

have formed small groups that meet regularly and allow members to exchange business advice and offer personal support. These Free Agent Nation Clubs, as I call them, also provide an important staging ground for self-education. At F.A.N. Club meetings, members discuss books and articles and share their particular expertise with the others. This type of learning—similarly alive in book clubs and Bible study groups—represents a rich American tradition. One of the earliest self-organized clusters of free agents was Benjamin Franklin's Junto, formed in 1727, which created a subscription library for its members, which in turn became the first public library in America.

The next few decades will be a fascinating, and perhaps revolutionary, time for learning in America. The specifics will surprise us and may defy even my soundest predictions. But the bottom line of the future of education in Free Agent Nation is glaringly clear: School's out.

Responding to Reading

1. What is a "free agent nation" (3)? In what sense is work in the United States undergoing a transformation? Why does Pink think this transformation is the "most significant transformation since Americans left the farm for the factory" (3)?
2. According to Pink, how are traditional public schools not meeting the challenges of the new economy? In what way does home schooling better prepare students for the new realities of "free agency"?
3. Do you think Pink is correct when he says that one of the consequences of home schooling will be "the demise of high school" (31)? What other changes does Pink see occurring in education?

Responding in Writing

List three advantages and three disadvantages of home schooling, and then write a paragraph in which you argue for or against it.

SHOULD THE OBAMA GENERATION DROP OUT?

Charles Murray

1943–

A scholar at the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, Charles Murray has written extensively on social issues ranging from the history of liberal education to welfare reform. He published his latest book, Real Education: Four Simple Truths for Bringing America's Schools Back to Reality, in 2008. In the following provocative essay, Murray questions the value of a college degree.

Barack Obama has two attractive ideas for improving post-secondary education—expanding the use of community colleges and tuition tax credits—but he needs to hitch them to a broader platform. As president, Mr. Obama should use his bully pulpit to undermine the bachelor's degree as a job qualification. Here's a suggested battle cry, to be repeated in every speech on the subject: "It's what you can do that should count when you apply for a job, not where you learned to do it."

The residential college leading to a bachelor's degree at the end of four years works fine for the children of parents who have plenty of money. It works fine for top students from all backgrounds who are drawn toward academics. But most 18-year-olds are not from families with plenty of money, not top students, and not drawn toward academics. They want to learn how to get a satisfying job that also pays well. That almost always means education beyond high school, but it need not mean four years on a campus, nor cost a small fortune. It need not mean getting a bachelor's degree.

I am not discounting the merits of a liberal education. Students at every level should be encouraged to explore subjects that will not be part of their vocation. It would be even better if more colleges required a rigorous core curriculum for students who seek a traditional bachelor's degree. My beef is not with liberal education, but with the use of the degree as a job qualification.

For most of the nation's youths, making the bachelor's degree a job qualification means demanding a credential that is beyond their reach. It is a truth that politicians and educators cannot bring themselves to say out loud: A large majority of young people do not have the intellectual ability to do genuine college-level work.

If you doubt it, go back and look through your old college textbooks, and then do a little homework on the reading ability of high school seniors. About 10 percent to 20 percent of all 18-year-olds can absorb the material in your old liberal arts textbooks. For engineering and the hard sciences, the percentage is probably not as high as 10.

No improvements in primary and secondary education will do more than tweak those percentages. The core disciplines taught at a true college level are tough, requiring high levels of linguistic and logical-mathematical ability. Those abilities are no more malleable than athletic or musical talent.

You think I'm too pessimistic? Too elitist? Readers who graduated with honors in English literature or Renaissance history should ask themselves if they could have gotten a B.S. in physics, no matter how hard they tried. (I wouldn't have survived freshman year.) Except for the freakishly gifted, all of us are too dumb to get through college in many majors.

But I'm not thinking just about students who are not smart enough to deal with college-level material. Many young people who have the intellectual ability to succeed in rigorous liberal arts courses don't want to. For these students, the distribution requirements of the college degree do not open up new horizons. They are bothersome time-wasters.

A century ago, these students would happily have gone to work after high school. Now they know they need to acquire additional skills, but they want to treat college as vocational training, not as a leisurely journey to well-roundedness.

As more and more students who cannot get or don't want a liberal education have appeared on campuses, colleges have adapted by expanding the range of courses and adding vocationally oriented majors. That's appropriate. What's not appropriate is keeping the bachelor's degree as the measure of job preparedness, as the minimal requirement to get your foot in the door for vast numbers of jobs that don't really require a B.A. or B.S.

Discarding the bachelor's degree as a job qualification would not be difficult. The solution is to substitute certification tests, which would provide evidence that the applicant has acquired the skills the employer needs.

Certification tests can take many forms. For some jobs, a multiple-choice test might be appropriate. But there's no reason to limit certifications to academic tests. For centuries, the crafts have used work samples to certify journeymen and master craftsmen. Today, many computer programmers without college degrees get jobs by presenting examples of their work. With a little imagination, almost any corporation can come up with analogous work samples.

The benefits of discarding the bachelor's degree as a job qualification would be huge for both employers and job applicants. Certifications would tell employers far more about their applicants' qualifications than a B.A. does, and hundreds of thousands of young people would be able to get what they want from post-secondary education without

having to twist themselves into knots to comply with the rituals of getting a bachelor's degree.

Certification tests would not eliminate the role of innate ability—the most gifted applicants would still have an edge—but they would strip away much of the unwarranted halo effect that goes with a degree from a prestigious university. They would put everyone under the same spotlight.

Discrediting the bachelor's degree is within reach because so many employers already sense that it has become education's Wizard of Oz. All we need is someone willing to yank the curtain aside. Barack Obama is ideally positioned to do it. He just needs to say it over and over: "It's what you can do that should count when you apply for a job, not where you learned to do it."

Responding to Reading

1. Why does Murray think it is a mistake to make a college degree a job qualification? Why does he think this goal is not realistic for most high school students?
2. What objections to his ideas does Murray mention? Do you think he successfully addresses these objections?
3. What job qualification does Murray think should replace a college degree? What are the benefits of "discarding the bachelor's degree as a job qualification" (11)?

Responding in Writing

After reading Murray's op-ed, several people wrote letters to the editor in which they voiced the following objections to his ideas:

- Murray's "reforms" would institute a class system in the United States.
- Liberal arts courses teach skills our country desperately needs.
- A liberal arts degree shows an employer that an applicant has the ability to accomplish something.
- A liberal arts degree teaches students how to learn.

Which of these objections to Murray's ideas do you think is the most convincing? Which is the least convincing? Write two paragraphs in which you express your views.