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## Special to the Standard-Examiner: Earnings increase with education

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Shelly Belflower is a wiz with computers. She is one of the people who work to keep the information technology systems humming at Weber State University. She has also saved me from many blunders I have made with my computer.

Shelly didn't begin her career as a computer expert. Shelly started her professional career as a cosmetologist, and she still maintains a current Utah license in cosmetology. About a decade ago, Shelly found herself a single mother with five children to raise, and she decided to explore other career options. She entered the Information Systems and Technologies program at Weber State and earned her bachelor's degree in 2000. A few years later, she decided that a master's degree would help advance her career, and she earned an MBA degree.

Shelly is probably the only licensed cosmetologist with an MBA in the state.

In this regard, she is unique, but in a great many ways, Shelly's experience typifies the career paths of modern workers. Increasingly, workers shift careers, and education is a key ingredient for moving up the career ladder.

Most people know that a college education leads to higher earnings and more career options. The latest census statistics indicate that over the course of a lifetime those who earn an associate's degree will earn about \$229,266 more than high school graduates. The lifetime earning of those who earn a bachelor's degree will be \$645,835 more than those who stop with an associate's degree.

Earnings continue to increase with additional education. Those who earn a master's degree can expect to earn \$2,312,426 over the course of their working career.

The workplace benefits of a college degree extend beyond salary. College graduates have more job security and are happier with their career choices.

Additionally, the benefits of a college degree aren't limited to the workplace. People with a college education are more involved in volunteer work and philanthropy. College graduates are more involved with community and civic organizations, and more likely to vote in local and national elections. Those with a college degree also are more likely to enjoy literature and the visual and performing arts. Access to health care is more widely available for those with a college degree and, as a result, college graduates have longer life expectancies.

Of course, a college education does not guarantee a litany of benefits. You probably know a summa cum laude graduate who is totally lacking any admirable qualities. The scoundrels responsible for the collapse of the Enron corporation have been called the "smartest guys in the room," and the Enron executive team held degrees from some of the best universities in the nation. Conversely, we all know people who shunned higher education and did just fine. Bill Gates is perhaps the best-known dropout. A college education is best viewed as an investment. A degree does not guarantee success, but for most people the rewards associated with earning a college degree are significant.

Last week Shelly was promoted to the position of director of Technology Services at WSU. "Looking back at my choices, I am so glad I chose the college route," Shelly said. "The benefits of obtaining a degree, just having that piece of paper, means 'I did it.' I proved to everyone, including myself and my children, that I could make a difference and be something more."

Shelly added, "Weber State has been a great fit for me. The education I received and the application of the skills I learned have given me the best reward ever. I would strongly encourage anyone who wants more for their life to return to college."

On Friday, WSU will hold its 126th commencement ceremony, and another 1,300 graduates, armed with their newly earned degrees, will embark on the next step in their careers. Like Shelly, they'll soon discover the advantages of having pursued a degree in higher education.

Vaughan is provost at Weber State University.