Bird’s Argument against College

Feminist and proclaimed author of over 6 literary works, Caroline Bird is an author who knows how to spark interest. Bird managed to spark a lot of interest in her article “College is a Waste of Time and Money.”Her main arguments are students are unhappy and college is a bad investment. Although her article is written in a way that entices me as a reader to want more, she unfortunately provides evidence that leads me to believe that she does not have extensive knowledge in the topic she is discussing, which is college.

Bird provides several examples in her article to support her claims that students are unhappy and college is a bad investment. However, with the various fallacies that are intertwined in her article, I can offer counter examples that refute her claims. Due to the various fallacies that are in her article, I question the sources she has used to obtain this information. Due to the number of fallacies and her lack of evaluating sources properly in this article, I am unable to agree with her argument.

In the opening, Bird uses a great thesis to grab our attention: “A great majority of our nine million college students are not in school because they want to be or because they want to learn.” This statement immediately sparked my interest and caused me to want to know more about the topic of college is a waste of time and money. The fact that Bird was a journalist lecturing on campuses, helped give her statement even more depth. However, according to the rules in critical thinking, “To make best use of information we acquire, we must first evaluate it.” (Makau & Marty 30)

With her access to faculty members at the colleges she lectured at, Bird asked for their opinion on their students. Based on her questioning, she was able to find out that no more than 25 percent of students are motivated by their classwork. Although she provides data, it unfortunately is an appeal to popular prejudice fallacy. Since Bird trusts the information given from her fellow colleagues, she is more inclined to believe their statement about the number of students being motivated by their classwork. However, we the readers need to know why these particular faculty member’s opinions can be trusted over all other opinions.

So what are the reasons for so much sadness and lack of motivation with college students? According to Bird, the reason lies in the fact that students feel as though they are not needed. She also argues, due to the fact that no one knows what to do with the young adults, “We temporarily get them out of the way by sending them to college where in fact only a few belong.” She has a great opinion about students being sad because of not being wanted; however in an earlier paragraph, she discussed where she obtained her information. She researched scholarly studies, economic analyses, historical record, had conversations with parents, professors, college administrators, employers and alumni, whom she deemed the especially knowledgeable and lastly she interviewed hundreds of young people on and off campuses all over the country (2).

We need more data from her to make this claim a valid argument. Information such as type of school student being interviewed is attending, the location, whether they are male or female, ethnic background, their academic grades, are they involved in campus clubs, etc. All of these examples provided, can have an impact on how a student responds in an interview. The sources she provided such as scholarly studies, economic analyses and also historical record can be used to develop a sound conclusion, however the “especially knowledgeable” people can be unreliable resources because we do not know if they hold a bias. Therefore this is an unreliable source fallacy.

Reading further into the article, Bird gives details as to why college is a bad investment. She provides the following example to back up her argument: “If a 1972 Princeton-bound high-school graduate had put the $34,181 that his four years of college would have cost him into a savings bank at 7.5 percent interest compounded daily, he would have had at age 64 a total of $1,129,200, or $528,200 more than the earnings of a male college graduate.” This is a great argument. Based on the figures, it is quite clear that college is a bad investment if you could make more money by just investing the money. In this instance, however, the non-representative instance fallacy is being used. According to Makau & Marty, only data that provide a reasonably accurate reflection of reality facilitate good reasoning (266). Bird provides an example of a rich uncle who happily donates the money to his nephew to use as he so pleases. In addition, she uses Princeton-bound high-school graduates as an example. What if the high school student went to a community college instead or what if they chose a less expensive university? This information would be relevant. The reality is in America, most individuals may not be rich and as fortunate as the example she provided. To connect to the majority of Americans, she would need to provide more examples or situations to make her argument stronger.

Overall Bird’s message is clear, since colleges lack career preparation sources, it is a bad investment. With college being a bad investment, students do not get the jobs that will make them happy, which in return make them overall unhappy citizens. I applaud her for bringing this topic to American citizen’s attention, and she presented a lot of details, with most of her information coming from respected people in her field. However, she did not follow the following criteria when using her sources: Reliability, Credibility, Objectivity and Scope of coverage. Even though she claims her sources are especially knowledgeable, are they trustworthy enough to provide non-biased facts for us readers? If these sources are respected in their field, how can we verify? She does not provide details as to why they are qualified to speak on the topic at hand. Lastly, in regard to scope of coverage, Bird does not go into enough detail and provide both sides of the story. She only uses interviews that were heavily negative on the reason for not going to college, which in turn supported her argument. Therefore, I am not totally convinced that she has a valid argument to fight.

Works Cited

Makau, Josina, and Marty, Debian. *Cooperative Argumentation*. Illinois: Waveland Press, 2001

Bird, Caroline. "College is a Waste of Time and Money." *Psychology Today* 8.12 (1975): 28-35.