

Probing Policy Resistance to Liberal Education: Why the Chasm? Can it Be Bridged? And Who Loses if We Miss?

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I'd like to thank Carol Schneider and her colleagues for the opportunity to be part of the conversation on this important and timely topic.

I will begin by reviewing briefly some economic forces driving public policy interest in higher education. These are familiar, and some might consider them narrowly utilitarian, a source of resistance to liberal education. I am personally a fan of utility, but I'll save that conversation for the discussion period.

Slide Two

First, here is a quick review of Tom Friedman's best selling book, *The World is Flat*. Friedman's title, of course, is a play on words. He means to say the "playing field" of the world economy has become more "flat," rather than being tilted so much in favor of more developed economies like the United States, Japan, and Western Europe. Friedman identifies ten forces that are "flattening" the world. They are:

1. Fall of Berlin Wall 11/9/89
2. First Mainstream Web Browser – Netscape goes public, 8/9/95
3. Work Flow Software – Standardized applications, Pay-pal (e-Bay), et al
4. Open Sourcing – Apache Adobe readers, LINEX
5. Outsourcing – Y2K, spin off functions to India
6. Offshoring – China in the WTO, capital flows to find cheap labor
7. Supply-chaining – Wal-Mart retailer to manufacturers
8. Insourcing – UPS services linked to shipping
9. In-forming – "Google-like" intelligent searches and data mining
10. "The Steroids" Wireless Mobile Digital Communication

Some think Friedman downplays the negative aspects of globalization and undervalues the important and essential roles of governments in the world economy. These are legitimate reservations, but they do not diminish his achievements. Friedman has grasped and masterfully articulated powerful forces that are dramatically changing the world.

The "world flattening forces" Friedman writes about are based in the global transformation from a manufacturing economy concentrated in a few countries to a knowledge economy which, empowered by information technology and the internet, has the potential to spread throughout the world. The forces driving this transformation are not entirely new; they have been with us for decades.

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In this context the U.S. workforce is becoming comparatively less well educated. The U.S. now ranks 9th in the entry rate to baccalaureate education, and 15th in the entry rate to post-secondary technical education. We still are near the top regarding the proportion of our current workforce with a college degree, but we are losing ground rapidly to developed economies in Europe, Asia, Australia, and New

Zealand. Perhaps the most disturbing finding is that our younger adults, age 25 to 34 rank tenth in the world in the attainment of an associate degree or higher, and we are one of only two OECD countries where older adults are better educated than the young adult age group. *Source: OECD Education at a Glance.*

The current economic crisis underscores how dependent we all are on the economic activity and productivity of others. Wider and higher levels of postsecondary attainment are essential for a well-functioning world economy, and access to economic opportunity now means access to educational attainment.

Slide Four

The prosperity of states and communities is directly related to the educational attainment of their citizens. The states with the highest per capita income and the states with the strongest, most resilient economies have the highest percentage of citizens with a baccalaureate degree.

Slide Five

In 1973 we had a labor force of 91 million employees. High school dropouts held 32% of those jobs and high school graduates held 40%, for a total of 72%. This was 66.4 million jobs in the 91 million workforce.

The other 24.6 million jobs (26% of the total) were held by college graduates (16%) and people with some college (12%.)

Slide Six

Thirty-four years later, in 2007 we had a labor force of 154 million employees. Only 11% of those jobs were held by high school dropouts, and 30% were held by high school graduates. Their share of the workforce dropped from 72% to 41% in 34 years. Their share happens to be 64 million jobs in 2007, slightly fewer than existed in 1973.

Slide Seven

By comparison, the number of jobs held by people with college degrees or some college jumped from 24.6 million in 1973 to 91 million in 2007. These people now account for 51% of employees. All the job growth in the past 37 years has been in jobs filled by people with some postsecondary education. (Source: Anthony Carnevale.)

It would be fair to ask whether the economy really needed all that education. An economist would say the best test of need is what businesses are willing to pay. Since 1975 the average earnings of high school dropouts and high school graduates have dropped in real terms (by 15% for dropouts and by 1% for graduates.) Real earnings have increased by 19% for college graduates.

In my view these economic reasons for increasing educational attainment are sufficient, but only part of the justification. The political, environmental, and social challenges in the 21st century to require all the human knowledge and wisdom we can muster. We cannot have too many well-educated citizens in the U.S. or anywhere else.

Slide Eight

During the past year the State Higher Education Executive Officers prepared an open letter to the Presidential candidates on national goals for higher education. We suggested that the United States should seek to be second to no other nation in educational attainment, innovation, and the application of knowledge. Of these three goals, we now fail to lead the world only in educational attainment.

Projections developed by my friends at NCHEMS, a higher education think tank in Boulder, indicate that 55% of our workforce will need to have a postsecondary credential by 2025 in order to be second to no other nation. This will require 16 million more postsecondary credentials than we are currently producing, one million more each year for the next 16 years.

Slide Nine

The title of this session implies there is a great divide, with policy makers on one side and educators on the other.

I have a different view. To quote the great Pogo, "We have met the enemy, and he is us." The sources of resistance to liberal education are deeply embedded in American society and in American academic culture. This goes back a long way.

Slide Ten

In his 1787 *Notes on the State of Virginia* Jefferson advocated three years of free universal Education. He believed democracy required voters who could read, and he concluded three years of universal education are essential for democracy to survive.

But Jefferson also believed in a natural meritocracy. So after three years, he proposed that the "boy of best genius" in each local school should be sent to one of twenty grammar schools for one or two more years of free education. Then the "best genius" in each grammar school would be given six more years of free education. Through this means, Jefferson wrote, "twenty of the best geniuses will be raked from the rubbish annually..." Finally the best ten of these twenty students would be given a three years scholarship to William and Mary.

Jefferson's story illustrates the original purpose, and still dominant cultural value in American higher education, the education of elites. Things have changed, but sorting and selecting the best and the brightest still gets more attention than building the capacity of every student.

Too many people (academics and non-academics alike) have a Charles Murray idea about liberal education: only the top 10% or 20% of the ability distribution can become liberally educated and are worth the trouble. The other 80% need to work with their hands. Of course, we normally think other people or their children are in the 80% who are not capable or "worth it."

Slide Eleven

So **who** must become better educated? This is obvious: those who currently are less-well educated – the poor, the children of the less-well educated, those who for any reason (poverty, race, ethnicity, or recent immigration to the United States) tend not to participate and thrive in postsecondary education.

The college participation rate is high for students from high socio-economic status families, regardless of academic ability and preparation. The college participation rate is substantially lower for students from low socio-economic status families, even when they are high in academic ability and preparation. *Source: Access Denied*, Department of Education, February 2001 (see Figure 1).

Slide Twelve

The college graduation rate is even more dramatically influenced by socio-economic status. This chart from Tony Carnevale's recent article in *Liberal Education* analyses data from the National Education Longitudinal Study to examine the graduation rate at a BA or higher by SES and SAT score. Low SES students at every level of academic ability obtain the baccalaureate degree at a substantially lower rate than students with higher SES and comparable SAT scores. ("A Real Analysis of *Real Education*," Anthony P. Carnevale, *Liberal Education*, Fall, 2008, pp. 54-61.)

The most dramatic and worrisome differences are for average students, those with an SAT score between 800 and 1200, roughly plus or minus one standard deviation from the average of 1000. Roughly 60% of high SES students in the average ability group obtain a BA or higher degree. About 40% of students in the second quartile of SES with average academic ability obtain a BA or higher, and fewer than 20% of average ability students in the lowest quartile of SES obtain a BA or better.

The evidence is pretty clear that, whatever our commitment to meritocracy, we have imperfectly achieved it. It is quite clear that socio-economic status is more powerful than academic ability in determining who goes to college and who eventually achieves a baccalaureate degree. We have to be deadly serious about student learning, and we need to improve the knowledge and skills of *all* students, the gifted, the average, and the academically challenged.

Unlike Jefferson's 18th century, the mission of education in a 21st century democratic society, should be to increase knowledge and intellectual capacity all across the ability distribution, not just for the few who are most gifted intellectually, economically, or socially.

While the ability distribution is real, the capacity of people to learn (especially those of average ability) has never come close to being exhausted. Some may not yet value learning (sadly some fear it), but many simply lack exposure and meaningful opportunities.

I used to say the challenge facing higher education is to "double the degree production of the 1960's with no compromise on quality." I've concluded I should follow Carol Schneider's lead. Our challenge is to "double the degree production of the 1960's with higher expectations and greater attainment of knowledge and skill by the average student."

As one obvious and immediate step in this direction, higher education leaders should support ambitious learning goals in elementary and secondary education. Academic leaders in higher education should strongly support the efforts of governors and chief state school officers to adopt rigorous Common Core Standards in language arts and mathematics for preparing students to be college and workforce ready.

Slide Thirteen

Does the academic community have the power to make liberal education a social priority? The answer is yes, if we have the will and determination to do so. What will it take?

A. Establish a coherent, concrete vision of liberal education across institutions – LEAP will serve this purpose nicely

Liberal education needs to be central to the mission of individual institutions, but this is not enough. A common vision of liberal education, with accessible evidence of attainment, is needed across the higher education community. When I suggest a “common vision,” I do not mean to imply a uniform one. The absence of debate is antithetical to the ideal of liberal education. But the academic community has implicit standards for a liberal education; they must become more explicit if we expect widespread support for the liberal arts.

Only about a quarter of today’s students start and end their college education in a single institution. What about the others? What about liberal education for the majority of students whose education spans several institutions, different sectors, and multiple changes in programs and majors? And what forms of liberal education are most appropriate for students whose studies are already intertwined with jobs and families?

Our students would benefit, and the credibility of higher education would benefit, if we forge a consensus on the content of a liberal education and a baccalaureate degree.

B. End casual, undisciplined approaches to setting learning goals and assembling evidence of attainment for the most important objectives of education

It will be easier to establish liberal education as a broadly accepted social priority when the academy: a) is more successful in articulating learning objectives clearly; and b) achieves better understanding of how learning occurs along with better evidence that it occurs. These drivers of assessment and accountability – clear learning goals and disciplined assessment of achievement – can become a bridge to help non-academic people understand and embrace the ideals of liberal education.

C. Diminish those aspects of academic culture and language that lead the uninitiated to question the relevance of learning to life

Higher education must get over the idea that our most valuable contributions are mysterious, ineffable. This is not to deny complexity and depth, but embrace the challenge of making it accessible to students.

D. Address public fears that the cost of widespread liberal education is beyond our means by developing and employing methods of increasing productivity in teaching and learning

The policy community will not support liberal education if the academic community doesn’t believe in it; nor will they support it if the academic community insists it can be delivered to the many only at an exorbitant cost. This is a tough challenge, but unless cost-effectiveness and widespread availability are part of the agenda for liberal education, the mountain may indeed turn into a chasm.

Let me use this point to circle back to the earlier point about learning goals and standards for high school students. The aspiration for a liberally educated society cannot be achieved if liberal

education is postponed until postsecondary education. Improving preparation for college as well as improving teaching and learning in college are essential.

The political, environmental, and social challenges of the world are becoming increasingly complex and some argue unmanageable. A serious problem is the shortage of people with the knowledge and capacity to understand complexity and appreciate diversity. Many, perhaps all of us in the room understand the apprehension of complexity and appreciation of diversity are at the core of the liberal arts. But some consider the celebration of diversity and complexity a political or ideological stance. Effective educators will need to cultivate genuine humility about our deepest convictions in order to bridge that divide.

Let me conclude on a hopeful note. Much of the resistance we face, in and outside of the policy environment, reflects the high, unrealized ideals of liberal education and our current place in history. We are still very much at the beginning stages of a liberally educated society, particularly in the global context. Economically we struggle to find the necessary financial resources, a challenge that is acute just now and will continue to grow over time. And intellectually, we need only look back to the debates of our predecessors or ahead to the increasingly rapid development of technology to realize that ours will not be the final answer to the questions of what liberal education is and should be and how it can be achieved. So there is the mountain; let us continue climbing.