

The importance of education

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North on I-25 at Cheyenne is an interchange named Vandehei Avenue. Perhaps some of you have wondered where this name came from. Earl Vandehei, was the last of seven children born to a lumberjack in northern Wisconsin in 1896. His mother died when he was eight years old at which time he had completed only one year of grade school. Yet this was the end of his formal education. He and his father emigrated by horse first to North Dakota, then to Wyoming. Soon he was earning his own way. Yet all he could do was work at menial jobs. Even in 1910 a primary school education provided no opportunities.

By the time he died in 1964, Vandehei owned a construction and demolition company, a gravel pit over on Fox Farm Road, an International Harvester dealership, and a trucking company. With his earnings he purchased ranches in Goshen County, raised a fine stable of thoroughbred horses that raced at Santa Anita and Turf Paradise; and he and his family lived on a nice piece of property that spanned the north boundary of Cheyenne. Many of his family have wondered in amazement at how a man with such limited education did so much. Yet, Vandehei explained how this happened. "The Army saved my life", he often said.

What he meant was that the Army provided him an education. The Army assigned him to an engineering battalion in 1916, and by the time he mustered out in 1919, he was trained as a construction engineer. He had build railroads and operated engines carrying munitions and supplies through the trench systems in France. The war was horrible and he rarely spoke of it, but it changed his life.

Soon after returning to Wyoming he started a construction company that built the original U.S. 85 to Torrington, the dam on the Hereford Ranch, the UP rail beds from Cheyenne to the summit, the runways at Cheyenne Municipal Airport, and the foundations for many buildings and homes.

Yes, Vandehei had ambition and a capacity for hard work, but it is no coincidence that his work revolved around the skills the Army had taught him. The Army did

save his life. It provided the education that prevented him being limited to a life of mediocre prospects.

You SAGE-TRIO students are a little like Vandehei. You are blazing a trail where no one in your family has traveled before, and in doing so, you are removing a limitation on your future prospects. What do you suppose is the value of the education you have begun?

I know what you are thinking. Many people are right now congratulating you on your achievement, but you are thinking to yourselves, and I know this to be true from what my engineering students say, that this education has been a lot of trouble, and hasn't added much value to you. Maybe, you think to yourself, you ought to quit here. You are wrong. You have changed a lot, and you simply haven't noticed the change. Here is where more education adds value to you.

First there is the monetary value; something I feel is overstated, but I'll mention it just the same. The U.S. Census Bureau says that a Bachelor's degree provides an average annual income of \$51,000 while a high school diploma offers a mere \$28,000. However, this is misleading because it is an average among degrees like English and sociology that raise earnings a little and professional degrees such as engineering or medicine that raise earnings a lot.

More importantly a college education adds personal value that is difficult to figure. First, the more educated a person is, the less authoritarian they become. Every social survey taken since surveys were new shows this. People become more tolerant, but also more skeptical of authority. This tendency will make you more skeptical of the PR blather of business, government and the media, and better consumers. Second, the more educated a person becomes the less they rely on binary thinking—the tendency to view things as black or white, right or wrong, this or that. You are beginning to appreciate complexity and trade-offs in making decisions. As a result you will make better decisions about finances, diet, health, spare time, and thousands of other things that will help your family live well. Finally, and most importantly, you are about to gain tools that make it possible to continue your education the rest of your life.

Oops. I'm sorry to let that slip out right now, but you were bound to find out about this at sooner or later. Today's degree, and the Bachelor's degree you will earn in a few years, are not end goals, but rather just mileposts on a journey. Let's return to Vandehei as an example. Despite his successes, by the 1950s he was complaining to his friends that he never seemed to have money any longer and the work was harder to find and organize. Nothing remains of any of what he founded. The companies are gone, and only a little of the property remains with family owners. The world changed and he did not change with it.

The world changes very fast now. In my lifetime I have had to reinvent myself three times—about once every 6 or 7 years—to keep up with it. You will probably have to do so as well. The tools you need to do this, however, are just beyond your reach right now. You need that Bachelor's degree, a couple more years of college, to obtain them, and then you need the gumption to keep them sharp.

The first tool is reading. When you read well and stay in practice, you can teach yourself almost anything. Perhaps you have heard people speak of a post-literate world. There will never be such a thing. The reason is that video and audio can only present information at the rate of perhaps 20 words per minute—but reading absorbs it at perhaps 200 per minute with the same comprehension. Other things augment reading—nothing replaces it.

The second tool is mathematics. You need to be proficient in algebra, statistics, reading and producing graphs. There is only one way to do this and that is through practice. One of my friends was nearly 60 when his two daughters headed to college and he decided to work through a book of 2500 problems in vector mathematics so he could tutor them. Thinking about that ordeal ought to make everyone here queasy. But if my friend could do that, then you can take some more mathematics in college and help your kids with math homework, analyze graphs and statistics presented in the media to stay in practice.

The third tool is public speaking. Being able to speak confidently in public about events and plans will connect you with other thinkers and the world of ideas.

The fourth tool is writing. Learning is a series of closed loops that end and begin with assessment. The only activity that provides the reflection and introspection that assessment requires is writing.

Today you are in much the same position of Vandehei when he returned from France. You can rest on your present accomplishments and succeed for a time; or you can continue to learn and succeed for a lifetime. What will you do?