



## An Investment in Faith and Learning

Is a Christian liberal arts education worth the investment? Provost Mark Sargent surveys the territory, unpacks the numbers, makes a few telling comparisons and comes to some surprising conclusions.

Higher education is one of the grand traditions of American life, but it is a regular sport to cast doubt on its value. As one critic recently told me, “The only real benefit of a college degree is that you can watch PBS without yawning.”

Without doubt, a college education requires a substantial commitment, and I am often inspired by the sacrifices many students and families make to pursue studies at Gordon. So it is unsettling whenever I hear individuals second-guess that goal, and all the more troubling when those doubts are fed by popular myths. Let me offer some reassuring data—as well as a few thoughts about the value of a Gordon education.

First and foremost, let’s remember that tuition is an investment, not a commodity. College education is an investment in social hope. Graduates tend to be excellent citizens, 30 percent more likely to vote and nearly twice as likely to do volunteer service and offer charitable contributions. They are

healthier—on average, far more likely to exercise; less than half as likely to get heart disease.

And college remains one of the most vital forms of social mobility, enabling individuals to overcome boundaries of ancestry, social status and race. It has long been part of the pulse of democratic opportunity in the United States. For that reason, as the nation grows more ethnically and socially diverse, it would be wise for the United States to ramp up support for higher education rather than diminish its merits. Many people are surprised to learn that only 36 percent of United States citizens between the ages of 25 and 39 have college degrees, a rate that lags behind many countries, including Canada (52 percent) and South Korea (45 percent).

But, of course, there is the challenge of cost. Most media and political scrutiny of college costs dwells almost exclusively on the price tag, often moaning that tuition rates fall

somewhere between a Lexus and a used Camry. What’s seldom told is that, in economic terms alone, very few investments have as impressive a return as higher education.

True, there are always the tales of entrepreneurs like Bill Gates who drop out and make millions, but those stories are told so often they can easily lead us to mistake the exception for the rule. Actually the economic value of a degree has been steadily rising. Twenty-five years ago college graduates, on average, made only 22 percent more than nongraduates. By 2003, according to the College Board, “the typical male college graduate earned 60 percent more than the typical male high school graduate, while the premium for females was 69 percent.”

The dividend, on average, is much greater for those who eventually receive graduate degrees. In 2005 a master’s degree yielded on average \$33,000 more in annual earnings than a high school diploma did; for those with professional degrees (i.e., medical, dental, law, etc.), the gap grows to more than \$73,000. Most economists insist that these distinctions will increase as we move further toward a knowledge-based global economy. When you consider that nearly two-thirds of Gordon students will eventually pursue graduate study (Gordon remains among the top 20 percent of liberal arts colleges in launching students toward doctorates), you can make a solid case that a Gordon degree can be a very profitable investment.

Most prospective students and their families, of course, are sold on the importance of a college education. Their questions generally focus on the specific price of a Gordon degree. There’s a better story here than many assume.

First, Gordon offers a financially reasonable option among private institutions in New England. In 2007–08, the average total costs (tuition, fees, room and board, etc.) for a private liberal arts education in New England is over \$42,000, at least \$10,000 more than Gordon. The actual costs at Gordon also compare quite favorably to other leading Christian colleges. Once you factor in our financial aid grants, the average cost for a student at Gordon is lower than most of the leading institutions in the Christian College Consortium, even though several of these schools advertise lower tuition prices. Last year *U.S. News & World Report* listed Gordon as the only nationally ranked Consortium school among the institutions with the lowest student debt.

One prevailing assumption is that public universities charge only a fraction of the costs of Gordon College, but sometimes the differences in actual costs are vastly overstated. The University of Massachusetts, for instance, advertises a low tuition price because it packs most of its costs into additional fees. After subtracting financial aid awards (including the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System MCAS scholarship) from total expenses, the average cost at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst is \$17,399, only \$1,055 less than the average cost at Gordon. Similarly, the average differential with the University of New Hampshire is merely \$1,216.

None of this should minimize the significant challenges that some families face when paying college bills. That is why we are especially grateful for the many donors who make substantial contributions to enable us to sustain strong financial aid grants and to allow some hard-pressed students to matriculate at Gordon. It is also why it is critical for us to continually ask ourselves questions about value.

And there is some encouraging data from recent studies that reinforces the merits of a Gordon education.

Many of the nation's institutions, as a supplement to more traditional rankings, have chosen to participate in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). According to the most recent results of the NSSE, on most indicators of academic rigor Gordon ranks higher than the norm for Carnegie I liberal arts colleges, the category that includes some of the nation's top liberal arts institutions. At the same time, Gordon students are nearly twice as likely as their peers at Carnegie I schools to participate in community service as part of their academic program. By the senior year more Gordon students have studied abroad or completed foreign language coursework. What the NSSE reveals is encouraging: that the blend of academic rigor, service and global vision is a distinctive feature of a Gordon education.

Above all we desire that an education at Gordon College be an investment in the community of faith. Academic rigor should be aligned with a vision for service and spiritual maturation. We hope our students develop a sense of vocation and calling—and that they make lifelong friendships that sustain them in their spiritual journeys. For so many graduates that is indeed the case. In recent alumni surveys more than four out of five of our graduates acknowledge that they are still involved in a regular church or worship community. That contrasts dramatically with national trends, which show that church attendance typically declines to 54 percent after college.

As part of their spiritual growth, we also hope our students learn to cross boundaries and discover the face of Christ in other peoples. The value of their degree will be best reflected in the imaginative and faithful work they will do over the next generation to promote long-term justice and hope. Consider the work of Alynne MacLean '86, who completed a doctorate in bioanalytical chemistry from the University of Kentucky, worked studying enzyme immunoassays for biotechnology and

pharmaceutical firms, and then used her experience and vision to found Science with a Mission Inc., a nonprofit organization that provides diagnostics in the poorest regions of the world. Or the work of Hillary Scholten '04, who helped coordinate legal services for refugees who come to the Boston area each year.

My used Camry still cranks along, but there has been no blue book limit on the ways college has opened opportunities for me and shaped my values. Yes, I do enjoy watching PBS, although I can easily nod off during some of those interminable pledge breaks. Most importantly, I have treasured the opportunity to work with many people in Christian higher education—friends and colleagues, students and alums, parents and supporters—who are morally awake. And it is in the aspirations of our graduates—to bring a spirit of innovation, integrity and hope into a new generation of Christian witness—that I can most readily see the fruits of this great investment in faith and learning.



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