nor left students with such burdening sums of student loan debt. No state represents this conundrum better than New Hampshire which was recently ranked first for the highest average debt per student (\$36,101) upon graduation. This cost benefit analysis is no longer a dilemma for only lower and middle class families – it's now a conundrum for most families, especially if they have more than one child. It's increasingly important that we explore and understand all of the educational options within an evolving workplace, while prioritizing the importance of value. Fortunately, Community Colleges, especially our own Great Bay Community College, are raising the bar and are likely to drive innovative educational solutions throughout the state.

We recently organized a group of local leaders, 4 PhD economists, and a noted demographer for a tour of Great Bay Community College lead by Chancellor Ross Gittell and President Wil Arvelo. Since we regularly seek solutions of value with a high return on investment, we thought it time to showcase the work being done in our own backyard. One of our group commented that “ten years ago you could have rolled a bowling ball down the halls of Great Bay Community College and not hit anyone,” yet today the corridors are full of students of all ages and backgrounds - all in pursuit of success.

Great Bay Community College and the Community College system in our state is delivering applied academics for a fraction of the cost of most other educational institutions. Through professional outreach programs local businesses are actively involved with helping educators tailor curriculum to meet the evolving needs of industry and services. The reciprocal approach makes it increasingly common for students to have jobs already in place before graduation, and without the debt that so commonly stunts the progression of adulthood. Knowing that the material being learned in the classroom is being actively applied within the community helps deliver a sense of purpose and pride.

In our opinion, practices like these are increasingly commonsensical and should become a normal part of the college discussion for all families – the quest for affordable education should be the 'norm' rather than the exception. It is also our responsibility to help eliminate the social stigma that is still sometimes associated with these 'non-traditional' educational options. The global workforce is changing, and the model for education that worked so well 30 years ago needs to change as well.

As Thomas Friedman wrote this past summer, "It's the story of our time: The pace of change in technology, globalization and climate have started to outrun the ability of our political systems to build the social, educational, community workplace and political innovations needed for some citizens to keep up."

Given this new reality, it seems illogical to believe the traditional route of four expensive years of education beginning at the age of eighteen is all that's necessary for a fruitful career. Especially considering a great deal of academic content learned in freshman year is already outdated by junior or senior year. Rather, our new world is likely no different than our Apple or Android operating system – our skill sets are going to require ongoing updates at various stages of our career. Otherwise, we risk being unprepared for the evolving needs of a modern workplace.

This alternative perspective means recasting the cost benefit analysis of education to include 30-40 years (a marathon), rather than only 4 (a sprint). It means being realistic about our financial resources, the return on investment and the oftentimes counterproductive burden of an expensive education. Does spending \$120,000 or more at the age of 18 without a committed and viable career path realistically prepare our young adults for the evolving demands of a modern workforce and the financial realities of today? Or, would it make more sense to utilize high quality lesser expensive programs for foundational learning (prerequisites, trade, or certificate) before spending top dollar in pursuit of a specialized career or highly regarded diploma. It's also common for two year programs to allow matriculation to a four year degree at a much lower cost. At roughly \$6,000 per year (in-state), programs like GBCC and others have the potential to save families and students thousands of dollars while simultaneously helping them develop a foundational set of values and skills.

As much as we would like to believe corporate citizenship will drive the specialized education needed for meaningful career advancement, we're currently surrounded by too many situations of structural under-employment and stunted career paths. In many cases our local barista has more student loan debt than the price of a first home, and they're unable to relocate for unique opportunities because of the need for free housing (living with their parents). Does this represent a system that's meaningfully aligned with the needs of our workforce?

Choosing an unconventional path without the assurance of success can be difficult. It sometimes takes confidence and a strong will to stand apart from the herd. However, the conventional and often times exceptionally expensive educational plan no longer promises success. Instead it often leads to the hypothetical over indebted barista.

Altering our cultural perspective of education will take time, but the underlying sands of education are changing. GBCC and other community colleges are the best examples of this, and a huge win for mindful students, family balance sheets, and the competitiveness of our local community.

Does anything you've read trigger a question? Send us an [email](#).

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