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Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

Education, Lifespan, and Quality of Life

By David Frew, Scholar in Residence
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David Brooks, author and columnist

I grew up in a working-class neighborhood where college degrees were somewhere between rare and non-existent. “Why waste time going to college,” a friend’s father once asked, rhetorically, “when you can get a job, save money, and buy a car? Most of my neighborhood friends internalized that sentiment. Was it

“cooler” to keep going to school or to get a 1949 Chevrolet convertible, like one of the slightly older neighborhood kids had done? Carry books back and forth to boring classes or drive around in your very own (chick magnet) car? Almost any car was impressive, but having a convertible like my friend was like being a Hollywood celebrity.

Somehow, I blundered onto a road “less traveled.” My fate began with a Catholic grade school education, from which it was generally assumed that all boys would all go to Cathedral Prep and girls to Villa Maria. Prepsters like me were generally tricked into going to Gannon. One day we were escorted a few blocks from Prep to Gannon, where we were given an entrance test. It was a proprietary test from the era before standardized tests like the SAT. Shockingly, I did well and was invited back for entrance counseling. I was already leaning slightly toward college because of my exposure to George Hesch, my Warren, Pennsylvania cousin’s good friend and a personal hero.



My friend Don Leone’s white Chevrolet convertible made him the envy of the neighborhood.

When I asked the counselor about how I might pay for college I was told that an entire year at Gannon would probably cost less than \$1,000 if I lived at home. All I needed to get started in the Fall term was \$500 and if I could not come up with all the required cash, the Gannon counselor explained that tuition was \$16 per credit hour and that I could sign up for fewer credits and catch up later. I signed up.

I recall Gannon’s 1959 orientation program like it was yesterday. With prospective freshmen sitting in the auditorium (basketball arena), a nasty priest stepped to the podium and began a diatribe, which went something like this: “You men (there were no women) are very lucky. You have been given an opportunity to make more money than any of your unfortunate friends who are not going on to college,” he began. “But before you become overconfident, look to your right and to your left.

At least one of those men will be gone by the end of this academic year.” What a positive message!

We were launched that day, albeit negatively, on the road to making money and, according to author and columnist David Brooks, living longer. Obviously, those were the days before colleges and universities did everything they could to prevent the loss of students.

Fast forward several decades. It is May 2020, and I am sitting in the bleachers at the Marquette University Arena, awaiting the commencement of my grandson and an address by David Brooks. By that time, I had been a fan of Brooks for decades, reading his articles in the Wall Street Journal and the New York Times. Brooks was almost a contemporary and I could usually relate to his worldviews, so I was excited to hear his talk. He began by congratulating the graduates and noting that because of their degrees they were statistically likely to live a decade longer than high school friends who had not gone on to higher education and to earn substantially more money. Brooks has used that supposition often in his chats, including ones delivered in Erie for the Jefferson Educational Society. But lately I have been wondering. Does education cause a person to live longer or is there something more complicated hiding within the data.

The raw, macro data is quite clear. Researchers have repeatedly noted the connection between education and life expectancy, and several have categorized levels of education into four data sets: (1) less than high school, (2) high school, (3) some college, and (4) college or more. Correlation studies have consistently shown that as the level of education increases (from category 1 to category 4), life expectancy increases. But of course, income rises as well. The connection between education and income has long been known.

But how do these three measures (education, income, and life span) connect with each other, and could there be complications therein? Potential interactions between education and income (two of the three measures) have led researchers to wonder if there may be something else hiding within the data, challenging the general conclusion that the act of increasing education from category 3 to category 4 (attaining a college degree) is, in itself, responsible for longer life. Nothing would make colleges and universities happier, especially in these contemporary days of declining enrollments. But I have become increasingly skeptical in recent years.

My statistical researcher brain began by wondering about the database from which these conclusions have been drawn and that was where the first red flag went up. The data is old and strictly demographic. Could there be new trends that have not yet broken through? Clearly there are huge exceptions to the rule. Bill Gates, who dropped out of college to become one of the richest men in the world, comes to mind.

I began by searching the literature for researchers who have questioned this relationship and as expected found several who have identified statistical “confounds.” A confound (confounded relationship) exists when an unknown or unmeasured variable that may influence both primary measures (in this case education and life span) exists. What unmeasured variables or other issues could be at work, influencing the apparent relationship between education levels and life expectancy? As expected, there are several. The current state of the art with respect to the overgeneralized assumption suggested the following issues with the assumption that education extends life expectancy.

1. Old Data: The first problem with the assumption of causality between education and life span is the sheer age of the data from which that conclusion has been drawn. The conclusion has been taken from a data set that is old and getting older. And given the current crisis of nationally declining birth rates, it is unlikely that an evolving new and better data base will ever “catch up” to imbedded trends within the old and existing data.

2. Impact of gender: The old data is also male dominated, which poses an interesting new problem caused by known differences between males and females. A contemporary data set would have many more females, and it has been demonstrated that women experience longer life spans as well as higher degrees of both education and happiness. A related issue is that in recent years females have been more likely to seek higher education and much more likely to successfully graduate.

3. Confound between education and income: Perhaps the biggest problem within the data is the long-known confound (confusing or bewildering connection) between education and income. Education, particularly with respect to the older data, is clearly connected to life span since educated people have the means as well as the motivation to seek out and consume the best health care. One of the saddest realities of the United States’ healthcare system is the fact that it is two-tiered with relatively well to do (economically) people generally having significantly different and much better care. This is the reason why many other countries (Canada, for example) outperform U.S. healthcare with respect to basic metrics such as life expectancy and infant mortality.

4. Age-Biased Data: The existing data contains a substantial age bias, which is not correcting itself because of reduced birthrates. The people who make up the data base are significantly older than the actual population of Americans.

5. Problems with Categorical Definitions: The fourth category (college degrees) contains not just people with bachelor’s degrees but individuals with master’s and other higher-level degrees, including MDs, JDs, MBAs, DOs, and PhDs. Those people generally make much more money than typical category 4

types with only bachelor's degrees, thus geometrically adding to the "apparent economic value" of having an undergraduate degree.

6. Missing Categories: There should be a category that contains individuals with high-end trade school skills, including plumbing, electrical, boiler-making, pipefitting, and HVAC. Acquiring a trade has always been a powerful alternative to pursuing higher education but in recent decades it has become even more attractive in terms of job security and income potential. People with trade skills almost always out-earn the typical college graduate, especially those holding degrees in less than marketable disciplines.

7. Failure to include intelligence measure: Modern literature suggests a powerful connection between both raw and emotional intelligence and two of the connected measures within this study: lifespan and income. The literature also points to major exceptions in the relationship between intelligence and education. Sometimes it would appear that exceptionally bright people cannot be contained in traditional college environments. Steve Jobs, for example, dropped out of Reed College in Portland, Oregon to travel and study Zen Buddhism before he created Apple.

8. Geographic Bias: There is a demonstrated geographic bias in the education, income, and lifespan data. Those who reside in the Deep South, for example, do not live as long as their counterparts in northern states. Several individual states -- Colorado, for example -- boast life expectancies that are well in excess of the national average while remaining average in education level.

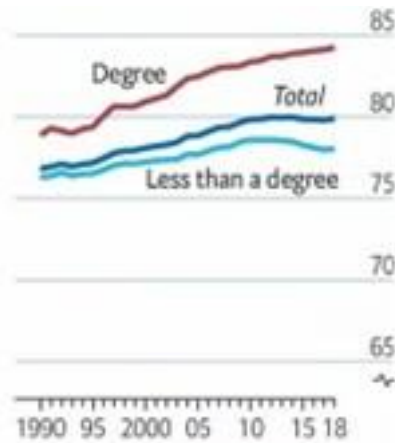
9. Ignoring Subjective Well Being: Over the last several years, a separate and robust literature has evolved about personal happiness (life satisfaction or subjective well-being). The justification for that growing subdiscipline within psychology is the evidence suggestion that general happiness is connected to health as well as income.

10. Failure to Include Relationship Success: Macro census data has long indicated a connection between relationships and lifespan. Married people, and in particular happily married people, outlive single people both in the United States and other countries.

While I agree with David Brooks' supposition that education "appears to make people live longer," the bulk of statistical evidence suggests that the relationship is one of correlation but not causal. My suspicion is that the 10 confounds listed above make it likely that the process of getting a degree is not, in itself, responsible for increasing life expectancy. The data suggest that several non-educationally related measures could be of significant impact: moving north, getting married, etc.

One close by and instructive comparison could be made between the United States and its northern neighbor, Canada, which is culturally and geographically similar. Canadians outlive us by about six years (85 versus 79), but they are “less formally educated.” Only 33 percent of Canadians have a university degree as compared to 37 percent of Americans. Fewer Canadians have degrees, but they outlive us.

The Canadian comparison points to another possible issue involving missing categories (Confound #6 above). Canadians are far more likely to complete what is known in that country as a college education; a one- or two-year program in a technical field such as retail management or hotel administration, the kind of education that would be identified in this country as a junior college or technical degree. Based upon that reality, a better analysis of the connection between education and lifespan might include separate statistical categories for junior college graduates, versus four-year degree holders, and for people with advanced degrees such as MDs, JDs, MBAs, and PhDs.



*The overall statistical relationship between education and life expectancy
(From the Economist)*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An emeritus professor at Gannon University, he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.



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