

VNC Questions posed to and answer by Dean Camilla Benbow, provided July 2, 2013:

1 - In referring to 'media promotion of the idea that college isn't necessary' and to media spawning 'an unfortunate narrative', etc., are you saying that there is a broad pattern of such media coverage, or is your observation limited to coverage of the Thiel program, which you describe as "acclaimed"?

My thoughts were prompted specifically by the Thiel Fellows coverage, which tended to amplify the detail that Fellows are not permitted to attend college during their award period. Beyond that, however, I think we often—including journalists—romanticize the idea of the lone genius tinkering in his garage who turns a big idea into a global corporate powerhouse. We hold up people like Steve Jobs or Bill Gates as examples, and they truly are, but we forget to state that these individuals are outliers. By far, most innovators succeed by a combination of education, hard work, creativity and collaboration.

2 - Do you believe, as you seem to be saying in the column, that accurate reporting of instances in which entrepreneurs opt-out of formal classroom education harms society, even though you assert that such education is not for everyone? Is such a fear widespread among your colleagues? (Do you, or academe generally, perceive this as a strain of anti-intellectualism, of the sort described decades ago by the late Richard Hofstadter?)

I'm not suggesting that smart people who opt out of formal education harm society by doing so, or that they are being anti-intellectual. But I do think that society benefits when smart people are broadly educated—when they are able to situate their own interests and talents in wider intellectual contexts, and when they develop specific knowledge of prior work in their own disciplines.

As researchers, we also know that too many smart children and young people fall through the cracks when our education system doesn't meet them where they are and challenge them intellectually. Some will even drop out. This is a loss to society with real social costs.

3 - Do you think media created the 'narrative' that you perceive, or was it created by the acts of entrepreneurs (or, was the narrative somehow otherwise created)?

I think we all create this narrative—the media, business people, and the public. It's a wonderful story. But again, it's the exception, not the rule.

4 - You cite the achievements of the precocious youth you have studied for decades. In your Tennessean column, you note that, among other feats, the subjects of your studies have founded major corporations. Your comment shows no regard for early-stage entrepreneurial activity, itself, which most often ends in material "failure," but which also frequently produces innovation of the sort that Thiel seems intent on spurring. Please comment.

Persistence and effort are one of the defining traits in the most successful of those we study. These are people who work very hard and derive pleasure from doing so. They are not daunted by setbacks. In that sense, I suspect they share a lot with entrepreneurs.

5 - You note that the precocious youth whom you and others have studied have 'achieved educations that equaled their talents'. Could you elaborate on the meaning of this assertion, and any research findings associated with it? How do you and your colleagues know that their educations equaled their talents?

Almost all of our study population finished college. There are maybe a handful who didn't. Many of them earned master's degrees or doctorates in their chosen fields. Also, most of them had educational opportunities as young people to participate in gifted programs, to take honors classes, to do independent research projects, and later to be mentored and conduct original research as undergraduates.

6 - Similarly, you suggest students emulate those who 'took their educations as far as possible, before capitalizing on what they had learned'. I'm not sure how to interpret this. What ultimately made continuing their educations impossible and are you assuming they capitalized on what they "had learned" in their formal education, only? Could you point me to studies about this inflection point, to which you allude?

I intended to convey that different disciplines have different terminal degrees, whether it's a Ph.D. in the sciences or humanities, an M.D. in medicine, or a J.D. in law. So the limits of formal educational possibilities vary. And different professions require different educational credentials. My primary point is this: most students are best advised to follow the examples of people who sought to make the most of their formal educations and to obtain the credentials that enabled them to embark on successful careers.

[7] - Is there anything good you would say about the Thiel program and the course chosen by Mark Daniel? If so, what would that be?

I think there is room for a variety of approaches to encouraging innovation, and the Thiel program is certainly among them. Talents vary and not everyone needs to go to college to make the most of their talents. But I do think that those who are especially talented benefit from the mentoring they receive in formal education settings not only from their professors but from their intellectual peers, as well. I worry when talented young people, at any educational level, lose or don't have access to those opportunities. **[END]**