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A higher education degree is good for your health

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Regional

A higher education degree is good for your health

A few weeks ago Brian Rosenberg, president of Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota, where I used to teach years ago, published a column in *Inside Higher Ed* in which he complained – and with good reason – that *The New York Times* had been lately publishing a number of articles about postsecondary education that were not only placing higher education in a bad light, but were based on inaccurate and incomplete information. He was annoyed by the fact that a serious news organization was only publishing articles that were clearly biased and lacking data on which to support its assertions.

“I’m thinking of submitting an opinion piece to *The Times* entitled, ‘College Causes Cancer.’ I don’t have any facts to support the claim, but apparently that doesn’t matter, and the title is catchy as hell,” Rosenberg wrote.

Well, in an article just published by the prestigious *Public Library of Science (PLOS)*, a group of researchers from the University of Colorado and New York University just came out with a the results of a study titled “Mortality Attributable to Low Levels of Education in the United States.” Based on one of the comments made in that work, it could just as easily be titled, “Lack of college education as bad as smoking.”

I know it sounds difficult to believe, but here are the essentials of the piece published by *PLOS*.

These researchers wanted to know if there was any correlation between levels of educational attainment and

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mortality, and if the levels of that mortality were comparable to the ones caused by well-documented sources of disease, such as smoking.

What they did was to use information from the National Health Survey collected between 1986 and 2000 and linked it to the prospective mortality through 2006 – information from more than one million individuals. They used mortality rates and data on the 2010 U.S. population from the American Community Survey to calculate annual attributable mortality rates.

Then they compared the mortality of individuals having less than a high school degree with high those of high school graduates. They then compared mortality rates between those with some college versus those with a baccalaureate degree. The researchers looked at different population groups within the U.S. over time, beginning with those born in 1925.

The results were clear-cut. The less education you have, the more likely that you will die at an earlier age. For example, for Americans between the ages of 25 and 85 in the 2010 population group, 145,243 deaths occurred to individuals having less than a high school degree, 110,068 deaths could be attributed to individuals having

some college and 554,525 deaths could be attributed to individuals having anything less than a baccalaureate degree. Furthermore, although the mortality of males and minorities is always higher than for females and whites respectively, mortality attributable to having less than a high school degree is proportionally similar among women and men and among non-Hispanic blacks and whites.

Among the conclusions of this study is that “Mortality attributable to low education is comparable in magnitude to mortality attributable to individuals being current rather than former smokers.” These researchers also mentioned – based on other researchers work – that there is a substantial cause-effect association between education and mortality. “Thus, policies that increase education could significantly reduce adult mortality,” the researchers concluded.

These results could not come at a better time. As I have mentioned in this column in the past, there has been a barrage of ill-founded criticism against higher education (from both the right and the left) with most of that criticism coming from uninformed sources. In fact, one typical problem defenders of higher education have is that some authors and media use a simplistic approach to these issues to attack higher education (lately, a favorite target of politicians and pundits).

These anti-higher education authors and publications are taking advantage of the progressive mediocrity and

vulgarization of the mainstream press, in part due to the abusive exploitation of social media that more and more looks like tabloids and less like a serious source of information. In a day and age when you see major networks having a unapologetic political bias, when famous news hosts blatantly lie about their personal experiences and yet keep getting other gigs in the news media and when the economic forces managing the media are more interested in ratings than in honest reporting, we should not be surprised that tabloid-like headlines not only abound. As a colleague of mine who used to teach journalism once told me, “Newspapers do not exist to inform, but to make money for their owners.”

And the *Times* is not alone in riding this wave. As I mentioned in an earlier column, a well-respected magazine like *The Economist* questioned on its front-page whether going to college was worthwhile because it did not necessarily lead to either good jobs or decent salaries despite the fact that study after study have shown quite the contrary.

Now this research by the investigators from Colorado and New York allows us to use a simplistic yet well-founded scientific research in headlines in the popular press: “The more education the better for your health.”

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