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Letter from the Editors

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Abstract

This letter introduces the first issue of volume 18. It addresses the most recent findings on student perceptions of higher education in the United States, based on a two-year study funded by the Gates Foundation.

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Letter from the Editors

Joe Pellegrino, Delores Liston, and Delena Bell Gatch

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This letter introduces the first issue of volume 18. It addresses the most recent findings on student perceptions of higher education in the United States, based on a two-year study funded by the Gates Foundation.

Last month the Gates Foundation released the results from the second year of its project, “Student Perceptions of American Higher Education.” This study, conducted by Edge Research and HCM Strategies, proceeded with two methods. First, it queried several focus groups made up of high school juniors and seniors, then asked the same questions of several other focus groups consisting of high school graduates who either did not attend college or dropped out of one. The findings from these sets of focus groups were coupled with the results of a national survey of these populations, with a demographic mix that ensured representation by gender, race, ethnicity, first-generation status, and geographic location.¹

The first major takeaway from the two-year study was that the higher education sector must prove its value to potential students. Fair enough. But what kind of value are we supposed to prove? We’re not naïve enough to think that the worth of our disciplines is self-evident. And we’re certainly not willing to cannibalize ourselves by creating some sort of hierarchy of value among our specific fields. So what value must we prove? The Gates Foundation has an answer for that, or at least their sampled populations do. Here are their top four reasons for getting a college degree in 2023:

1. To be able to make more money
2. To be able to get a better job and/or promotion
3. To get training for a specific career
4. To have more job security

The summary memo from the Gates Foundation characterizes the thinking behind this ranking:

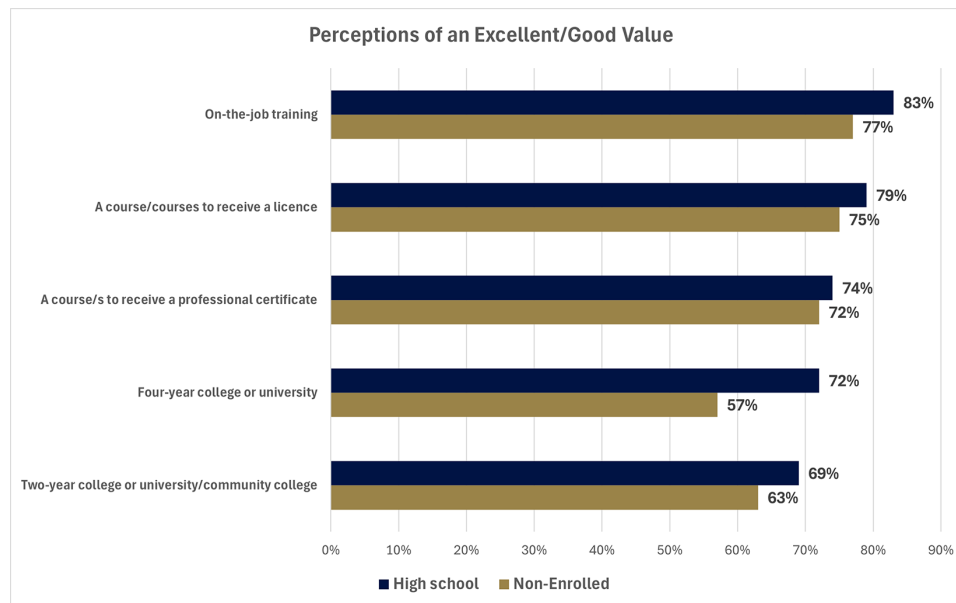
[B]oth audiences look at the decision to attend a 2-year or 4-year institution through a cost-benefit analysis lens—will the investment of time and money to obtain a degree provide a guarantee of economic stability?

This definition of “value,” then, is purely economic. The top priorities within these groups are money, upward mobility, and security, all facilitated by a streamlined entry into a defined career path.

Unfortunately, most of us are ill-prepared to pitch higher education in such a manner. We certainly didn’t spend years creating and honing a discipline-specific knowledge base because we thought it was the greased slide to fabulous wealth. We may be able to articulate a worldview that is dependent on the primacy of our particular field. But in terms of cold, hard cash, well, we didn’t have a seminar on that in grad school.

We’re currently faced with declining enrollments, the shuttering of programs, departments and entire institutions, not to mention the proliferation of comparative dashboards showing potential students just how much is to be made in any field, at multiple points along a projected career trajectory. Facing decades of potential student debt, who can blame these potential students and their families for considering what the ROI for a college degree might be?

These questions lead to the second point we should look at in this report: we're competing for the attention and interest of a population that finds significantly more value in on-the-job training, or courses leading to licensure or a professional certificate, than they do a traditional two- or four-year degree. Here's a portion of one of the Gates Foundation's charts explaining these results:



Our most dependable pool of potential students (dare we call them clients?) sees much less value in what we offer than what they can gain from other, more directly focused pathways, because those pathways lead more directly to what they want or need. How, then, do we stand and deliver? How do we address the very real concerns of Gen Alpha and convince them that, at some level, learning is, in and of itself, valuable?

It would be a lovely thing, to be able to answer those questions with something glib like “it’s our passion that will attract them.” Perhaps we could offer a call to action that tells you how to proceed, a step-by-step script that somehow jousts against these windmills while also taking on the post-pandemic malaise among our students, the specter of AI, and that ultimate bugaboo, the demographic cliff. But we, like you, are limited. You might think that poring over hundreds of manuscripts on SoTL each year would give us some sort of insight, so that we could pull disparate points together into an understanding where the whole is bigger than the sum of its parts. But that’s not the way this thing works. We do, however, get to admire the great variety of innovative work being done in so many places, in so many disciplines, using so many models. The articles in this issue testify to that breadth and level of commitment. Yet all of this work falls under the great umbrella of SoTL. An umbrella may be thin protection against the elements that seem to be descending upon us, but we are somewhat strengthened by knowing that we’re all under it together.

NOTE

¹Edge Research and HCM Strategies. (2024, March 12). *Student Perceptions of American Higher Education*. The Gates Foundation, U.S. Program. <https://usprogram.gatesfoundation.org/news-and-insights/articles/student-perceptions-of-american-higher-education>