

Countering “The College Is Not Worth It” Narrative

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July 2026

Counter-recruitment initiatives, such as those by Project YANO, have long emphasized identifying and educating youth about non-military pathways and career options in peace making and social change. Almost invariably, the realization of these options entails investing in a college education. Many U.S. Americans have made that investment, motivated by the narrative that “college is worth it.” However, in this century, as public trust in higher education has diminished, a competing narrative -- “college is not worth it” -- has gained traction.

Where did this negative narrative come from? As increasingly noted in discussions of the issue, its roots may lie in the attack on higher education primarily by conservatives in the United States. Among conservatives, perhaps the most prominent figure to articulate this point of view was Charlie Kirk, founder of Turning Point USA and author of “The College Scam: How America’s Universities are Bankrupting and Brain-washing Away the Future of America’s Youth.”

The most direct, contextualized, and insightful response to this argument can be in an essay by Haley Taylor Schlitz, “Why are They Suddenly Telling Us College is Not Worth it?” According to Schlitz, the answer has to do with changing demographics and white power. She writes: “GenZ and Gen Alpha are America’s first majority-minority generations. Black, Latino, Native, Asian American, first-generation and immigrant students are entering higher education pipelines in unprecedented numbers . . . If fewer Black and Brown students become doctors, lawyers, scientists, or policy leaders, those in power stay in power.”

Put simply, as observers have noted, those most likely to be affected by the promotion of anti-college narratives are disadvantaged students of color. In California, a state with the largest Latino population in the country, only 16% of Latinos ages 25 and over hold a bachelor’s degree. Among Latinos and other communities of color the educational inequality reflected in such numbers makes youth vulnerable to the military poverty draft.

The findings of two recent studies focusing on California debunk the “college is not worth it” narrative and call for a counter-story holding that college is still worth it; or, in Spanish: *el colegio: vale la pena*.

One study by the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC), “Is College Worth it?”, found that college graduates do in fact out-earn non-graduates. California workers with a bachelor’s degree earned a median annual wage of \$96,000, double the amount for high school graduates. In addition, the college premium increases steadily over a graduate’s career. And the job market favors college graduates in other ways: graduates are more likely to participate in the labor force, less likely to be unemployed, and more likely to have full-time jobs. In addition,

graduates received non-wage compensation such as paid vacations, health insurance, and retirement. These provide greater financial stability and security over the long run.

In “Overcoming the Odds: The Benefits of Completing College for Unlikely Graduates,” Jennie Brand -- a sociologist at UCLA -- examined the outcomes of having a college education for a sector of the youth population that tends to be seen as unlikely to complete their degrees.

Considering a wide range of long-term benefits, Brand found that having college degrees enables these young people “to circumvent unemployment, low-wage work, job instability, poverty, and social assistance.” Completing degrees also promotes intergenerational mobility.

For Brand, the implications of her findings are clear and include calling for “investment in educating those students who have low odds of completing a degree.” This is a wise call especially in a state which, according to PPIC, will fall short of economic demand by 1.1 million bachelor’s degrees by 2030. To make progress, it is urgent to promote the narrative grounded in the findings of these studies.

Efforts to increase investment must, of course, contend with the persisting influence of the “college is not worth it” narrative; but all is not lost, as even some conservative youth have begun to question the wisdom of the narrative. As stated by Christine Schueckler in an op-ed in USA Today, “Young conservatives like me are told not to attend college. That’s shortsighted.”

Moreover, resources for resistance are becoming available. A UCLA Magazine article titled, “Winning the argument: 6 tips on how to push back -- nicely -- on those who say college isn’t worth it,” is a useful resource for those who are engaged in campaigns against military recruitment. Armed with such tools, as well as the findings of studies such as those by PPIC and Brand, let us seize the moment!

This article is from the July-September 2026 issue of Draft NOtices, the newsletter of the Committee Opposed to Militarism and the Draft (<http://www.comdsd.org/>).