

A college education isn't just about the money

I'm not certain that my mother, bless her immigrant heart, saw any value at all in a college education.

A product of the Great Depression, she wanted me to hook up with a city job. Maybe driving a truck.

I don't know where she came up with that plan. Probably it was the precariousness of her own life and how the only people she knew who had steady work didn't get it from college. They got it working for the city.

And God knows there have been times when I wished that I had taken her advice. I've driven trucks, and I like the work. According to payscale.com, the average \$60,000 yearly long-haul trucker salary doesn't suffer compared with your average print journalist salary.

Still, I couldn't have taken up journalism without a college degree. Nor could I have been the semi-educated person I wanted to be without the life-shaping college experience.

I started thinking about this after reading a front-page story asking if a college degree was "still worth it?"

It's the "it" that's important here. And getting it, whatever that is, costs around \$20,000 a year at a University of California campus and not a whole lot less anywhere else if you include food, rent and criminally priced textbooks.

Harvard tuition, get this, is \$188,000 for four years. So is it any wonder that students, on average, now finish college \$22,656 in debt?

This while one in five students in the class of 2009 — the largest in U.S. history — had jobs waiting at graduation.

So it's all boo-hoo on the part of young grads who somehow expected the world and even worse for parents who had certainly hoped for more. Though I don't know why. Especially if those parents came up in the late 1960s and early '70s, in that first big bunch of college grads to be rejected by a recession-plagued job market.

I could have skipped college myself and stayed on in the sports department of my hometown paper. Or taken a city job. But no, I needed four years in college to teach me about a job I was already doing.

Blame that on high school guidance counselors — a bunch raised in the 1940s in a nation where fewer than 25 percent of Americans even had high school diplomas — promising that a B.A. was a punched ticket to a life of big cars and



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avocado-green home appliances.

Naturally, I didn't notice that an awful lot of people my age were likewise on their way to college. By the time I graduated, hundreds of would-be reporters were in line for my old job.

Still, I've managed to stay marginally solvent and relatively happy despite the vicissitudes of a profession that shed half of its practitioners in the past decade. This as the Supreme Court grants foreign and domestic corporations the deep-pocket go-ahead to bombard us with their take on political issues that suit their business models best.

In 2008, according to the Census Bureau, 29 percent of American adults had bachelor's degrees. And it is still being claimed by many sources that such degrees are worth a cool million in extra earnings over a lifetime, though I'm not quite certain where my million went. But a study out of Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., claims that a B.A. is worth closer to \$550,000 in added earnings.

Now I'm waiting for my extra \$550,000.

But there is far more to this equation than can ever be quantified. Sure, statistics state that college-educated people donate more money and more blood, they volunteer more, vote more often and are far more open-minded and healthy.

Then we hear the anecdotal opposite. Billionaires Bill Gates, Michael Dell, Steve Jobs, Larry Ellison and Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg are all college dropouts and are likely to have their college-educated employees donate blood for them.

Is that supposed to mean that college is some kind of impediment? Or are we bound by that other statistical factoid, the one claiming that college — while it may not allow you to write your own ticket — certainly offers an upgrade.

Or not. Anecdotally speaking, I know Ivy League grads who have not done terribly well financially and people who barely finished high school who have prospered mightily. That is, if you count the amassing of wealth as the only gauge of success.

Face it, if you're a grind with no perceptible personality, Yale isn't going to make you Steve Jobs. On the other hand, if you're Steve Jobs, there isn't a college invented that can contain you.

In reality, most of us are like Army drill instructors. You know, "Don't call me sir! I work for a living!"

And we do work for a living, the vast majority of us, as will our children. But there is a reason for spending all that tuition money and, in my case, for living like a dog to get a certificate that now lives at the back of a closet.

The same applies to the two kids I somehow managed to put through college. This I did with no expectation that they would emerge as anything but educated in a bedrock way that would serve them in whatever field they chose.

But what is money for anyway?

I didn't have to make a choice between food and tuition but I did make a choice between nice cars, cool vacations and education. Between investing in stuff and investing in children who probably won't (as my mother did) offer to buy their children cars if they skip college.

For most of us, it is an investment in their future and in the futures of children as yet unborn.

If the past year has taught us anything it's that absolutely everything can be lost in an instant. All except one thing. And it took my stepfather, a man who left school at 14 to help support a family, to privately countermand my mother's offer, telling me, "Get an education. It's the one thing they can't take away from you."

That is trite, old-time nattering, for sure, a thing said too often which — in this instance — makes it all the more true.

I want to hear your comments. Connect with me at john.bogert@dailybreeze.com.

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