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# Is College Really Worth It?

Alexander W. Martin

*Southern Illinois University Carbondale*, alexmartin21@icloud.com

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IS COLLEGE REALLY WORTH IT?

by

Alexander W. Martin

B.A., Computer Science, Southern Illinois University, 2013

A Research Paper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Master of Science in Education.

Department of Education and Human Services  
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RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

IS COLLEGE REALLY WORTH IT?

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Alexander Martin

A Research Paper Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of  
Master of Science in Education  
in the field of College Student Personnel

Approved by:

Patrick Dilley, Ph.D., Chair

Saran Donahoo, Ph.D.

Graduate School

Southern Illinois University Carbondale

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## **Introduction**

It is no secret that education grants opportunities. These opportunities span far and wide in relation to how far they can take an individual, if that opportunity is utilized efficiently and effectively. The question remains, can one still access these opportunities if they are not granted access to education? The timeless debate of whether higher education is a right or a privilege has blinded many critics of higher education to the over-arching problem; in this generation, do the benefits of college outweigh the costs? In addition, many of the most successful people of this era have reached unimaginable heights without the use of higher education and the steadily increasing costs associated with them. Increasing costs, such as state tuition and fees, have kept many degree seeking individuals away from attaining that degree due to lack of funds. It seems as if the system is designed for you to pay for school to obtain a job, in order for you to obtain a job just so you can pay back what you borrowed from school. It is a perpetual cycle that has yet to be challenged. Throughout the context of this essay, I will review critical research that aims to answer the question: Is college worth it? To answer this question, I will start by providing a critical analysis of how college works based on reference material by various authors. I will also include aims of innovation that have been taken these past few years that has made education more accessible outside the physical space of a classroom. Finally, I will conclude with a projection of where I see the future of higher education going, based off current research and support.

## **Analysis of Higher Education**

What measures are taken in order to ensure that students are receiving a quality education? How is “quality education” defined in the United States? Of course there is the

Carnegie Classification system, in addition to accreditation agencies, but to what extent do those systems reach in to the classrooms where student learning is alive and active? These were all apparent questions in Daniel F. Chambliss and C. G. Takacs' *How College Works* (2014). Chambliss and Takacs outline the best practices for determining how and when college works best for students in *How College Works*, and they concluded that college works best when it offers students relationships and daily motivation, not just information access (p.151). If this notion of what college is supposed to offer its students is expanded, the overall purpose of higher education comes into question. Although more information on that purpose comes later in this essay, it is imperative to begin critically thinking about it in the meantime.

Many institutions of higher education have been stricken by limited resources and because so, have resulted in raising tuition in order to compensate. A challenge to those institutions is this: can colleges do more to improve the quality of education without making students continually pay higher tuition rates? Nowadays, the only thing that is guaranteed for a college graduate is a phone call from Sallie Mae six months later ready to collect. How can society continue to put so much emphasis on education, when education itself does not guarantee one a job after completion? Far too often, young adults are told that college is important and that education is everything, without telling them that education is only one part of what college is all about. Access to information, along with building relationships, critical thinking, the ability to critically analyze, and learning transferable skills are just as important. It is only by establishing these objectives that will colleges improve the overall quality of education.

Institutions of higher education aim to offer the very best education possible to multiple and vastly diverse student populations. What is important to look at however, is which students are making the most of their college experience. "Why do some undergraduates feel they are

making the most of their years at college, while others are far less positive? (Light, 2001, p.43), Richard Light (2001) posed this question in *Making the Most of College: Student's Speak Their Minds*. This question serves as a dual threat to both educational institutions and the students that attend them. Education is a two-way street, one side must be willing to teach and the other must be willing to learn. Both sides however, must be willing to engage in critical conversation that produces they best results. Light (2001) suggests that “Those students who make connections between what goes on inside and outside the classroom report a more satisfying college experience” (p. 13). I feel this notion from Light is spot on, and until educators can make those necessary connections both in and out of the classrooms, students cannot fully appreciate the content they are learning to its most extreme. One of the main practical outcomes of higher education is the ability to apply theory to practice. The ability to take what you learn in the classroom, and apply it to the real world. This can only be done when students are given practical applications of learning. Far too often, I feel that educators are more focused on wanting students to simply regurgitate information on a test to prove a thorough knowledge of the curriculum, as opposed to learning the curriculum's practical applications in the real world.

### **Post-Graduation Analysis**

It is not the degree itself that grants opportunity, it is the knowledge accumulated over the course of time it took to obtain the degree, applied affectively, that grants opportunity. At this point in the current education-to-employment spectrum, employers are stating that recent graduates are not showing the proper proficiency needed to make it in the workplace.

Furthermore, higher education critics must take into question if students are taking college seriously, and if so, to what extent? Nowadays, record numbers of students are enrolling in college, however it may not be for the benefit of society as originally planned. Quite the opposite

actually. By default, high school graduates enroll in college with no set plan or goals because it has become the norm of what to do after high school graduation. In *College (Un)bound*, Jeffrey Selingo (2013) states that higher education is “opposition to change, and resistant to accountability” (p. x). Do higher education administrators really care about the well-being of students after graduation? Furthermore, do institutions of higher education hold themselves accountable as educators and gate-keepers of the “real world”? Is it important to take into account that Selingo, while writing this book, wanted readers to know that this book is not so much a recap of how higher education got where it is today, but rather looks forward to its future.

After graduation, if a student were to look back at their transcript, how many classes would that student have taken that may not have been a necessity for their chosen career field, but more so just a fulfillment of a collegiate core requirement? The way the higher education system is set up, students must attain a certain amount of credits in order to graduate. Those credits come from courses, internships, and externships picked by the students. Also mixed within those credit hours are core classes, classes that all students must take in order to graduate. These core classes vary based on the institution, but mostly contain English, Math, Science, History, and a Health class. From a critical perspective, I agree that it is important for a student to develop skills in areas such as Math, English, Science, History and Health; however I think that core classes should be contingent upon one’s major or minor. For instance, if a student is a computer science major and upon graduation is told that they cannot graduate unless they take a history class, what purpose will that history class serve to a computer science major? Not saying history is not important, but just making the argument that it is not a necessity for every career field. The reason I bring this issue up is to address another critical analysis of higher education;



does it really take 4 years for a student to accumulate a sufficient amount of intellectual capital to make it in the real world?

It is worth mentioning that the history of the development of higher education has shown that four years is the standard time frame for a legit collegiate experience. When it comes to the academic portion of college, I do not agree that it should take every student 4 years to graduate. I feel the 4-year structure of institutions of higher education is set up for the financial benefit of the institution. This hypothesis stems from looking at tuition rates and increases. If an institution is charging \$50,000 a year per student for tuition, and the institution is bringing in 17,000 students a year, and then figure in budget cuts that cause a hike in tuition, it is fairly easy to see the revenue stream that higher education is bringing in every year over the course of four years. From the student perspective, this means that one will be paying \$50,000 over the next 4 years, minimum, for the “idea” that a full-time job is all but guaranteed after graduation. Education practitioners have to be open and honest with students. The degree itself is not enough to make it in the real world. One must learn the appropriate soft skills and transferrable skills necessary in order to apply the theory and concepts learned in the classroom into the practice of the workplace.

### **Innovation in Higher Education**

In an age where science and technology continue to spur off into new and ever-changing adventures, it seems that higher education continues to slowly drag in last place. Major changes in higher education has come so far and reached new heights in the light of recent years, but it continues to lack innovation in the areas that need it the most. Many institutions of higher education have upgraded in areas such as facilities, amenities, and dining; however, the

classroom seems to be the one place in higher education that seems to always remain stuck in the past.

In the article ‘Academically Adrift,’ written by Scott Jaschik (2011), Jaschik suggests “If the purpose of a college education is for students to learn, academe is failing” (para.1). This notion was formed after Jaschik reviewed the book *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* by Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa (2011). The purpose of the book was to collect data that shows college students have a very minimal outlook on classwork expectations. Of the information given within the context of *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, included were statistics such as 45% of students did not demonstrate any significant improvement in learning during the first two years of college (Arum & Roksa, 2011).

Additionally, 36% of students did not demonstrate any significant improvement in learning over four years of college (Arum & Roksa, 2011). As appalling as these statistics are, they shed very little light in the public eye. This could be due to the fact that many universities care too much about the future stake of its sports teams, or care too much about how the campus looks in magazines and advertisements. If the same intentional innovative effort is put into the classrooms as is with facilities and college amenities, maybe employers of recent graduates would not be so disappointed with the lack of critical thinking skills and transferable skills that recent college graduates have shown to not possess.

Many institutional policies regarding classroom conduct revolve around how students and teachers interact with each other on behavioral aspects. What institutional policies are readily available to help innovate the classroom and guarantee that students will attain the greatest return on their investment? Richard Arum and Josipa Roska (2011), in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, both specify that “growing numbers of students are sent to college at increasingly

higher costs, but for a large proportion of them, the gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and written communication are either exceedingly small or empirically nonexistent” (para. 2). If this concept of students going to college, but not learning anything continues, sooner or later institutions of higher education will bear the same resemblance of a 4-year club or resort, an extended vacation or get-away from home. In the article "Students don't go to college to learn", P. T. Corrigan (2013) highlights what he considers to be bad news for higher education professionals studying common trends among students who go to college. Some of the highlights suggested in the article were that students go to college for the social life, students do not go to college to learn, and most strikingly, academic engagement is often considered taboo (Corrigan, para. 6-7). If academic engagement, as it relates to a student's professional development and future career, is considered taboo, then what purpose do these critical engagements serve if they never reach the desk of those that have the power to promote change? How is one able to engage students in a way where they see that learning is fun, effective, and should be intentional? The answer to these questions is simple, work with students, not against them.

Innovation can be described as taking one pre-existing idea, concept, or resource and extending it further passed its original intentions. The focus of higher education professionals should be to devise an educational policy that will innovate the classroom in which students will have access to the most up-to-date technology and learning material, ultimately making learning and the college experience more enjoyable and meaningful. How is it that educational institutions have high quality athletic facilities and higher rated union facilities, yet their students are struggling with learning within the classroom where there is no social engagement, minimal student teacher interaction, and nothing that students feel they can readily relate too? With technology consistently growing closer to student's fingertips, educators should practice

revitalizing the classrooms with this notion in mind. Technology is not something that educators should fear, but something educators should embrace as it will make teaching more effective and student friendly. As this generation grows closer to smartphones, tablets, and social media, the concept of what a “classroom” is has reached far beyond the confines of a physical institution.

The plan for the implementation of a new policy should begin within the classroom. Many institutions of higher education have already adopted a “Tablet model” learning style. With colleges and universities offering tablets to assist with student learning, this gives students access to far more material and educational content than what is recommended in the class syllabus. Tablets within the classroom gives students the ability to reach into a more familiar environment, such as the internet, and have access to answers to questions they could have that are not answered clearly or thoroughly enough in the textbooks. The motivation behind implementing this new policy would be derived from the notion that there is no guarantee that students will receive a job after they graduate, no guarantee they will earn more money, and no guarantee to a better future. Therefore, this policy should be geared towards prepping students for the actual job market and what they can expect upon graduation, not the next midterm or final exam.

### **Value of Higher Education**

If one were to call into question the value of higher education in America, one should start with its structure. The structure of educational institutions in America has been under fire lately due to them being run as more like that of a business, instead of an institution of higher education. In “45% Of Students Don’t Learn Much in College,” written by Eric Gorski (2011), Lindsey McCluskey, president of the United States Student Association at the time, mentions “the findings speak to a larger problem in U.S. higher education: universities being run more like

corporations than educational institutions, with students being viewed as consumers who come for a degree and move on” (para. 24). The problem I see with this business-like mentality is that students receive no direct or tangible benefit from college other than the skills they were supposed to have gained from their time enrolled in the institution. Students are unknowingly investing money into a dream that is not guaranteed to come true, while universities on the other hand are there readily available to collect the money. To ensure students are receiving the greatest return on their educational investment, institutions of higher education have to start treating them like students ready to learn, and not as consumers ready to spend money.

Jonathan Zimmerman (2012), of the *Los Angeles Times*, wrote in "Are College Students Learning?", “the big open secret in American Higher Education: Most institutions have no meaningful way to measure the quality of their instruction” (para. 2). As much of a problem as this presents, educators need to be proactive in engaging students and meeting them where they are educationally to make sure they are offering students the best education possible. Nowadays it is hard for a professor to keep the attention span of a college student for more than 20min, not to mention the entire 50 minute class period. Students are more so engaged in what is happening on social media and television, than they are engaged in classroom study material. Incorporating new technologies, ones that students can grow excited about, can thus produce more enthusiasm about learning and even attending class. For example, by utilizing Tablets and Laptops within the classroom, not only does it allow students to become more proactive in the classroom, but it also encourages students to become more creative and critical thinkers since they will have to synthesize through more information. In this generation, almost everyone has access to the internet via smartphone, tablet, computer, and even smartwatches. The world is literally at one’s fingertips and the best part about it is that everyone has access to the same information. If

institutions of higher education took advantage of these technologies, students would be more engaged in class, more likely to attend class, and more likely to participate in class due to them being more familiar with the new innovative learning strategies.

Evaluating the effectiveness of this new policy will be one of the biggest challenges, but not entirely impossible. The evaluation process must start within the classroom, looking at variances in attendance, student participation, and material accountability. Educators will be able to test the effectiveness of these new innovative classroom strategies based upon the increase in the above mentioned student engagement strategies. If students are coming to class more often, being excited about coming to class more often, and show more signs of intentional participation within the class, this will be a sign that higher education is headed toward a brighter future. Classrooms should not be a place where social engagement stops, or decreases due to the lack of social relevance relevance. A classroom should be a place where students can go to make the necessary connections between what they learn within the class, and what they experience outside the class.

### **The Purpose of Higher Education**

In order to discern the purpose that higher education serves within one's own community, one must reach back to the past and look at the historical significance of higher education. The difference between the original Colonial Colleges and the institutions of higher education that are established today is that the Colonial Colleges had an undeniable purpose, or mission, for its students and its community. The mission of the Colonial Colleges were to create religious and social leaders for their colony. Educating the religious leaders to take charge served as a primary purpose, in which afterward, former students who wanted to become religious leaders became tutors for the upcoming students. As for assessment of knowledge gained, in order for students

to teach others the material learned, religious leaders had to prove they knew the language and material. They had to clearly prove they understood Trivium (Rhetoric, Dialect, and Grammar) and Quadrivium (arithmetic, Geometry, music, and astronomy). All this was in effort to instill a notion of social and human capital, or superiority because of knowing content knowledge.

As for higher education in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Education started to become a need in which to be embedded within the experiences of the students. These experiences had to be rooted in ideas for which society felt were universal and needed to be considered. Higher education pioneer Alexander Meikle-John believed in using experience to encourage students to think about the world they live in. Freedom of thinking and learning and understanding culture were the driving forces for gaining the interest of students. Meikle-John believed that a teacher must have clear insights on the student's interest and use that as a means of interpersonal communication. In order to achieve this level of communication, the responsibility of actively trying to become familiar with a student personally must be a priority.

Student affairs and its role in academics is often one that is left in the dark. This could be due to the fact that they both have different roles as they apply to students. On the academic aspect, the classroom and faculty aim to help students gain the necessary content knowledge and soft skills needed to function effectively in the real world. Student Affairs on the other hand, one could classify as a university's way of helping students cope with their transition through their collegiate career. Often times both sides of higher education seem to clash when it comes to working together, or establishing a difference of some sort between the two. An example of this could be how some institutions of higher education have a division of students affairs implemented with the university system while other institutions do not. This is key because the

student affairs division of higher education helps students in areas that affect their lives outside of the classroom, while they still remain a part of the university campus.

Higher Education has grown into a \$420 billion business, and that number will continue to rise as current trends in higher education finance continue to perpetuate themselves. It has become a custom for universities to resort to increasing tuition at unimaginable rates in order to compensate for the lack of funds given from the states. Should the students be the ones to bear the burden of the lack of University funds being received from the state? At the same time, since tuition is being raised to help the university, what does the university do in return to help compensate the students? Andrew Hacker and Claudia Dreifus (2010), authors of *Higher Education? How Colleges are Wasting Our Money and Failing Our Kids*, propose that the business of shaping undergraduate minds charges too much and delivers too little (p.3 ). Their claim was supported earlier by Richard Arum and Josipa Roska (2011) of the *Chronical of Higher Education*, “growing numbers of students are sent to college at increasingly higher costs, but for a large proportion of them, the gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and written communication are either exceedingly small or empirically nonexistent” (Are undergraduates actually learning anything, para. 2). I considered it feasibly and fiscally irresponsible to continue to revert to tuition hikes as a “go-to” revenue generator, when the students are not receiving any reasonable benefit on their behalf. How can one justify a system that pumps \$420 billion into a desired lifestyle, job, benefit, or opportunity that is in no way a guarantee after completion?

### **Club College**

It can be argued that nowadays students come to college for the social experience, as opposed to the promoted academic endeavors offered. From the time they fill out the admissions application, to the time they arrive to the institution, students are bombarded with visualizations



of new campus facilities, residence hall amenities, and state of the art sport complexes with very little information pertaining to classroom innovation. Although new facilities and amenities are important to the campus climate and overall outlook of the university, putting so much promotion and advertising behind that one aspect of higher education can deter students from the main mission.

A detailed analysis of why students tend to come to college with a more socially active mindset than one of academia is outlined in *Club College: Why so many universities look like resorts* by Andrew Rosen (2011). Rosen exposes what colleges have in their minds when they decide that it is time to improve on the outlook of the university. When it comes institutional expenses, I often wonder just how much money is devoted to the student's learning experience, not their living or social experience. In chapter 2 of *Club College*, Rosen (2011) describes higher education institutions as sun-drenched campuses with cafes, state-of-the-art fitness centers, extravagant dining options, and excessive living arrangements (p. 60). This notion presents an interesting dynamic, because it causes one to question if more care is put into the physical representation of the campus, or more into the justification of academia.

I question, just how many university dollars go into investing in things that have nothing to do with the classroom, but everything to do with initially drawing students in? Spending university dollars on activities that have no significant impact on learning or education is counter-productive. If institutions are spending these outrageous amounts of money on facilities, athletics, and amenities, there is no wonder why tuition increases are the go-to method for compensation. It is a self-fulfilling prophesy, draw students in by showing them lavish lifestyles and social platforms, pay for these platforms out of university dollars, then get the money back via tuition. Are the administrators that are making these decisions aware of the actual costs of

going to college? With so much emphasis on getting that bachelors or master's degree, and the frustration that comes with constantly trying to find ways to pay for that degree, there is no question as to why many students drop out, or use their time in college to invest totally into their social life.

### **Universities Running as a Business**

The pressure is on for students who are coming into college under the assumption that college will grant them that six-figure salary or prestige benefit package this is so greatly desired. This pressure comes from the experiences one gains in high school and how society does everything but demand students to go to college. Society should not be allowed to make students believe that without college, they will be forced to receive the employment leftovers when this is far from the truth. Instead of looking at why college is so important for students, I feel critics of higher education need to take a closer look at why students are so important to an institution.

It has become arguably a common trend that many institutions of higher education have become corporate universities, adopting a more "business-like" model of operation, as opposed to operating more so like an educational institution. In *Wannabe U: Inside the Corporate University*, author Gaye Tuchman (2009) spent six years interviewing members of faculty, staff, and administration of an unnamed institution of higher education in which she give the cover name "Wannabe U". Tuchman (2009) suggests "today the mastery of practical knowledge in the nation's service is becoming synonymous with registering patents, incubating start-up companies, and growing revenue streams" (Wannabe U, p. 175). Tuchman continues to provide examples of the increasing number administrators who are more concerned with making the university look outstanding rather than actually becoming outstanding. This should come as a

concern because this reaffirms the notion that universities are only after the dollar amount that students bring to the table, not their intellectual capacity.

In addition to acting as a corporate university, another issue with institutions of higher education operating as a business is this fascination with ranking systems. U.S. News does a highly popular ranking system among various aspects of higher education and institutions of higher education. U.S. News ranks aspects such as top programs, top professors, and also ranks the most popular trends in higher education. Much like many of America's top businesses, many higher education institutions have become fascinated with becoming the top or best in certain aspects. Tuchman (2009) further elaborated on one of these aspects and how it inhibits institutional efficiency, "although those rankings have neither a solid theoretical or methodological basis, administrators care about those rankings because potential students and their parents consult them to plan college applications" (p.7). Over the years, it seems as if a small hidden agenda within higher education has been created in which institutions look out for more of the future of their own well-being than they do the future of the students. As Tuchman (2009) was doing her research at Wannabe U, she came across facts and testimonies that gave her reason to believe the following as well, "professors at research universities, such as Wannabe U, tend to down play the importance of teaching and emphasize the value of research to their jobs" (p. 3). In other words, putting emphasis on teaching for U.S. News grants an institution more students, more revenue from tuition, and more prestige from university research. If these ideologies continue to spread, the question "is college worth it" will be more one-sided in favor of the university than it will the students.

In 2008, Associate professor of English at the Ohio State University, Frank Donoghue (2008), wrote *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities*.

Donoghue outlines exactly what sets apart the current modern-day university from any current modern-day corporation, and explains how this growing trend of corporate culture is threatening the very essence of higher education. One of the key facts I noted from reading Donoghue's work was this concept that today's market-driven, rank and ratings obsessed world of higher education, corporate logic prevails. Donoghue (2008) theorizes that "the inequitable funding trends are unlikely to change as we advance toward the future. In fact, as the National Association of College and University Business Officers suggest, the richest universities will continue to become richer" (p. 125). In this sense, I agree that institutions have gone from utilizing prestige in a sense of academics, to a sense of the visual prowess of the institution. An increasing students are being drawn to the universities with the most money, biggest football fields, newest recreations centers, and most updated student unions. All of which have little to do with how the institutions plans to help the student thrive academically.

### **The Future of Higher Education**

Many may wonder why I chose to research the future of higher education, and why I feel its purpose in 2014 may be in jeopardy. As a current Graduate Student in the second and final year of my program, I have witnessed multiple increases in tuition, fees, and other expenses that ultimately effect a student's ability to operate in college, in addition to determining if a student can even attend college. With 2014 offering so many other avenues and ways to make it in America, it seems that an increasing number of students are choosing to go the non-higher education route due to them realizing that their time spent in college is nothing more than an investment of time and money into something that is not and will not be guaranteed. This

however, can be looked at as something good, but at the same time, something that many higher education practitioners fear, the complete and innovative transformation of higher education.

Education is no longer confined to the physical space of a classroom or institution. Anya Kamenetz (2010) author of *DIY U: Edpunks, Edupreneurs and the Coming Transformation of Higher Education* theorizes that in higher education “there remains a general refusal to acknowledge the implications of how easy it is to publish, share, teach, and even apprentice one another outside of the traditional logic of institutions” (p. 110). This theory of Kamenetz is in relation to a similar notion that was quoted earlier in this essay from P. T. Corrigan (2013) in regards to academic engagement being considered taboo. If the most important issue facing higher education today keeps getting swept under the rug, the inevitable “transformation of higher education in American” that everyone seems to notice is coming, will catch educators off guard and leave them no time or resources to adjust.

Anya Kamenetz (2010) further suggests that “the analogy of a return on investment is invoked to explain the wide gap in salaries by level of education, which has persisted for the past hundred years” (p. 25). The analogy of a return on investment used in this essay is used to describe not monetary capital, but social, intellectual, and cultural capital. All of which one will gain from a meaningful academic collegiate experience. Kamenetz (2010) also adds that in many institutions educational equality is quickly declining. This brings discussion back to the notion that education is a \$420 billion business; however what good is a business if the transaction only works in favor of one side? As long as institutions continue to view students as customers, higher education will never be able to revert back to the days where they offered education as a form of social mobility and leadership.

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VITA

Graduate School  
Southern Illinois University

Alexander W. Martin

alexmartin21@icloud.com

Southern Illinois University Carbondale  
Bachelor of Arts, Computer Science, May 2013

Research Paper Title:  
Is College Really Worth It?

Major Professor: Patrick Dilley Ph. D.