

Inquiring Minds Topic Paper

John Moore, Moderator - - October 28, 2016

"Should Everyone Go to College?"

The presidential campaign has been notable, among other things, for the lack of discussion of specific policy proposals. Oddly, perhaps, higher education provides one small exception. The president has called for universal college education, perhaps prompting responses from the candidates. One has proposed subsidizing college tuition for students from middle income families as well as student loan relief. Another candidate has proposed reform of the student loan program. These proposals have gone largely unnoticed in the maelstrom of personal attacks and invective.

Few would deny that higher education remains critical for the nation's future. Success in the modern economy requires a well-educated labor force, especially but not exclusively in technological fields. Although our universities still set the standard for the world, others are catching up. Slightly more than 20 million students were enrolled in our degree-granting postsecondary institutions in 2013. This amounted to about 40% of persons between the ages of 18 and 24. Universal college education thus seems a distant goal.

But is it a desirable goal? As the reading for this session shows, this is a disputed issue, even within the gates of academia itself. Questions that might be discussed include:

- The overriding issue is in the title of the essay: Should everyone go to college?
- If not everyone should go to college, where should the responsibility or authority lie to decide which individuals do? Parents? Students? Colleges? Government?
- A related question: Who should pay for postsecondary education, whether four year college/university or the practical technical education discussed in the essay?
- A great deal of attention and resources have been devoted to so-called STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) education in colleges. The long time staple of higher education, the B.A. degree, seems almost to have fallen by the wayside, a perhaps unintended consequence of the STEM emphasis. Is this wise? What is the role of the B.A. degree in the 21st century?
- The essay presents a number of arguments for technical or practical training instead of college education for some individuals. Yet, as it notes, there are cultural biases against such training. What does it take to alter those biases? Who should take the lead in this?
- It is suggested that colleges and universities could combine the traditional undergraduate program with practical technical training. Given the traditions and self-perceptions of academia, is this a reasonable expectation?

Should Everyone Go to College?

By Scott Carlson

Chronicle of Higher Education (online version), 5-1-2016 (edited for length)

In 2016 in the United States, society pushes high schoolers to go to college. The watchword is access: There are college-completion goals to hit to keep the country competitive, a wage premium to earn to secure a decent living. This is a movement that people in and out of higher education grapple with, uncomfortably. Professor X, writing a few years ago in [The Atlantic](#), described the students who had floundered in his introductory English courses. By making them strive for academic standards they struggled to meet, he wondered if he was doing them more harm than good.

Decades ago, students who were deemed "not college material" — particularly those who weren't white, no matter their potential — were often tracked into vocational training, manual labor, manufacturing, and other work that didn't require academic study. Today, because of the decline of such jobs, a transformation in grade-school education, and the increasing skills required in professions like sales and service, a path to a career almost must pass through higher education.

"We have a system now that has one pathway," says Anthony P. Carnevale, director of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. "The only logical outcome of that is postsecondary, which is where the job training goes on in America."

Policy makers and pundits call the agenda "college for all," referring to certificates and two-year degrees, in addition to four-year degrees. But many laypeople — and even some educators — devalue career and technical education, taking "college" in that prescription more traditionally. They believe success means a bachelor's degree, and the only question is how to help everyone afford it. Bernie Sanders, in particular, has been vocal about college for all, having sponsored a Senate bill by that name to eliminate tuition and fees, and lauding the European countries that offer "free college." What often goes unmentioned, however, is that, in places like Austria, Germany, and the Netherlands, which have strict tracking systems, not everyone gets to go.

Here in the United States, we have one of the [lowest college-completion rates](#) in the developed world, a fact we're fervently trying to change. Effectively, we have set up a "pay to play" barrier to the highly valued jobs, and now we're urging everyone to clear it. But for low-income students especially, that pursuit comes with substantial

costs and risks, like dropping out with debt or, even with a degree, lacking the social and professional connections to land a lucrative job.

Some policy makers have responded by clumsily encouraging lower-performing students to take a different course through postsecondary education. State lawmakers in North Carolina want to [route those with middling grades through community college](#), a move that educators decry as discriminatory. The debate over whether everyone should go to college — and what "college" means — has prompted remarks that the higher-education system should be overhauled. Marco Rubio, for example, has said that the country needs [fewer philosophy majors and more welders](#).

For the most part, though, policy makers have [ignored viable practical training](#). "If you go up to Capitol Hill, you speak to staff or policy makers, none of them went to vocational education," says Mary Alice McCarthy, a senior policy analyst at New America. "None of their children went into vocational education. And they have no experience with it."

Yet not all students thrive on academics. Can schools and colleges fairly present and value an array of educational and employment pathways, while still offering late-blooming learners a chance at a four-year college and beyond? The challenge is figuring out, at crucial junctures, who should go which way.

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In the past few years, manufacturers west of Minneapolis have been desperate to hire welders, poaching employees from one another. With the Dunwoody College of Technology, the companies started an accelerated training program: one semester to get a job starting at \$32,000 a year. Ads aired on the radio, blurbs ran in church bulletins, and recruiters visited high schools and community events. But the response they often got was, I'd rather go to college.

Dunwoody's career and technical education carries — maybe even reinforces — the old stigma that clung to vocational education: something less for the less fortunate, or a consolation prize. "I hear comments like 'My son or daughter wasn't successful in college, so I sent them to Dunwoody,'" says Rich Wagner, its president. Ironically, he notes, the nonprofit institution enrolls many students who already have a four-year degree but aren't landing a job. The college has a 99-percent placement rate for its graduates, Mr. Wagner says, with an average starting salary of \$40,000.

"How do we get parents to understand and appreciate that these occupations are viable pathways to the middle class?" he wonders. "The biggest frustration is that there doesn't seem to be a national voice on this."

There is, however, a growing chorus questioning college for all. Mark S. Schneider, a vice president at the American Institutes for Research, has said that competencies, not bachelor's degrees, may become the [more valuable currency in the job market](#). The *Washington Post* columnist Robert J. Samuelson has [argued](#) that the movement "cheapens" four-year degrees and stigmatizes those who choose another path.

Katherine S. Newman, provost at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and Hella Winston, a journalism fellow at Brandeis University, wrote in *The New York Times* last month that the education system should create more routes "straight from high school to a career," noting more than 600,000 open jobs in manufacturing, which some say is not in decline but in a renaissance. Other countries have expanded training for such jobs, they said, while we have let it atrophy.

James Rosenbaum, a sociology professor at Northwestern University, has long [argued](#) against the B.A. for all, particularly low-income students. In the old days of tracking, guidance counselors and others acted as gatekeepers, he says, steering even promising students away from college. Today, especially in poorer school districts, those counselors each serve hundreds of students, and because of the unfortunate history and current campaign, they are reluctant to discourage any aspiring collegegoers. As a result, Mr. Rosenbaum says, they put unprepared students on an unrealistic path.

The pressure of the national college-attainment agenda is misguided, says Diane Ravitch, the prominent education historian and professor at New York University. "The Obama administration keeps saying that everyone needs to go to college, and that we are going to have the highest college-graduation rate in the world by 2020, which is ridiculous," she says. The highest share of college graduates in the world doesn't equal a healthy economy, she adds. "We are chasing a fantasy."

Our economic and social problems stem more from the wide gap between rich and poor, and jobs sent overseas, says Ms. Ravitch, than from too few people pursuing a bachelor's degree. We're projecting economic insufficiencies onto the education system, she says. "The college-for-all talk is like fairy dust sprinkled over the conversation."

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Despite general encouragement to go to college, guidance or the lack thereof can still hamper ambitions. As part of a research project a few years ago, Mr. Harper interviewed dozens of high-achieving students in working-class and low-income neighborhoods of New York City. Guidance counselors were referring the students to the City University of New York and State University of New York systems, he says,

even when they had the grades to get into Penn, Harvard, or the University of Virginia.

"When we talked to the guidance counselors, they would say, 'Kids from here don't get into schools like that,'" Mr. Harper says. So-called [undermatching](#), the phenomenon in which high-achieving, low-income students don't apply to or attend competitive colleges, is an insidious form of tracking, Mr. Harper says. But even he doubts whether all students should be pushed into four-year programs.

"I want to make college possible for anyone who wants to go and stands a shot at succeeding," he says. But plans for free community college or free public college, and more high-school graduates striving for bachelor's degrees, would have unintended consequences, he says. Even more than happens already, poor students would go to the free institutions, while rich parents would send their kids to expensive private colleges.

"What we are going to see, I'm afraid, is an amplification of the stratification of higher education," says Mr. Harper.

By getting rid of tracking, paradoxically, we have devalued a set of occupations and the training for them. "There is a narrative out there where it's college or nothing," Mr. Harper says. "Most of us need someone to cut our hair," he says. "We need hotel workers. We need auto mechanics."

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Maybe it's right that our educational and economic systems push the four-year degree. Some students will drop out along the way, but those who finish will have earned currency on the job market and be prepared (at least on paper) for graduate school and even more remunerative work. Meanwhile, technical training can be subject to the vagaries of specific industries, and in physical occupations like welding, employment lasts only as long as one's body.

But despite the focus on college completion, the [national graduation rate](#) at four-year institutions still hovers around 60 percent, about half that at open-access colleges. Clearly, four-year degrees aren't right for everyone, especially in a country that [increasingly](#) expects individuals to shoulder the cost. If you're poor, then, is it better to be told you're not cut out for college, and guided toward training that may cost less and lead to a solid job? Or is it better to shoot for a bachelor's degree, with the risk that you might fail, rack up debt, drop out, and be worse off?

"Everyone knows that we need to make career-focused education work, and the question is, How do you do that without falling back into some sort of tracking?" says Ms. McCarthy of New America. "It's just not an American thing to track kids into some sort of career at age 16."

There may be solutions that wouldn't force those choices. Many policy advocates — like Ms. McCarthy and Mr. Rosenbaum, of Northwestern — want to lower the stakes of pursuing a B.A. by instituting more "degree ladders" or "stackable credentials," to let students benefit in the job market as they accumulate credits. Under that approach, initial courses in any degree program would be oriented toward professional skills or specific fields of study. That would lead to badges or certificates, which could become an associate degree, which could lead, in time, to a bachelor's, as students built up their knowledge, experience, skills, and maturity.

"With each step, they get a payoff and a success," Mr. Rosenbaum says, "and if life interrupts with a crisis, as it [often does](#) for low-income students, they have got whatever they accomplished in the meantime." Such a step-by-step approach could also help motivate students.

College leaders like to say that higher education's greatest strength is its diversity. But it can also be a liability.

For now, students who want to move through the system's tiers have a difficult path. [Credits from community colleges](#) or career and technical colleges often [don't transfer easily](#) to four-year institutions. Many of Dunwoody's students were effectively stranded. So the college set up a B.A. itself. Now students can get a certificate to work in, say, a machine shop, come back for a two-year degree in tool programming, and later return for a four-year industrial-engineering degree.

Some students who have a hard time with straight academics, says Mr. Wagner, Dunwoody's president, can excel when they apply lessons to a practical problem. He sees students finally grasp math when they work with gear ratios in car transmissions. Mr. Wagner knows that kind of student well. He failed out of Lehigh University when he was 18, but his success in technical education led him to later earn bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees.

But as long as career and technical education is culturally marginalized, its quality will suffer, and its integration into mainstream higher education will stall. "We gave it over to the for-profits, which shows that we don't care about it," says Ms. McCarthy. "It's an afterthought."

While education can raise individual fortunes, it has historically been a great divider, structured to evaluate people and their abilities, and to separate them. Instead of accepting that reductionist approach, why not recognize individual talents, and find ways to enhance them? Some academics understand medieval literature or political philosophy in ways most of us never will. But others who never went to college may know how to deal with a "check engine" light in a car or a leaky dishwasher. We need both philosophers and plumbers, but our system values one more highly than the other.

In forging a path forward, Mr. Carnevale asks, "are you going to be a realist or idealist?" The idealist presses on with college for all, with more education, hoping that will solve the problems of inequality.

The realist, he says, respects job training and skills, counting career and technical education as a solid option. But if job-training programs were to grow in high schools, if educators steered more students into technical education, Mr. Carnevale says, those moves would need a certain packaging to make them politically acceptable. They would have to be billed as a path to college.

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