The Many Decisions of College

In the game of life, higher education has long been regarded as a luxury and the ultimate meal ticket to getting a good job. However, many flaws of education have been recognized by people who want to give students a proper education. The biggest factors in this argument are the ever-growing costs of education and the changing definition of the “college experience.” Many people will realize this is important, because it impacts how well people do their job. College education still has a lasting value, but that can soon change with the growing number of graduates and how students receive their education.

The world of college education is changing on an everyday basis. With a higher tuition rate coming every school season and new technology shaping where and how students learn, the college environment is becoming more unpredictable with each passing year. It is no secret college graduates are paid more, but with tuition skyrocketing, students are starting to wonder if college is worth the extra pay. Technological learning has changed the way education is brought to the people as it becomes more easily available to the masses. Education is now taught with electronic textbooks, lectures, and live feeds, which raises a question about the worth of going to a lecture hall versus just going to college in pajamas. However, a college degree is still revered as the ultimate achievement.

The college experience also entails what a student chooses to study while they are there. Colleges were originally established for students to study philosophy, politics, and the liberal
arts. Now, colleges are prepared to teach anything from underwater basket weaving to psychology. *They Say/I Say with Readings* has compiled the arguments as to why liberal education is important to students and why students should and should not go to college.

Ever since higher education started to become mainstream, students everywhere have asked “Why go to college?” Their parents and adult role models will then give them a lecture, pointing out all the benefits of going to college. Upon getting this answer, students research and look into the universities they want to attend. They start to ask themselves questions like: “Community and junior college or four-year university? What about vocational schools? What am I going to do with my life? Who or what is going to pay for all this?” The scholars who have written the essays in the book *They Say/I Say with Readings* have answers for all these questions. One author is saying go to community college, another says do not go to college at all. Some say student loans are good while the other side says they are bad. Then there are those who say the four-year university is the ultimate achievement in life. There are those who are against career education, saying the liberal arts is the best of the best. Either way, students can find answers to these questions, whether or not the answers are all the same is a different story.

There are many questions students ask themselves in their final year of high school. One of these questions is: “Should I go to college?” People of course will answer this question positively, by saying everyone should go to college. However, Charles Murray, author of “Are Too Many People Going to College?”, says otherwise. He states, “Getting a liberal education consists of dealing with complex intellectual material day after day, and dealing with complex material is what students in the top few percentiles are good at” (227). In other words, college is not for anyone, it takes time and brain power to do well and to be successful after graduation. Claudia Dreifus and Andrew Hacker also have a few words to say about this topic in their essay
“Are Colleges Worth the Price of Admission?,” asking if college is worth the hefty price tag that comes with being accepted. The pair has determined colleges are losing track of their goals in education and list proposals to ensure college will be worth the prices they advertise (179-188). Then there is Mike Rose, author of “Blue-Collar Brilliance” who understands the college degree is not a certificate saying one is a genius. He sees in blue-collar workers knowledge learned on a shop floor, such as measuring, reading blueprints, and understanding other workers (243-254). In the eyes of Dreifus and Hacker, Murray, and Rose, college should be a carefully considered decision, but it is not mandatory in life to attend.

On the other side of this question though, there are people saying any and all should attend college. Sanford J. Ungar of “The New Liberal Arts” sees that more people need to focus less on career education and more on the liberal arts. Ungar notes “…it is often the people who are the newest to certain ideas and approaches who are the most original and inventive in the discussion and application of those ideas” (193). This means, unlike Murray’s belief, students need not come to college with an array of knowledge from their previous liberal arts courses. Like Murray, Liz Addison understands there are some students who may be unprepared for college. This becomes the reason why she suggests in her essay “Two Year Are Better Than Four”, the nearby community college is perfect for the new, incoming freshman just starting out in the big world of higher education (212-214). There are many disagreements as to whether or not students should go to college, but in the eyes of adults, all students should go to college.

One of the first questions students ask themselves is about paying for college. What will they do to pay for this massive investment of not only time, but money? Tuition has been increasing almost every year for decades. As tuition continues to rise, many students will start to wonder if college is worth its hefty price tag. Many will say “yes” to this question, but worry
how the student is going to pay off the bills coming in as they attend school. Robin Wilson offers a solution in her essay “A Lifetime of Student Debt? Not Likely” by noting many students do not graduate with debt and those who do can find the amount roughly equivalent to an older car (257). Liz Addison also gives a solution to costs of education in her essay “Two Years are Better than Four” as she praises the community college for its affordability (214).

However, there are those who disagree and say college is no longer worth its cost. Relating back to his essay, Charles Murray maintains college is not always necessary to be successful in life. He states, “In today’s America, finding a first-rate lawyer or physician is easy. Finding first-rate skilled labor is hard” (236). In other words, skilled labor is becoming more valuable, and most of the time it does not need a college education. These workers, as Murray noted are more likely to find work and have greater overall financial and intrinsic benefits. Mike Rose also acknowledges college is not an indicator of knowledge by recognizing the many blue-collar workers who learn skills relating to their occupation (254). The knowledge these workers learn can be awarded with an honorary degree, or a higher job position as they learn more about their work and its technical side.

After students ask whether or not they should go to college, they begin to ask even more questions. The next question students ask about college is about which one is the best for them. Many students research these colleges, scanning each one for the best price, the best programs, and the best way to graduate. However, colleges are taking on many new roles that distract from what should be their main focus: educating undergraduates and teaching them to use their minds.

In their essay, “Are Colleges Worth the Price of Admission?”, Hacker and Dreifus encourage students to use their minds and tell colleges to get back to what they should be doing: teaching students. They want colleges to focus on using donations to benefit everyone in the
college, avoiding the exploitation of adjunct professors, and ensure college boards of trustees do not give huge pay raises to university presidents. They also want students to learn about thinking. The two authors report “some 64 percent of undergraduate students are enrolled in vocational majors, instead of choosing fields like philosophy, literature, or the physical sciences” (180). In other words, most students want to find the fast track to a job, and not go through those long liberal arts classes that can better prepare them for the future. Dreifus and Hacker encourage undergraduate professors to engage their students and to take fewer sabbaticals which will help their students find success (179-188). Dreifus and Hacker’s proposals should be carefully considered in choosing a college or university.

After putting in hours of research into which college should be picked, students must choose what they want to do with their lives. College students once picked majors involving the liberal arts, such as economics, political science, and history. There are many who believe students should study the liberal arts while in college. As mentioned previously, Dreifus and Hacker are two of those people who believe students need to use their minds by studying subjects like philosophy and physical science. Now, two voices will be heard on the subject of studying the liberal arts.

The liberal arts were once some of the most commonly studied majors. Now, Sanford J. Ungar is arguing for the liberal arts and gives reasons why everyone should be a liberal arts major in college. He acknowledges there are many misperceptions to the liberal arts and names each misperception and gives reasons as to why they are untrue. His essay, “The New Liberal Arts”, suggests these misperceptions are the reason why the liberal arts are no longer the most common majors (190-196).

Ungar maintains in his essay a liberal arts degree is a far better investment than a career
degree because it gives people “an understanding of the complex influences that shape the world” (191). He acknowledges education is getting more expensive, but he knows this does not mean only the wealthy should get a liberal education or that it is a waste of money to get one. His essay also refutes the common belief the liberal arts fields are nothing compared to those of science, technology, engineering and math by stating, “The liberal arts encompass the broadest possible ranges of disciplines…Another term sometimes substituted for the liberal arts, for the sake of clarity is the “arts and sciences” (193). Meaning, the liberal arts is not just the arts, it encompasses every major subject. In his essay, Ungar argues the importance and value of liberal education in the future (190-196).

David Foster Wallace’s commencement speech at Kenyon College brings new insight upon the topic of liberal education and what it teaches students. He instills in listeners the point of education is not to gain knowledge, but to gain a better sense of the world around them by thinking of it differently. He gives advice to the new graduates and the world they will be facing as they enter the job market as liberal arts degree recipients. His speech advocates for a new perspective on life by thinking about what others think (198-209).

The speech given by Wallace brings in new ideas about thinking and education. He claims the point of his liberal arts degree is about teaching how to think, which has a much deeper meaning in “learning how to think really means learning how to exercise some control over how and what you think” (202). He maintains this point by saying people need to change some of their thinking habits by not focusing so much on them. Wallace continues by giving an example of this skill, such as going to the grocery store where people are focused on themselves and not on them when in fact it can also be vice versa. He encourages people to think differently about their world, saying “real freedom” involves “attention and awareness and discipline”
which results from being educated and understanding the skill of thinking (208). The ideas expressed by Wallace teach how to apply liberal education in real-life and how it teaches people to be better thinkers (198-209).

The decision of what college a student should go to is a personal one. They must factor in not only cost, but how far they want to leave from home if at all. It has now become the norm for students to choose a four-year university over any other colleges available to them. The decision to attend this type of college can be a wise decision, or it can be a major mistake. The type of college a student attends plays a major part in a student’s future.

The first type of college being advocated is the occasionally looked down upon community college. Liz Addison disagrees with this outlook in her essay “Two Years are Better than Four”, saying four years is not always the best choice for students. She recognizes the environment community colleges foster is beneficial to those beginning with higher education. Unlike most adults, she advocates for the two-year community college and argues with Rick Perlstein about whether or not college matters today (211-214).

Addison contradicts Perlstein by saying college still matters today in the small community colleges where people can just begin. She emphasizes in community college people can start out as a “rookie” and work their way up from there instead of being thrown into the big world of education (213). She recognizes the affordability and accessibility of these small colleges, and the growing dreams happening as community college students progress their education. Addison’s argument refutes Rick Perstein’s belief college no longer matters in the world by advocating for community colleges, where education matters in the eyes of the students who attend (211-214).

The for-profit college is one of the most hotly debated topics today. These colleges run
more like businesses and less like educational institutions. Kevin Carey in his essay "Why Do You Think They're Called For-Profit Colleges?," asserts his belief in the fact for-profit colleges deserve to be named exactly so. He emphasizes the massive loans students need to take out in order to pay tuition only, not including books or other supplies and fees that can find a student. His main argument though is for-profit colleges need to admit the debt they set upon their students and claim responsibility (215-221).

One of the major points of Carey's argument is the government is allowing students to take out many loans to pay for these for-profit colleges. He states "[University of] Phoenix alone is on pace to reap $1-billion from Pell Grants this year, along with $4-billion from federal loans. A quarter of all federal aid goes to for-profits...they enroll only 10 percent of students" (216). In other words, even though their enrollment numbers are some of the lowest, for-profits still get the majority of the money given out by the government. He acknowledges many students of for-profit colleges are moderate to low income students, and the loans they are taking out can put them into vast amounts of debt they may need to default on. He does notice there is an upside to the world of for-profits though, such as their partnering with bankrupt colleges to teach courses they can no longer offer and picking up students other colleges have ignored (215-221).

While staying on the yellow brick road leading up to the four-year university, some students find their minds wandering back to an old question: “Do I have to go to college?” They ponder this question for a while, but they still get back on the road to college because it is what their parents and role models say they need to focus on. There are people though who disagree with this perception, saying some should not be going to college and there are other good jobs that can be acquired without college.

Going back to Charles Murray's essay, one question may not surface in the minds of busy
students. Murray asks the question in the title of his essay "Are Too Many People Going to College?" He reports to his readers new college students are unprepared to attend college intellectually and skilled work is becoming more valuable than professional work. The main idea of Murray's essay is people who are attending college are unprepared and their skills could be used elsewhere (222-242).

Murray's argument asserts good students need certain qualities about them in order to succeed in college. Murray's essay begins by quoting E.D. Hirsch Jr.'s *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*. Hirsch discusses what every person needs to know in order to gain a liberal education and what everyone needs to know in every subject (qtd. in Murray 223-225). Murray's next statements involve discussing the preparation a student needs and the qualities those students need in order to do well in a liberal education, such as enjoying puzzles and Enlightenment-age literature. He recognizes the changing world of education and the different mediums being used today as part of this changing world. Murray acknowledges skilled work is a more reliable occupation than some college graduate jobs through the example of a young man who researches his occupation choices only to find an electrician has more benefits than a white-collar manager. He has observed many adults are encouraging students to attend college no matter their career interests and urges them to think of the student’s abilities before saying they should go to college (222-242).

Mike Rose’s idea about intelligence is expressed in his essay “Blue-Collar Brilliance”, and it involves more than just books and fancy degrees. Over the years, he has noticed blue-collar labor can be viewed as work for those who are less intelligent. His views on intelligence came from his mother and uncle who were both blue-collar workers. The point of his essay is intelligence goes beyond what is learned in school, it goes into what blue-collar workers learned
while they are on the job and how it makes them intelligence (243-254).

Rose celebrates the tradition of blue-collar labor and suggests the work required in this labor is more knowledge-extensive than most believe and see. Rose begins by explaining how smart his mother was when she had to be able to work around peoples’ moods, taking and remembering orders, and doing the “basic” jobs of a waitress. He acknowledges many scholars look at the values of blue-collar workers, not their actual work. He gives another example of blue-collar smarts by telling the story of his uncle, an auto mechanic with an eighth grade education. Despite this, he went on to become a supervisor of a GM paint and body department because of the technological knowledge he picked up from being on the floor for so many years. This type knowledge may not be conventional, but it still requires skills often given in the form of on-the-job training. From interpreting building plans to sketching measurements and reading manuals, blue-collar labor can often be undervalued (243-254).

College is an investment. How much is invested depends on the financial situation of the student and his or her family. Many students are fortunate to find scholarships, grants, and work study programs to help pay for their education. Those who take out loans to pay for their education can sometimes be pitied as the media has led people to believe student loans are a necessary evil in education. However, it has been shown student loans are not as bad as they seem.

Robin Wilson’s essay on student loan debt suggests to readers, if managed properly, it can be paid off very easily. She does not see student loan debt as the terrible burden people make it out to be. She acknowledges the differences in debt amount between students who graduate with debt, and students who graduate with debt who have a story about them on CNN. Wilson unveils the truth about student debt and what it means to the student (256-272).
Wilson asserts student loan debt is not as bad as the media portrays and supports this by giving examples of students who go along with life living with student debt. She acknowledges some students graduate with no debt, and those who do graduate with it will find the number relatively easy to pay off and forget about. The newsmakers are the “overborrowers” and attend the school they have always wanted to go to no matter the cost (258). Experts expect professional students, such as law, medicine, and business to take out more loans because they are more likely to make more money. A law student came about this problem when he decided to take a low paying job in the district attorney’s office upon graduation from an expensive law school. The problem, Wilson says is lack of understanding of student loans, which she in part blames on the college. She ends with examples of students who are paying off their debts, living a normal life, and not complaining (256-272).

All the voices have been heard, but questions are still being posed as to why and how students should be taught and what decisions they need to make regarding their education. One of the discussions not touched upon by these scholars is class sizes. Should students be taught one-on-one or should they be taught in stadiums? Another topic that went unmentioned was when students should be educated. Should they be taught the minute they get out of high school, or can they wait until they are adults and possible parents to receive an education? While Murray touched upon the subject of test scores, it still remains a question as to whether or not technology in the classroom impacts test scores. Scholars think they have an answer to these questions, but in reality no one does. Their readers upon reading their essays may find themselves with more questions as more influences around their world come and give their opinion as well. This is why the essays discussed in this review are still being written, because these scholars have chosen to answer these questions to influence others to think one way or another. If these scholars sat at a
round table, and had a meeting about education they would all be asking the same question: Is a college education worth it? The cycle will continue and questions about education and its worth will still be asked.
Works Cited


