

# 'Does a College Education Help All People Equally?' - Learning English, Online

By Pete Musto | Learning English, Online | March 2017



Higher education has been a dream for generations of men and women all over the world. Many people consider higher education a major step on the path towards success.

Most high-paying jobs require a college or university degree. And parents often begin saving for their children's college years when they are still young.

But does higher education improve the lives of all people in the same way?

People have long called college the 'great equalizer,' meaning it gives students from all backgrounds the same opportunities or similar chances for success.

A study released in February 2017 supports this idea. The study comes from a research program called the Equality of Opportunity Project. It is operated by Stanford University and other top schools in the United States.

In the study, researchers examined tax records from about 30 million U.S. college students and their families. The tax records were from the years 1999 to 2013. The researchers then compared the earnings of families before their children went to college to the income of individual students about 10 years after they completed their studies.

The findings may not come as a surprise to some. For example, it showed a degree from an 'Ivy League' or other highly selective school helps students from low income families a great deal.

Ivy League is a term for eight private universities in the northeastern United States. Many people consider them to be among the best for higher education in the world.

Two of the eight, Columbia University and Cornell University, are in New York State. The others are Brown University in Rhode Island; Dartmouth College in New Hampshire; Harvard University in Massachusetts; the University of Pennsylvania; Princeton University in New Jersey; and Yale University in Connecticut.

The study found that about 60 percent of the lowest income students at Ivy League schools earned as much as students from the highest income families later in life. But the high cost and intense level of competition to attend one of these schools can be a barrier for many students.

What may be more interesting is what less widely known colleges can do, says Niklas Flamang. He is a doctoral degree candidate in economics at Stanford.

Flamang says the study identified 10 less selective universities that also helped large numbers of students escape poverty. The State University of New York at Stony Brook is one example. Fifty-one percent of Stony Brook students from the lowest income group entered the highest income group sometime after graduating.

Flamang says this proves that any given college can be a tool for success.

"From a societal perspective, these universities really contribute to economic mobility in the sense that they both admit a large share of low income students, and also provide excellent outcomes for

Caption: Graduating students in the Class of 2016 at City College of New York cheer.



these low income students."

However, there are other issues to consider. The study notes that Ivy League and other top schools are less likely to admit students from low-income families. On average, a young person from the highest income background is 77 percent more likely to attend one of these schools than someone from the lowest income background.

Also, while a college education may help almost everyone, higher income students still have an advantage. That is the opinion of Dirk Witteveen, a doctoral candidate at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

In February, the journal *Social Forces* published his report on a study of college graduates and their earnings.

Witteveen examined information from the U.S. Department of Education on all students attending an American college or university in 1993 and 2008. He did not compare different schools or degree programs.

Instead Witteveen compared the earnings of all students 10 years after they graduated. He found that the students born into the highest income families still earned at least two percent more after college than anyone else.

Witteveen says this is because people from wealthier families have more connections that can help their children.

"Some families have connections within professional industries that could lead to a good first job or a great first internship. So, more generally, this means that class is a much wider concept than just the amount of money that your parents earn or the amount of wealth that your parents have."

Witteveen suggests that almost no amount of education can take the place of these special relationships. Colleges can help lower income students by doing more to connect them with successful graduates. Also, programs teaching skills like network-building should become part of how colleges prepare students for the real world.

But some people would argue that college is not

the only path to success.

Nicholas Wyman is head of the Institute for Workplace Skills and Innovation. His company helps organizations and educators with job training for employees.

Wyman argues that there are still many well-paying jobs that do not require a college degree. This includes jobs in manufacturing and other highly technical fields.

"There is no guarantee of a job," Wyman said. "College is definitely a pathway for some people, and there is no question that it is very successful for many people. But for some people, there are alternatives."

Many U.S. high schools once offered classes in how to repair automobiles and other machines. But programs like these have become less and less common over the years. Wyman says this is because many Americans do not want their children working in positions involving physical labor. He suggests parents should support students' interests in these fields to keep manufacturing jobs from leaving the country.

And, with the cost of college rising, Wyman says young people may find the success they are looking for at a much lower price.

I'm Pete Musto.

Pete Musto reported this story for VOA Learning English. George Grow was the editor.

We want to hear from you. How important do you think a college education is to a person's success? Write to us in the Comments Section or on our Facebook page.



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