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**QuickTakes!**

## ***New York Times Editorial: Four-Year Degree Absolutely Needed***

David Leonhardt  
NYTimes.com  
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“You hear people say, ‘Well, a four-year degree isn’t needed,’” Connie Ballmer, the philanthropist and wife of the former Microsoft C.E.O. Steve Ballmer, recently told me.

“But then if you turn to them and say, ‘What do you want for your child?’ they wouldn’t dream of not having their kid go to a four-year college,” she continued. “they said it’s not needed – but they need it.”

Ballmer is right. The boomlet of skepticism about college comes disproportionately from upper-middle-class people who have the luxury of airing hypothetical concerns about education, without having to worry that their own children will be influenced by them. Yet, the misplaced skepticism can do real damage to poor and working-class teenagers who hear it and take it seriously.

The evidence remains overwhelming. College is the single most reliable path to the middle class and beyond. No, it doesn’t guarantee a good life. Nothing does. But earning a good living without a college degree today is difficult.

College graduates earn vastly more and are far more likely to be employed. They live longer, are more likely to be married and are more satisfied on average with their lives. These relationships appear to be at least partly casual, too. If you want more details, you can read some of [my previous columns](#) or dig into a long trail of academic studies.

I was talking to Connie Ballmer because she and her husband recently donated \$20 million to an organization with a track record of helping more low- and middle-income students go to college. It’s called College Advising Corps. It started in 2005 and now oversees about 650 recent college graduates. They work for two-year stints in high schools across the country, advising students about two- and four-year colleges.

The advisers are needed because many high-school guidance counselors are overworked. Nationwide, the average counselor is responsible for almost 500 students, according to

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Nicole Hurd, the founder of College Advising Corps. The student advisers also have the advantage of empathy: Many are themselves recent first-generation college graduates.

As Ballmer says, the counselors are sending an implicit message to the students: “You can do this.” The Ballmer gift will allow the advising corps to grow by about 50 percent in coming years to 1,000. It will also help the organization evaluate its results and try to improve. One area where it can do better: lifting the [college graduation rate](#) of the low-income students it advises.

If you’re interested in finding out more, read [Anemona Hartocollis’s Times story](#) about College Advising Corps; some [academic research](#) on the program’s effects, by Eric Bettinger of Stamford; or a [summary](#) of the Ballmer gift.

**Department of disagreement.** A good example of skepticism about college is an [op-ed](#) that ran in The Times this week, called, “College May Not Be Worth It Anymore,” by Ellen Ruppel Shell, a Boston University professor of journalism. I disagree with it, for all the reasons mentioned above. More important, the authors of the research cited in the piece disagree with it.

One of them, Tim Bartik, an economist at the Upjohn Institute, wrote on Twitter: “It draws the wrong conclusions from our work, and omits some important findings.” He wrote a [series of tweets](#) with further explanation.

[The research](#) by Bartik and his colleague Brad Hershbein finds huge returns on four-year college degrees for all students, including those from lower-income families. For a typical student, a degree is worth about \$500,000.

**The full Opinion report** from The Times follows, including [Marguerite Joutz](#) on the college that almost closed.