

Education Pays

By Joel Seligman

THE ARGUMENT THAT YOUNG PEOPLE ARE wasting their time and money by going to college is sometimes made. The disparaging stereotype of higher education as an “ivory tower” disconnected from the realities of the “real world” is one that cycles periodically through our nation’s political discourse, mass media, and popular commentary. We’re in the midst of a new round of attacks from cultural critics who argue that the entire field of higher education has lost its way. If you want to write a bestselling book in this genre, you inevitably pick one with a snappy title such as the recent work *Higher Education? How Colleges Are Wasting Our Money and Failing Our Kids—And What We Can Do About It*.

As someone who over the course of a 34-year academic career has been affiliated with several different universities, the picture such analyses paint of higher education is wildly divorced from my experience. I do not mean to suggest that universities are perfect or that we cannot do better in balancing our priorities among our missions of teaching, research, service, and clinical care. But isolating a set of important numbers—tuition, for example, or faculty salaries—as these books usually do, and presenting them out of context is a simplistic and troubling form of analysis.

Particularly troubling is the failure to recognize that higher education is one of the best investments a young person—and that young person’s family—can make. As the College Board titled an October 2010 report, “Education Pays.” In simple financial terms, the report shows that there is a correlation between level of education and earnings over time. The 2008 median earnings of people age 25 and older who have a bachelor’s degree were \$55,700, about \$21,900 more than the median earnings of people with high school degrees. For individuals with master’s degrees, the median was \$67,300; for people with doctoral degrees, \$91,900; with professional degrees, approximately \$100,000. Putting this in other terms, the expected lifetime earnings of college graduates were 66 percent high-



er than for those with high school degrees; master’s degrees, about double those with high school degrees; doctorates or professional degrees, over two and one half times those of high school degrees.

Beyond the financial return, individuals with college degrees are more likely to be active in the life of their communities, to lead healthier lifestyles, and to be more engaged in the education of their children. There are also intangible benefits of education: the broadening of social and personal horizons as young people learn from their professors and from one another.

We know college education comes with a price tag in the form of tuition, and much of the criticism results from the “sticker shock” of paying for education. Tuition is a burden for many families. At the University of Rochester, we have made concerted efforts to increase the financial aid that we can offer many families. All of us have heard painful stories of young graduates of the nation’s colleges who cannot pay off their loans or who cannot find appropriate work in their fields. But as the College Board points out, based on median earnings, by age 33, typical four-year college graduates have earned enough to pay back their tuition costs and student loans, and to

compensate themselves for being out of the workforce for four years.

Where does the money go? The critics contend that tuition is lavished on the salaries of faculty who don’t teach, on cocurricular facilities such as dining halls, and on programs such as athletics. Building and maintaining one of the nation’s most highly regarded private research universities such as Rochester is a competitive environment, and we compete on all levels to attract and retain the finest teachers, scholars, and researchers. Outstanding faculty are the essence of what makes a research university outstanding. But throughout our history, we have put a premium on the collegial, academic, and scholarly relationships students have with their professors. Students at Rochester know they will get to work with faculty on research projects, be able to meet with faculty in smaller classes, and be part of a scholarly community.

That includes athletics, a frequent target of higher education’s critics. While some NCAA Division I schools have earned censure, Rochester, like all Division III schools, takes a different approach to the role of athletics. We have no special scholarships for athletes, who play for the love of their sports. Nearly without exception, our student-athletes excel in all facets of their lives on campus.

Education at Rochester focuses on an often rigorous curriculum. We have learned that our most successful academic approach recognizes that we are educating whole persons, whose health, ability to work with others, cultural life, and leadership skills fundamentally matter.

Finding the right balance between providing the opportunities for students to achieve academically as well as socially and personally with the necessary financial costs such opportunities entail is a continuing task. We take it seriously, and we recognize that much depends upon those decisions. As the College Board report stated, “[O]ur challenge is to make the most promising paths readily available to students from all backgrounds. We will all be better off if we continue to make progress in this direction.” 