Part 1: Summary

In The Article “Are Too Many People Going to College?” Charles Murray claims that there are too many people attending college. While this seems like an easily disputable claim, there are three reasons that he believes less people should go to college. The first point Murray brings up is that a liberal education can and should be gained in elementary and middle school rather than college. He also believes that there are many people going to college who don’t need to because they already have the knowledge and skills necessary for a career. Murray also thinks that many students are going to college solely to get their ticket for employers to consider their resume: “large numbers of students are in college to buy their admission ticket- the B.A.” (p. 10)

Murray does not argue anything against college itself, he argues more against society and especially the education system. He thinks that if the education system was altered, less people would need college. He also accuses guidance counselors and parents of “automatically encouraging young people to go to college straight out of high school...being thoughtless about the best interests of young people” (p. 13) Murray leads us to believe that if guidance counselors and parents thought more about the needs of their students, then less people would go to college.

Part 2: Rhetoric

In the Article “Are Too Many People Going to College?” by Charles Murray, he seems to be talking to a vast audience. He is speaking to the parents and students because they are the people who are choosing, or helping their child to choose, whether to go to college or not. They are also the ones spending their money on a college education for their children or themselves. Murray also addresses the teachers and administrators as they are the people who can change what and
when things are taught in schools. High school guidance counselors are included in his audience as “more than 90 percent of high-school students report that their guidance counselors encouraged them to go to college” according to Murray. Because he is speaking to so many different types of people, he touches on many different areas.

Murray believes that the liberal education gained in college is very important, but he thinks it should be taught somewhere else: “More people should be getting the basics of a liberal education. But for most students, the places to provide those basics are elementary and middle school.” He goes on to explain that small children enjoy learning and are better at memorizing, therefore they should receive the liberal education when they are younger, not waiting until College. He reasons that if the basics are taught in elementary, middle, and high school, then many people wouldn’t need to go to college.

Murray argues that too many people are going to college because there are people who don’t need to go to college to be successful, but they are pushed to attend. He thinks they would do better in the industry they already know and are good at than getting a degree and doing something they are barely capable of. He uses the example of a young man debating whether to become an electrician or go to college and major in business. Murray reasons that even if the young man receives his B.A., he will probably make less money than if he becomes an electrician. Murray has a strong argument in the numbers and logic he provides. His weakness is in only running with one possible outcome for the situation. Murray runs with the idea that he gets his degree but isn’t a good manager because he is “only average” in interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities while being just above average in academic ability. Murray leaves out the possibility that the young man could acquire or improve these abilities while attending college. Why couldn’t the young man go to college to learn how to be a good manager?
There are many claims that Murray makes that sound logical, but he doesn’t back them up very well. For example, he says that employers don’t interview people if they don’t have a B.A. This makes sense because parents, teachers, and counselors always tell us that. But Murray doesn’t state where he got that information. For all we know it could be just as true as someone saying that the world is flat. He doesn’t have evidence to prove that what he is saying is true.

Murray appeals to emotions when he brings up intrinsic rewards. No matter what one’s current occupation or lifestyle is they want to do something rewarding. He uses phrases such as “confined to a cubicle” and “made a difference” to tug on people’s heart strings. The manager is confined to a cubicle and the electrician makes a difference every day, therefore Murray believes that an electrician has more job satisfaction. This idea of being an electrician being more rewarding makes one think they should be an electrician and not go to college. He does admit that the intrinsic reward of being a top manager can be just as good as being an electrician, but doesn’t believe it’s very likely.

Part 3: Ambiguity

In his article “Are Too Many People Going to College” Charles Murray writes a strong argument about too many people going to college who don’t need to. Although he has some solid points, there are multiple things that make his article ambiguous and leave the reader wondering.

Murray mentions statistics and percentiles but doesn’t explain what they mean. He goes in so many different directions with his argument that it is hard to follow. He also fails to show us the evidence that makes the facts actual facts.

Murray gives an example about a young girl being in the 98th percentile on page 4, then talks about a girl being in the 80th percentile on page 5. It isn’t clear if this is the same girl or two
different girls. He also doesn’t explain what the percentiles mean. If she’s in the 80th percentile does that mean she’s doing great or doing poorly?

Murray brings up some statistics with the SAT. He explains that only 10 percent of American 18 year olds would achieve the SAT score that achieves “School readiness” yet 30 percent of 18 year olds go to college. This argument makes sense, but his explanation of the scores and criteria is so confusing that the reader just takes it as fact because they can’t pick it apart.

At one point in his article Murray talks about no longer needing brick and mortar schools. His support for not needing them anymore is strong, but doesn’t help his argument of whether too many people are going to college. As a reader this information is distracting and confusing.

In this article Murray states many things as fact, but doesn’t support the facts with evidence. For example on page 9 he says “Employers do not even interview applicants who do not hold a B.A...Employers value the B.A. because it is a no-cost (for them) screening device for academic ability and perseverance.” Murray makes a valid point here, but he doesn’t explain where this came from or how this is known. He doesn’t tell the reader if there was a study done or if it’s just his own personal experience.

**Part 4: Assumptions**

The article “Are Too Many People Going to College” by Charles Murray is full of assumptions. Some of these assumptions are acceptable because it is a fair assumption based on the audience while some of them are unreasonable assumptions.

The first assumption that Murray makes is that everyone values a liberal education. “More people should be getting the basics of a liberal education. But for most students, the places to
provide those basics are elementary and middle school.” He is assuming that everyone values liberal education when he says more people should be getting it. If people don’t value liberal education then they would not believe that more people should receive it. Murray is speaking to people in the field of education, whether it be the educator or those being educated. Most of his audience is likely to value a liberal education therefore this assumption is valid.

The next assumption we will address comes near the middle of Murray’s argument. He believes that a young man should become an electrician, something he is already good at, rather than go to college to become a manager, something that he doesn’t have natural skills for. Murray is comparing the income expectation and says, speaking of the young man, “Realistically, he should be looking at the incomes toward the bottom of the distribution of managers.” (p. 2). In this statement Murray is assuming that the man never gets better at the skills needed to be a manager. He assumes that after four years of college the young man is still only average in interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities. This assumption does not play in Murray’s favor because most people in his audience have been to college. Most people who go to college feel that it is a growing experience; during college years people learn and develop various new skills and capabilities. Murray is also assuming that the young man will not need above average interpersonal and intrapersonal skills to be a top electrician.

Murray makes another assumption that really does not help his case. He is assuming that all students are not getting enough of an education in history, science, and great works of art, music, and literature. When discussing these areas of education Murray states: “They do need to know—and to know more than they are currently learning. So let’s teach them, but let’s not wait for college to do it.” (p. 3). Not only is he assuming that people aren’t getting the education, he is also assuming that if they are getting it, they aren’t getting it until college. This poses a problem
in his logic because he is speaking to educators. These educators are trying to give these students that type of education early on in the students’ lives. The educators may take his statement as a personal attack on their abilities and career.

In Murray’s article, he argues that too many people are going to college, but many of his assumptions are invalid and hurt his argument. He is speaking to educators which make some of his assumptions effective, but also causes some of his assumptions to be unsound.

**Part 5: Evidence**

In Charles Murray’s article “Are too Many People Going to College?” He addresses the fact that too many people are going to college. There are reasons he believes too many people are going to college. The first is that the liberal education people are gaining in college should be taught in elementary and middle schools. The second reason is that people are going to college when they should just go to work at the job they are already good at.

Murray claims that getting a liberal education is important but people should be getting a liberal education in elementary and middle school rather than in college. He quotes a book by E.D Hirsch talking about learning being more natural for younger children.

small children enjoy learning myths and fables, showing off names and dates they have memorized, and hearing about great historical figures and exciting deeds.... memorizing things is an indispensable part of education, too; and memorizing is something that children do much, much better than adults. The core knowledge is suited to ways that young children naturally learn and enjoy learning.
Murray thinks that children should gain a liberal education earlier because it is easier for them to learn, it is more natural. The question that is not answered by Murray or the book is how do you know? How does Murray, or E. D. Hirsch know that children are better at memorizing? Was there a study done? Murray does not provide any evidence that the stated facts are true. This is very important because if there have been studies done and theories proven that children are better at memorizing, then this is a sound argument with strong evidence. If it hasn’t been proven then this means nothing.

In his article Murray explains that it would be more beneficial for a person to work in an area they are already skilled rather than going to college for something they are averagely skilled in. He gives an example of a young man who is at the 95th percentile in the skills that are helpful in being an electrician. This same young man was “exactly average” in interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities which are important to being a manager. Murray describes that the young man is debating between going to college and major in business or become an electrician. Murray believes that the young man should be comparing the incomes near the bottom of the distribution for managers and top of the income for electricians.

This example has the potential to be good evidence to support Murray’s claim that too many people are going to college who don’t need to, but maybe misses the mark. He is using a case example which helps to explain the idea, but not to prove his point. The situation seems too perfect to be true. Murray never tells the reader that it is based on a true story, so the reader has no reason to believe it. If the reader doesn’t believe it then it’s not supporting Murray’s claim very well.

Part 6: Fallacies
In “Are Too Many People Going to College” Murray uses fallacies to try and persuade his audience. Sometimes he distracts the reader so they don’t have a chance to disagree, while other times he tries to prove that something will happen based on another, unrelated, fact. Murray is clever enough to use these fallacies to his advantage.

Murray uses a slippery slope fallacy to prove his point that it is sometimes ok to push people into undergraduate programs because they will enjoy it.

“But the only reason we can get away with pushing her is that the odds are high that she will enjoy it. The odds are high because she is good at this sort of thing—it’s no problem for her to read On Liberty or Paradise Lost. It’s no problem for her to come up with an interesting perspective on what she’s read and weave it into a term paper. And because she’s good at it, she is also likely to enjoy it.”

This is a slippery slope because he starts by saying she is good at reading and writing and weaving, therefore she will enjoy an undergraduate program.

While Murray is trying to prove that liberal education needs to be taught before college and while he discusses liberal education in college, he tries to distract the reader by including unnecessary information. His use of a Red Herring Fallacy sidetracks the audience just enough that they won’t think to disagree with his argument. Murray is explaining about the article On Liberty but continues his thought with “I will not burden you with On Liberty’s last sentence. It is 126 words long.” (P. 4). Murray is trying to prove that liberal education is important at an early age. Before anyone can disagree with his point, he throws in a distraction to disrupt the reader just enough that they forget they didn’t agree with him, but not enough to derail his whole train of thought.
The fallacies Murray uses in his article could easily go unnoticed; he is using them to his advantage. If Murray’s audience does pick up on the fallacies, he loses credibility. If they notice his slippery slope they will assume that he is being extreme in everything he is saying and won’t take his statement seriously. If Murray’s audience notices that he is trying to distract them, he has lost their interest.

**Part 7: Final Assessment**

Based on Murray’s audience, his argument is not the best it could be. He is targeting people in the education field, student, and parents. Many of his arguments against college do not have strong enough evidence to support someone in his audience. His biggest weakness is his assumptions. Many educators would not agree with what he is assuming, therefore foiling his logic. Had he assumed less and provided more facts, he would have won the vote from much of his audience. His argument as a whole also would have been more effective if he had stuck to his claims instead of breaking off on random tangents for paragraphs at a time.

If we ignore his specific audience, he has some pretty convincing arguments. He plays to people’s logical mind when he talks about people already having the skills needed for a career. But he also tugs on people’s heartstring when he points out the intrinsic rewards that come with many jobs not requiring a degree. While I have not changed my own mind about college, Murray’s article had caused me to re-think my own blanket opinions about college attendance.

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