

College education benefits the public good

Bernie Patterson, for USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin

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A recent Pew Research Center poll showed nearly 60 percent of Republican and conservative-leaning independents view colleges as having a negative influence on America. Meanwhile, about three-quarters of Democrats and liberal independents say America's institutions of higher learning have a positive impact. While I have no reason to dispute these findings, I wonder whether framing them in a partisan manner is useful.



As the chancellor of this 123-year-old institution, I can vouch for the positive impact UW-Stevens Point has on this community, current students and graduates. The university prepares future employees and taxpayers, community leaders and volunteers, provides entertainment through arts and athletics, insight through faculty lectures and learning opportunities. I view these as civic goods, not partisan issues.

Education certainly benefits each individual student, from primary school through college or technical training. In so doing, it also benefits the public good.

Those with more education are more likely to:

- Be employed in a meaningful career
- Earn a higher wage
- Be engaged civically
- Be healthier
- Be happier

They are less likely to:

- Need public assistance
- Be involved in criminal behavior
- Divorce

These positive effects of education were compiled by Kevin Neuman, professor of Economics at UW-Stevens Point, who reviewed research on the economic, political, medical, social and personal aspects of those who attain a college degree.

Before we delve into his findings, let's acknowledge: It's as easy to find an unhealthy college grad as it is to find a happily married person who did not complete high school or a civically minded person whose formal education ended with a high school diploma. My point in sharing this research is to demonstrate that a college education benefits the public good, not just the private individual.

Among the findings:

Health: Increases in education are associated with better health and general well-being, according to Social Indicators Research. College graduates are more likely to report being in very good health (45 percent) than high school graduates (30 percent).

Individuals with a high school education are 17 percentage points more likely to have smoked than college graduates, according to the Journal of Economic Perspectives.

Having at least some college education was associated with lower levels of hypertension and diabetes.

Social outcomes: Education reduces the likelihood of criminal behavior. Graduating from high school was linked to lower property crimes than not completing high school.

Personal: Happiness increases with level of education, regardless of income. Among those with roughly the same annual household income, high school graduates report being happy about 4 percentage points more often than high school dropouts, and college graduates report being happy 2 percentage points more often than high school graduates.

Trust also increases with the level of education. According to a 2016 report in Social Indicators Research, more than 50 percent of college graduates report people in general can be trusted. An estimated 40 percent of high school graduates and 30 percent of high school dropouts said people generally can be trusted.

Divorce rates declined as education level rose, according to the Journal of Economic Perspectives study. The fraction of people who have been divorced or separated was more than twice as high for high school graduates compared to college graduates,.

Political: Those with a college degree are more than 20 percentage points more likely to be interested in politics and more likely to vote.

Economic: Earnings increase with education, particularly for college and post-graduate degrees compared to those with a high school education. College graduates ages 25 to 32 who are working full-time earn about \$17,500 more annually than employed young adults with only a high school diploma, based on a Pew study in 2014.

The likelihood of needing social services, such as welfare, declines with education, according to the Journal of Economic Perspectives article. This report also noted greater educational attainment reduces the likelihood of unemployment periods.

These findings are good news for taxpayers. We can conclude that a more educated citizenry will place fewer demands on our medical, social and criminal justice systems. Education benefits the fabric of our community, regardless of political persuasion or career path.

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<http://www.stevenspointjournal.com/story/news/local/2017/07/28/chancellor-college-education-benefits-public-good/518496001/>