

Scaling Mountains

For centuries, generations have faced insurmountable mountains and always managed to climb over them. As time passes, these looming mountains always change shape but appear just as high to the budding youth. In the 1930s it was economic depression, in the 1940s it was war, in the 1960s it was civil rights. But not only have these generations overcome such social and economic barriers, they have also taken steps to ensure that these events are not likely to occur again. Our generation faces a different mountain to scale: sustainability. In the coming years it will be more and more pressing for our society to find ways to sustain employment levels as well as the environment. In our increasingly technologically-dependent society, we millennials must strive to prepare ourselves for gainful employment amidst developing automated manufacturing, discover new energy solutions to benefit the economy and environment, as well as earn an education at a cost that won't cripple our financial growth.

In our progressing technological society, the job market is shifting in both positive and negative ways. As automated manufacturing becomes less expensive and more convenient, minimum wage jobs are becoming threatened. This is why the current minimum wages throughout the nation is subject to so much debate. While it is important to increase minimum wages in parallel with economic inflation, too much of an increase will push companies into investing in machines and automation instead of in the workforce. The Pew Research Center explains that, in the value of 2016 dollars, the minimum wage peaked in 1968. *The Economist* also estimates that, adjusting for inflation, the minimum wage should be about \$12. But, as our society progresses in the use of technology, wages that high could provide incentive for companies to use machines to replace minimum-wage workers. Such a reaction has already

been experienced in some parts of the country. Large cities in the U.S. have been pushing for increased minimum wages, some as high as \$15. But, “these minimum wage increases coincide with falling prices for computers that can replace human labor in some low-skill jobs,” says the research organization *Brookings Institution*. This could happen on a much larger scale if the minimum wages everywhere throughout the country were raised exceedingly. Instead of increasing the standard of living for these minimum wage workers, the effect could be a major decrease in the number of minimum wage jobs. This is why our generation must find a “sweet spot” between adjusting for inflation while retaining the number of minimum wage jobs.

In order to secure the future of the job market in America, our generation must face a skills gap contributed by the cost of achieving a postsecondary education. Our society is facing a shortage of “mid skilled” workers—ones who fill jobs that require *some* postsecondary

Chart: See 20 Years of Tuition Growth at National Universities

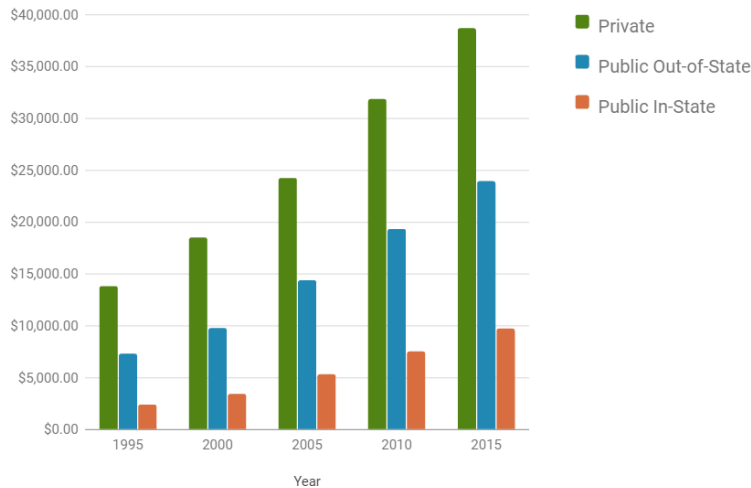


Figure 1

education. The data from US News in *Figure 1* illustrates that the cost of achieving this education is quickly increasing. As this cost increases, it will become more difficult for people to attend college and fewer people will be available to fill these mid skill positions. The result is a gap of

untapped employment potential. So, if our generation can find ways to reverse the trend of college tuition costs, we can begin to fill these employment gaps that currently lay untouched.

Our society has become increasingly reliant upon the use of fossil fuels in everyday life. From running cars to heating houses, it is a reality that we will continue to use them. This trend can be seen in *Figure 2* from the EPA, with the increase of total carbon emissions per year for the last twenty years. But while this style of living is not sustainable forever, it currently is the most economic option when compared to

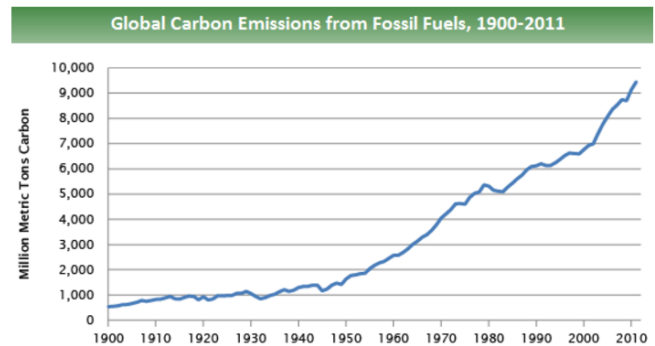


Figure 2

other renewable energy sources. Even though the cost of solar panels has decreased significantly in the past ten years, they are still an expensive option. Wind turbines experience the same problem as well as the fact that they are not reliable in all regions of the country. Natural gas and coal offer less expensive solutions, but still contribute more gas emissions than other renewable sources. And while many associate solar panels with the clean energy, the manufacture of these panels is much less than clean. Refining the quartz needed to extract silicon for solar panels requires a lot of energy and produces toxic waste known as silicon tetrachloride that can be recycled or dumped. This is why it is so important for our generation to invest time into developing cheaper and cleaner ways of producing renewable energy solutions.

In conclusion, our generation has a long road ahead of us. Between debates over minimum wage, college tuition costs, and natural resources, there are a lot of things we need to sort out for the good of our society. It is important for us to combat these issues head on; we must adjust the minimum wage so that jobs are retained and inflation is controlled. We must discover and invent cleaner means of harnessing energy that is economically and environmentally friendly. Great minds are needed to solve these problems—but affordable college education is needed to develop these great minds. Without this education, our generation will not have the brainpower needed to scale the mountains ahead of us. But if we tackle these issues, we can start the climb and eventually reach the other side of our mountain to be there to help the next generation scale their own. Just like the generations before us that have taken steps to prevent catastrophes such as war and economic depression, we can try and leave our world in a better and more well-prepared state than it was before us.

Word Count: 953