

DOWN WITH THE FOUR-YEAR COLLEGE DEGREE!

Charles Murray

The proposition that I hereby lay before the house is that the BA degree is the work of the devil. It wreaks harm on a majority of young people, is grotesquely inefficient as a source of information for employers, and is implicated in the emergence of a class-riven America.

Before explaining why, let me specify a few things that I am *not* arguing.

I am not complaining that too many people are getting education after high school. On the contrary, I am in favor of education after high school for almost all young people.

I am not denying that that possession of a BA is statistically associated with higher income across the life span, and that this economic benefit persists after controlling for measures of human capital (e.g., IQ scores), field of study, and other background variables.

I am not disparaging the value of a liberal education, classically understood. On the contrary, I think far too few young people are exposed to the stuff of a liberal education (that's the last I'm going to say on that issue in this presentation. There's a long discussion of liberal education in the book.)

Why the Current System Doesn't Make Sense

So what's my beef with the current system? Perhaps the easiest way to introduce the argument is to ask you to imagine that you have been made a member of a task force to design America's post-secondary education system from scratch. One of your colleagues submits this proposal:

First, we will set up a single goal to represent educational success, which will take four years to achieve no matter what is being taught. We will attach an economic reward to it that often has nothing to do with what has been learned. We will urge large numbers of people who do not possess adequate ability to try to achieve the goal, wait until they have spent a lot of time and money, and then deny it to them. We will stigmatize everyone who doesn't meet the goal. We will call the goal a "BA."

You would conclude that your colleague was cruel, not to say insane. But that's the system we have. It doesn't make sense. Here's why:

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Four years makes sense for students who are trying to get a liberal education and therefore need to take a few dozen courses in philosophy, religion, classical and modern literature, the fine arts, classical and modern history (including the history of science), plus acquire fluency in a foreign language and take basic survey courses in the social sciences. The percentage of college students who want to do that is what? Ten percent? Probably that is too optimistic. Whatever the exact figure, it is a tiny minority.

For everyone else, four years is ridiculous. Assuming a semester system with four courses per semester, four years of class work means thirty-two semester-long courses. The occupations that require thirty-two courses are exceedingly rare. In fact, I can't think of a single example. Even medical school and Ph.D.s don't require four years of course work. For the student who wants to become a good hotel manager, software designer, accountant, hospital administrator, farmer, high-school teacher, social worker, journalist, optometrist, interior designer, or football coach, the classes needed for the academic basis for competence take a year or two. Actually becoming good at one's job usually takes longer than that, but competence in any profession is mostly acquired on the job. The two-year community college and online courses offer more flexible options than the four-year college for tailoring academic course work to the real needs of students.

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The BA really does confer a wage premium on its average recipient, but there is no good reason that it should.

First, consider professions in which the material learned in college is useful for job performance, such as engineering, the sciences, and business majors. Take the specific case of accounting. It is possible to get a BA (I use BA as a generic term embracing the BS) in accounting. There is also the CPA exam required to become a Certified Public Accountant. The CPA test is thorough (four sections, timed, totaling fourteen hours). To achieve a passing score indicates authentic competence (the pass rate is below 50 percent

for all four tests). Actual scores are reported in addition to pass/fail, so that employers can assess where the applicant falls in the distribution of accounting capability. If I am an employer of accountants and am given the choice between an applicant with a mediocre CPA score but a BA in accounting and another who studied accounting on-line, has no degree, but does have a terrific CPA score, explain to me why should I be more attracted to the applicant with the BA

The merits of the CPA exam apply to any college major for which the BA is now used as a job qualification. To name just some of them: journalism, criminal justice, social work, public administration, and the many separate majors under the headings of business, computer science, engineering, engineering technology, and education. Such majors accounted for almost two-thirds of bachelor's degrees conferred in 2005. In every one of those cases, a good certification test would tell employers more about the applicant's skills than the BA does.

Now consider job applicants for whom the material learned in college is, to put it charitably, only indirectly related to job performance. I am referring to people like me (BA in Russian history), and BAs in political science, sociology, English lit, the fine arts, and philosophy, not to mention the flakier majors (e.g., gender studies). For people like us, presenting a BA to employers amounts to presenting them with a coarse indicator of our intelligence and perseverance. If we have gone to an elite college, it is mostly an indicator of what terrific students we were in high school (getting into Harvard and Duke is really tough, but getting through Harvard and Duke for students not in math or science is really easy).

Yes, the wage premium for college is associated with these majors as well, but please don't tell me it's because employers think college augmented our human capital. Employers are not stupid. They know that college *might* have augmented our human capital. Occasionally, college does teach students to become more rigorous thinkers and writers, and those are useful assets to take into a job. But employers also know that it would be foolish to assume that the typical college graduate has sought out the most demanding teachers and slaved over the syntax and logic of his term papers. The much more certain implication of the BA is that its possessors have a certain amount of raw intellectual ability that the employer may be able to exploit after the proper job training.

Finally, consider the hundreds of thousands of students who go to college just because they have had it pounded into their heads since childhood that the good jobs require a BA. The wage premium that shows up in regression equations may or may not apply to them. In *Real Education*, I offer an extended example involving a hypothetical young man graduating from high school who is at the 70th percentile in intellectual ability — smart enough to get a BA in today’s world — but just average in intrapersonal and interpersonal ability. He is at the 95th percentile in the visual-spatial and small motor skills useful in becoming a top electrician. He is trying to decide whether to go to college, major in business, and try to become a business executive, or instead become an electrician.

The bottom line of the example is that he cannot compare the mean income of business managers to the mean income of electricians. If his configuration of abilities means that he *could* get a BA in today’s colleges, but his cognitive and interpersonal skills are minimal for success in business, he has to recognize that he will be at a huge disadvantage in the competition for promotions after he gets his entry-level white-collar job. The relevant income figures are those for people in the bottom few deciles of the distribution of income for business managers. If his configuration of abilities means that he could become an excellent electrician, he needs to focus on the income of electricians in the top few deciles of that distribution.

We will urge large numbers of people who do not possess adequate ability to try to achieve the goal, wait until they have spent a lot of time and money, and then deny it to them.

Historically, an IQ of 115 or higher was deemed to make someone “prime college material.” That range comprises about 16 percent of the population. Since 28 percent of all adults have BAs, the IQ required to get a degree these days is obviously a lot lower than 115. But the cognitive ability required to cope with genuine college-level material has not changed. A recent study of “college readiness” by the College Board asked what SAT scores were required to have a 65 percent chance of maintaining a 2.7 grade average in the freshman year in a sample of 41 major institutions that included both state universities and elite schools. The answer was a combined SAT Verbal and Math score of 1180, a score that only about ten percent of 18-year-olds could get if everyone took the SAT. Nor was

this requirement inflated by the inclusion of the elite colleges in the sample—the difference in the benchmark scores for unselective and selective universities was a trivial 23 points.

So even though college has been dumbed down, it is still too intellectually demanding for a large majority of students, in an age when about 50 percent of all high school graduates are heading to four-year colleges the next fall. The result is lots of failure. Of those who entered a four-year college in 1995, only 58 percent had gotten their BA five academic years later. Another 14 percent were still enrolled. If we assume that half of that 14 percent eventually get their BAs, about a third of all those who entered college hoping for a BA leave without one, often after accumulating a large student-loan debt.

If these numbers had been produced in a culture where the BA was a nice thing to have but not a big deal, they could be interpreted as the result of young adults deciding that they didn't really want a BA after all. Instead, these numbers were produced by a system in which having a BA is a very big deal indeed, and that brings us to the increasingly worrisome role of the BA as a source of class division.

We will stigmatize everyone who doesn't meet the goal.

The United States has always had symbols of class, and the college degree has always been one of them. But through the first half of the twentieth century, there were all sorts of respectable reasons why a person might not go to college — not enough money to pay for college; needing to work right out of high school to support a wife, parents, or younger siblings; or the commonly held belief that going straight to work was better preparation for a business career than going to college.

As long as the percentage of college graduates remained small, it also remained true, and everybody knew it, that the majority of America's intellectually most able people did not have BAs. Over the course of the twentieth century, three trends gathered strength. The first was the increasing proportion of jobs screened for high academic ability due to the advanced level of education they require — engineers, physicians, attorneys, college teachers, scientists, and the like. The second was the increasing market value of those jobs. The third was the opening up of college to more of those who had the academic ability to go to college, partly because the increase in American wealth meant that more parents could afford

college for their children, and partly because the proliferation of scholarships and loans made it possible for most students with enough academic ability to go. The combined effect of these trends has been to overturn the state of affairs that prevailed through World War II. Now the great majority of America's intellectually most able people *do* have a BA.

Along with that transformation has come a downside that few anticipated. The acceptable excuses for not going to college have dried up. 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. Face it: To say "I'm just a high school graduate" as of 2008 is to label oneself in some important sense as a second-class citizen. No amount of protestations of egalitarianism by people who like the current system (i.e., people who do well in an academic setting) will change that reality—a reality fostered by a piece of paper that for most students in most majors is close to meaningless.

Testing Is Ideal

And so I have taken as my mission to do everything I can to undermine the BA. The good news is that the conditions are right for change. There is a diverse world of work out there, filled with jobs that are interesting, well-paying, and intrinsically rewarding, that do not call for the kind of training that colleges are designed to provide. There is a vital and growing world of on-line education that is revolutionizing the possibilities for delivering post-secondary education.

No technical barriers stand in the way of evolving toward a system where certification tests would replace the BA. Hundreds of certification tests already exist, for everything from building code inspectors to advanced medical specialties. The problem is a shortage of tests that are nationally accepted like the CPA exam. But when so many of the players would benefit, a market opportunity exists. If a high-profile testing company such as the Educational Testing Service were to reach a strategic decision to create definitive certification tests, it could coordinate with major employers, professional groups and nontraditional universities to make its tests the gold standard. A handful of key decisions could produce a tipping effect. Imagine if Microsoft announced it would henceforth require scores on a certain battery of certification tests for all of its programming applicants. Scores on that battery would acquire in-

stant credibility for programming job applicants throughout the industry.

In my ideal system, the college campuses of America will still exist and they will still be filled with students. Some of those students will be staying for four years as before, but many others will be arriving and leaving on schedules that make sense for their own goals. The colleges in my ideal system will have had to adapt their operations to meet new demands, but changes in information technology are coming so fast that major adaptation is inevitable anyway.

The greatest merit of my ideal system is this: Hardly any jobs will still have the BA as a requirement for a fair shot at being hired. Employers will rely more on direct evidence about what the job candidate knows, less on where it was learned or how long it took.

To me, the most important if most intangible benefit of my ideal system is that the demonstration of competency in European history or marketing or would, appropriately, take on similarities to the demonstration of competency in cooking or welding. Our obsession with the BA has created a two-tiered entry to adulthood, anointing some for admission to the club and labeling the rest as second-best.

Here's the reality: Everyone in every occupation starts as an apprentice. Those who are good enough become journeymen. The best become master craftsmen. This is as true of history professors and business executives as of chefs and welders. Getting rid of the BA and replacing it with evidence of competence — treating post-secondary education as apprenticeships for everyone — is one way to help us to recognize that common bond.

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