Americans Foresee a Decline in The Value of a College Degree

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The importance of higher education is repeatedly stressed in school but the value of a college degree is on the decline for some. According to a study by the Pew Research Center, four in ten Americans do not believe there's a need for a college degree for a well-paying job. About half of the respondents believed the importance of a college degree is not as significant as it was twenty years ago and this can be seen in many organizations, where skill and experience trump a well-padded resume. The public opinion on college degrees may be shifting but the numbers should be treated cautiously as formal education has not become redundant just yet.



Image: Pexels

THE VALUE OF A COLLEGE DEGREE IS NOT AS SIGNIFICANT AS IT WAS IN THE PAST

Pew Research Center recently released the results of the American Trends Panel (ATP) Wave 139, for which data was collected between November 27 and December 3, 2023. A total of 5,203 randomly selected U.S. citizens over the age of 18 participated in the study and their perspective has been very useful in understanding the public attitude towards higher education.

According to the study, "Four in ten Americans say it is not too or not at all important to have a four-year college degree in order to get a well-paying job in today's economy."

The study also found that college graduates were more likely to say that having a college degree is extremely important. This may be because they've seen some genuine benefit from their education. Their perspective could also be shaped by the sunken cost fallacy where they want to believe that their investment in education was not a waste of their resources. 58 percent of those with a four-year college degree felt their education was extremely useful in giving them the skill and knowledge to get them a well-paying job, so there may be some benefits of a college degree for those who do seek it out. Regardless, both those with and without a college degree are more likely to agree that the value of college degrees has decreased compared to twenty years ago.

These numbers suggest that those with a degree have found some benefit from having spent their time in study, but considering the work climate today, it may not be an "essential" component. The numbers make sense when you consider the myriad ways in which people gain experience today. Essentially, a four-year college degree isn't the only way to get a good job.

THE EVOLVING NEED FOR A COLLEGE DEGREE IN SECURING A JOB

There are many reasons why public opinion regarding a college degree could be shifting. From the economic burdens of pursuing a degree to the lost time when individuals could be practicing instead, the landscape of education seems to have shifted compared to where it was twenty years ago. Some even point to the lack of hands-on training and the outdated teaching practices in colleges that have not kept up with the shifting demands of the job market.

A COLLEGE DEGREE'S IMPORTANCE CAN DEPEND ON ITS COST

Quoting the U.S. News & World Report, CNBC states that college tuition has outpaced inflation and left students with substantial debt. The fees at private institutions have gone up by 144 percent and public tuition has also risen by 211 percent for in-state students. Data from the Federal Reserve suggest that four in ten adults have attended college by taking out student loans to support their education. The cost of studying beyond high school is on the rise and it's no wonder that citizens are beginning to question the value of a college degree.

Of the respondents of the Pew Research study, 47 percent said a four-year college degree was worth the cost only if they didn't have to take out loans to access the degree. Only 22 percent of them saw the value of a college degree even with the inclusion of loans and 29 percent of them said college wasn't worth the costs at all. The public opinion on college degrees is very closely tied to how expensive it is. For a majority, the struggles of paying off student loans inhibit any real value gained from the experience.

NEED FOR COLLEGE DEGREE IN JOBS WITH SPECIALIZED SKILL

A college degree can be useful because it provides a lot of the background knowledge that is required on the job and it helps with developing skills that tie into future careers. With

specialized jobs like a nurse or a doctor, there is a significant amount of studying required to understand the human body before you can get to treating it and operating on it. When it comes to being a lawyer, extensive training and testing of the legal system and its intricacies is essential before you can be allowed into any court.

With professions that require very specific training, the public opinion on the importance of a college degree is far outweighed by the systems in place that require these degrees by default. When it comes to other professions like marketing and management, a college degree's value can decrease over time. For many, a few months on the job gives them more hands-on training than their degrees do.

IMPROVED PROSPECTS FOR HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES

There is a very evident wage gap between those with and without college degrees but there are an increasing number of opportunities for those without a college education. Over the last few years, the labor market has been more accepting of freshers willing to work and learn rather than insisting on higher education. This has likely contributed to the public opinion on college degrees.

Teenagers are very entrepreneurial and pick up many skills while balancing school these days, largely thanks to the many platforms that are available to them. Some run Etsy resin jewelry stores, others sell their art on Instagram, still, others make money selling crocheted clothes at pop-up stores, and the list goes on.

Not all of them are able to turn these small businesses into full-fledged careers, but they do have resilience and significant experience running a business all on their own. Companies who know how to prioritize these experiences and look for candidates in the right place greatly benefit from hiring the right talent. Such trends can be credited as contributors to the declining need for college degrees to secure jobs.

CHANGING NATURE OF JOBS CONTRIBUTE TO THE SHIFTING VALUE OF A COLLEGE DEGREE

Job roles themselves have also evolved drastically over the years. A social media manager is a crucial part of any successful marketing campaign and it requires someone with a keen knowledge about the internet and what's trending. Finding such experts can change the trajectory of a company's business prospects and the skills they have are frequently self-taught. New job roles are being designed every day and the importance of a college degree isn't always as prominent for these positions.

If the market shifts to reprioritize a formal education, the public opinion on college degrees may shift as well. For now, Americans' views on college degrees are signs that the nature of work is changing and that there are alternate paths to finding success.