

LEARNING CURVE:

Is college too much to ask?

For many students, yes, says one scholar. An adversary begs to differ.

By Maureen Downey
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It has become an article of faith that more U.S. students need to graduate college for the sake of the economy and to assure themselves middle-class status. Education researcher and provocateur Charles Murray, co-author of “The Bell Curve,” disagrees, at least partially.

“My beef is not with postsecondary education and college,” Murray says. “My beef is with this piece of paper called the B.A. The B.A. is the work of the devil.”

With that verbal grenade, Murray launched a lively debate last week with his polar opposite, Anthony Carnevale, an expert on education, training and employment and director of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.

Held in Atlanta, the debate was sponsored by Columbia University’s Hechinger Institute on Education and the Media.

The audience of education writers from around the country was skeptical of Murray’s contention that while half of our high school graduates march off to four-year residential colleges each year, only about 10 percent meet the intellectual benchmark suggested by College Board data — at least an 1180 on the SAT math and verbal tests — to master traditional college-level work. (Murray also cited journalism as a field for which students would be better prepared by an apprenticeship than by a college degree, a statement that did not endear him to the crowd.)

In essence, Murray contends that it’s cruel to steer kids to college when most lack the intellectual chops to handle it and will flounder. America holds a romanticized view of education, he says, and propagates a fairy

tale, unsubstantiated by the hard truths of inborn abilities, that students are limited only by their ambition and will.

Murray claims that the most schools can do is cause children who are intellectually below average — by definition about half of all kids — to be a little less below average. Even the best teachers under the best conditions cannot overcome the limits set by a child's own cognitive abilities, asserts Murray, a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute.

“The 9-year-old who has trouble sounding out simple words and his classmate who is reading ‘A Tale of Two Cities’ for fun sit in the same classroom day after miserable day, the one so frustrated by tasks he cannot do and the other so bored that both are near tears,” he writes in his new manifesto, “Real Education: Four Simple Truths for Bringing America's Schools Back to Reality.”

In countering Murray, Carnevale attacked his major premise, “that there is something in each of us that is innate and fixed, that doesn't change over time. ... It is true that cognitive ability affects people's prospect in life, but it's also true that people's prospects affect cognitive ability.”

In looking at high-scoring first-graders across incomes, Carnevale says 75 percent of the more affluent kids will still test high in fifth grade, compared to only 45 percent of the poorer students. That gap is not created by some inherent deficit in the children, he says, but to the quality of the educational opportunities afforded the two groups.

“If you come from a poor or working poor family, there's a 60 percent chance that you won't be able to ‘be all you can be,’ because our stratified, segregated and underperforming education system will fail to develop all your talents,” Carnevale says, citing the research of Eric Turkheimer at the University of Virginia. Murray's embrace of an education elite — that cognitively gifted 10 percent — is not only morally repellent, says Carnevale, but economically ruinous. The nation will face a shortage of 10 million B.A. graduates within the decade, he says, so it is vital public policy to encourage more high school students toward college.

Carnevale challenges Murray's contention that students who obtain certificates as plumbers or electricians can do as well as college-educated peers.

“Joe the Plumber makes \$39,000 a year,” says Carnevale. “The value of a technical education has been declining since the 1970s.”

Appointed by President Bush to serve on the White House Commission on Technology and Adult Education, Carnevale says market forces created the urgency for college degrees because of a shift to jobs that required mental agility and a capacity to learn well and quickly.

“Science and technology and service jobs demanded higher levels of skill, so employers began to hire people who were better learners,” says Carnevale. “Since 1973, we have gone from about 15 million people with B.A.’s or better degrees to about 40 million. That blue-collar economy is gone.”

Murray rejects the idea that students have to choose between getting a B.A. and taking a cashier’s job at Wal-Mart, noting that the top 10 percent of plumbers earn \$90,000 a year.

“Look, I am not saying that kids shouldn’t get more training after high school,” Murray says. “It shouldn’t be the straitjacket of four years of college.”

In my experience, plumbers who make \$90,000 a year — and I know a few in my own family — often did attend college. Their advanced schooling taught them how to set up a business, attract customers and maintain a base. While I share Murray’s doubts that every college degree has to be delivered in four years — some may require more time, some less — I see greater value in expanding higher education enrollments.

Although college may not be for everyone, we shouldn’t begin sorting the college-worthy from the blue-collar wage earner in kindergarten. There are scholars today who didn’t learn to read until third grade, and minimum-wage workers who tested in the 99th percentile in first grade.

Neither IQ nor SAT score should ever be mistaken for destiny.