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## Stott: College taught me higher education isn't essential

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This is my last column as a Northern Illinois University undergraduate student. As you read this, I am selling my textbooks, preparing to pick up my regalia and attempting to normalize my sleep schedule after a busy finals week.

I could use this column space to reflect on the 5½ years it took me to complete my bachelor's degree. I could recap the good and bad times and the stereotypical college memories.

Instead, I want to reflect on something that took me five years to realize, something I should have been taught alongside high school geometry and English classes: College isn't essential.

I do not regret attending college. My degree and student experiences have put me in a position to receive a job offer in the field and location I intended upon since my first day of class. I enjoyed attending college, and I had excellent adventures, met wonderful people and learned a lot.

Unfortunately, some students aren't so lucky. I've sat alongside classmates who didn't return the next semester. They struggled through months or even years of college classes, only to realize they would be better off in a different environment.

Rather than being informed in high school about the alternatives to higher education – which include trades and apprenticeships, workforce classes or specializations – students are taught that college is the only way to embark upon a successful path.

In fact, college has been so effectively emphasized as the only option, I didn't realize it wasn't until I encountered classwork on the issue.

A public policy class project posed the question: Does America put too much emphasis on higher education?

As a student of a public, four-year university, I can say confidently that it does.

I was talked into that very ideal as a high school graduate and never considered other opportunities.

It's shameful because not only are there plenty of students in college who don't belong there but also many skills-based jobs remain unfilled because high school graduates who should be exploring those options are dulling their time and abilities in a lecture hall. Now, as so many recent graduates are forced to seek jobs unrelated to their expensive degrees, parents and students should heed the wake-up call and at least consider other options.

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Again, college plays an integral part in today's complex world. But there is room for more than college-educated people in the workforce, and levels of education paired with career paths will fit best within our dynamic society. It is unfortunate that the U.S. government has put such an emphasis on acquiring a higher education degree. It has trickled down to high school students who are taught, alongside their aching-to-be-proud parents, that the ticket to success is a degree.

It's not, and many breadwinners without college degrees will tell you that. Finding work continues to challenge even the most qualified candidates, and a degree is no longer a ticket to the top.

High school graduates should explore options such as trade programs and apprenticeships before committing to a college career, and their advocates should emphasize the benefits of all alternatives.

I would have liked to know what other options lay before me before I graduated high school – not so I could choose a different path, but so I would have felt in full control of my future. Other high school students could benefit from that information if they choose to take advantage of an alternative.

There is a world of opportunity when college isn't the only consideration, and it shouldn't take a bachelor's degree to come to that conclusion.

• *Lauren Stott is a Maple Park native studying journalism and political science at Northern Illinois University, and works part time at the Daily Chronicle. She can be reached at [lstott@shawmedia.com](mailto:lstott@shawmedia.com).*

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