

High School for All

A number of years ago I wrote a [short essay](#), which ultimately found its way to an online publication about education, which argued that the view that everyone should aspire to 'go to college' was mistaken and harmful, principally to a large portion of the students to whom that advice is given. I don't wish to rehearse that argument in its entirety here but, briefly, the principal point I made there was that the economic argument made in favor of seeking a bachelor's degree was premised on a retrospective view of its value which had eroded because of the declining quality of degrees being conferred and which, to the extent that it persisted, was premised more on the decreasing economic value of a secondary school education rather than its continuing inherent worth. Over the past few years, several extensions or elaborations of this discussion have suggested themselves to me arising from the following considerations, in no particular order of precedence. First, the proliferation of high school graduates whose aim is to obtain a bachelor's degree has led to an erosion of standards at both secondary schools and, concomitantly, at colleges and universities, particularly those regional institutions at the third or fourth tier of bachelor's degree granting universities. Second, and relatedly, small colleges, even community colleges, at the same time that the level of academic accomplishment of their admitted students has been in gradual decline, have been in an ongoing 'accreditation arms race' in which they have transitioned to faculties consisting to ever greater degree of Ph.D.'s in subject matter which has led in turn to increasing discord between the motivations and interests of students and faculty members. Or, more succinctly, students come to colleges increasingly in need of remedial and developmental instruction to cover the vast lacunae in basic skills left by their secondary school educations and are instructed by faculty with dramatically different personal academic experiences and expectations. And finally, across the board at both smaller public and private four-year colleges at the lower echelons of higher education, institutional funding has come to depend to a very large extent on tuition dollars rather than, in the first instance, state support or, in the second, secure endowments. This development has had a pernicious influence on the behavior of college administrators, faculty and students. My motivation in revisiting the subject of education now is, in part, the calls amongst some portion of the political class for universal access to free college education, a suggestion which, whereas perhaps motivated by sympathetic and well-meaning intentions, I regard as misguided under the present circumstances.

In what follows I intend to discuss these points together and in their implications for education, secondary and post-secondary, in the United States. Aside from the

role that fundamental literacy and numeracy play in these discussions, I will not discuss curricular matters. That is to say that, although it seems fair to say that general education curriculum in, for example, mathematics, the discipline with which I am most familiar, cries out for substantial reform (yet again) at the level of college instruction, that is a matter which is secondary to the ones I will address here: how funding is effected and standards are enforced (or not) at secondary schools and, again, lower echelon bachelor's degree granting institutions in the US and the consequences of the choices made, consciously or unconsciously, in those policy domains. I hope subsequently to come to terms with issues of curricular choice in mathematics education at the college level for the general population of students (as opposed to those who study mathematics specifically).

As an outgrowth of the GI Bill at the end of the Second World War, large numbers of Americans who hitherto would not have had access to post-secondary education were able to pursue and obtain bachelor's degrees in the 1950's. For many of these folks, almost exclusively men, having a four-year college degree opened a path to substantially greater economic opportunity, a life in the 'middle class'. The inference drawn at the societal and political level was straightforward and was, seemingly at least, supported by experience and data. Those who had completed a bachelor's degree were relatively advantaged economically over those who had not and, consequently, students should be encouraged to 'go to college', more or less across the board, and state governments should dramatically expand the opportunities for them to do so by both establishing more state colleges and universities and expanding the enrollments of those that already existed. This impulse to expand the availability of and access to higher education received its most florid expression in the 1960's in California with the rapid expansion of all three elements of its public system of post-secondary education.

As both cause and effect of this burgeoning of the role of four-year college education in the public imagination in the US, there was a concomitant diminution in the perceived value of a completed secondary education. In, say 1920, in the US a person who had been graduated from high school was generally regarded as a reasonably well-educated human being and, in fact, could reliably be assumed to be competent to read the popular press with understanding, write generally grammatically correct English and perform accurate arithmetic. By the end of the 1970's in the US it was commonplace for people generally to refer to those who had not completed a college degree as having '*just* a high school diploma'. This transition in the perception of the components and tiers of the educational hierarchy has led to a decay in the pedagogical efficacy of institutions

at all levels, a decay which has been accelerated, ironically, by decreased public willingness to expend resources to support public education, particularly support for institutions which serve the poor. As high school students and their parents have come to believe in the economic necessity of obtaining a four-year college degree high schools have responded by attenuating actual, if not the nominal, rigor of high school education so that being denied high school graduation, in the presence of demonstrably inadequate performance has become a rarity. I know this anecdotally from having observed at close range the behavior of my stepson in high school who clearly had the attitude, if not explicitly articulated, that high school did not really matter and that graduation and subsequent college admission were inevitabilities. As a consequence, despite the fact that he was of at least modest intelligence, he managed to master neither fundamental arithmetic nor the grammar of the English language before being ‘successfully’ graduated from high school and, in an act of incredible cynicism on its part, was subsequently admitted as a regular student at South Dakota State University notwithstanding his $2 + \epsilon$ grade point average. In fact, this perception of his was correct; high school faculty and administrators have neither the resources nor the will, presumably in part because of their abysmal pay, to undertake the fight required to retain students who haven’t sufficiently mastered the material at each grade level. And of course, at the other end of this educational conveyor belt, are small public college administrators who rely on tuition dollars for the largest segment of their institutional funding. At Black Hills State University, where I worked in the years 1998-2012, as of 2012, 85% of the institutional budget came from tuition dollars. So throughout the system, at both the secondary and post-secondary level, there is no appetite on the part of administrators to increase the rigor of secondary school education. To the contrary, every significant political and economic incentive in the system motivates the attenuation of standards so that supply of student bodies move along. uninterruptedly.

From the point of view of faculty, developments at smaller, middling and lower level four-year colleges (many of which have gratuitously promoted themselves to ‘university’ status) this shift in received wisdom concerning the roles and inherent values of secondary and post-secondary education has had a number of less than salutary effects. The proportion of admitted students who arrive in need of remediation of deficiencies in fundamental skills in mathematics and English has, of course, risen so that the proportion of courses offered at a level below what might once been interpreted as ‘college work’ has increased commensurately. In states, such as South Dakota and Montana, the two with which I am most familiar, in

which there is no widely available access to community colleges, this effect has been most profound at the step-children institutions in their systems of public universities (again, construing that term very liberally). At Black Hills State University, for example, where I worked for fourteen years, roughly 60% of the student contact hours in any given semester were with students in courses belonging to the secondary school curriculum (or below), more still if one were to use the definition of that curriculum employed by people in other industrialized countries. Because state funding at such institutions has not kept pace with increases in enrollment (although recently enrollment has begun falling for various reasons), this has led to increasing class sizes and the greater use of adjunct faculty who are employed in non-permanent positions without health and retirement benefits. For permanent, tenured or tenure-track faculty, the result has been a shift in the workload away from courses at the upper division of their academic discipline towards general education and, to a lesser extent, remedial and developmental courses. It is generally not the case that people pursue Ph.D.'s in an academic discipline with the goal of teaching courses in that discipline from the secondary curriculum so there is large dissonance between the professional life that faculty at such institutions actually have and that which they might have imagined themselves leading when they were in graduate school. Full-time faculty might try to insulate themselves from this effect in various ways depending upon discipline, institution and personal temperament but in net, the result is not good as it leaves the core faculty alienated to some degree from the educational endeavors and aspirations of the bulk of the students at the institution at which they work.

For the majority of faculty, contrary to a notion widespread in certain quarters of the public, this disaffection between students and faculty does not lead to widespread gold-bricking or lack of diligent attention on the part of the latter. For the most part, despite sometimes yawning gaps between what they think it reasonable to ask of students, what they indeed asked themselves as undergraduate students, and what the students themselves are willing and/or able to muster in terms of effort, faculty, even or perhaps especially poorly-paid part-time and adjunct faculty, apply themselves with a will to the tasks of education. Of course, there are exceptions to this who openly, but more often covertly, use tenured positions as a sort of long-term demi-vacation, working twenty hours a week. My ex-girlfriend of almost eleven years in South Dakota, who goes by the name of Ellen Buckwalter Devine (but whose real name is **Peggy Anne Buckwalter**) for instance, quietly found a way perpetually to exert the minimum amount of effort consistent with discharging her obligations and maintaining a reputation as a solid

academic citizen. It helped her maintain this opaque screen of assiduousness that she was the only full-time faculty member teaching a foreign language. She had a Ph. D. in applied linguistics (a dissertation concerning Spanish language acquisition involving a handfull of subjects) so the institution presumably thought that she would be interested in teaching language pedagogy courses but she quickly found a way to fob that responsibility off on adjunct faculty, likewise the duty of advising the Spanish Club, and any irritating committee assignment that she could get someone else to assume for her. In the upper division courses she taught, she would regularly not grade final exams since she already 'knew' what grades the students should receive, and only mark up papers *ex post facto*, in a manner consistent with the grade she had already assigned, if a student asked about his or her grade. But, as noted, this behavior was exceptional and enabled by the fact that her activities went largely unmonitored as she was the sole 'expert' in the area of foreign language instruction to whose judgement both administrative superiors and academic colleagues regularly deferred. Although having said that, I recall that she reported a similarly 'efficient' approach to grading on the part of the fellow who had the dubious honor of being her boyfriend immediately before me, an English instructor. He would carefully read the first paragraph of submitted essays, decide a grade, and then skim through the rest of the paper looking for sentences to decorate with praise or gentle correction. He was very popular with students.

Because institutions of ilk of Black Hills State have become creatures the funding of which is largely driven by enrolling and retaining students, over time the profile of their administrative leadership (again, take that phrase with a less than literal interpretation) has evolved away from that of a genuine academic deeply interested in his or her discipline and towards a person frequently referred to these days as a 'professional manager'. When I arrived, for instance, at Black Hills State in 1998 both the president and academic vice president, had genuine academic qualifications and had had reasonable academic careers, the former an historian and the latter a mathematician. When I left, finally, in 2012, both those roles, the academic vice-president now styled 'provost' in an apparent lipstick-on-pig maneuver designed to obfuscate the general institutional lack of academic seriousness, had Ed.D.'s in something akin to 'higher education'. An Ed.D. is a fine degree - for someone who studies pedagogy (think Neil Postman). As a vehicle to become an educational 'manager' it deserves the same sort of contempt as does a law degree obtained purely as means of pursuing a political career. Actually more. In any event, with this conversion of administration from academics with genuine interest in study to a caste of people who aspired, unbelievably enough, to hold

administrative positions at academically retrograde institutions in the American hinterlands came a singular focus on 'enrollment management' and 'retention' involving various contortions to get students onto campus, with their tuition dollars, and hang onto them - for dear life - once they were there. One particularly regrettable instance of such was a push towards the end of my years at the institution to admit students with severe intellectual and emotional disabilities, who not coincidentally qualified to have tuition paid via federal grants. The result, naturally enough, was frustration on all sides, both in and outside of the classroom.

Under increasing pressure from administrators in both indirect and direct ways to make certain that students are 'successful', and thus 'retained' until they receive a degree, over the course of time many faculty have adopted a policy of accommodation, reasoning that they, by themselves, cannot stem the tide of lowering standards. This attitude is fostered by the role that student evaluations of teaching, generally administered in at least two courses for each instructor each term, play in decisions concerning faculty promotions and pay, leading some to participate in a tacit agreement with the students which has been called by one writer 'The faculty-student non-aggression pact': I won't harm you in grading your work if you won't harm me when you evaluate my teaching. It is well-documented that instructors who are regularly more lenient in grading receive generally more positive student reviews. In other words, teaching in these settings has come to a significant degree to resemble work in a customer service role. The students (or parents) have paid their money, a significant pile generally, and they expect to walk away with the goods, satisfactorily delivered, no guff. This attitude persists to some degree at post-secondary institutions of all ranks but it more pronounced at those with minimal genuine scholarly pretensions at which, no matter what sort of window dressing is presented to create a contradicting image, teaching is the sole important aspect of the work. In any case, despite this effort to massage criteria so that fewer students received substandard grades and thus leave, taking their tuition dollars with them, the four-year graduation rates at small regional universities is generally abysmal. At Black Hills State, where I worked for fourteen years, the *six year* rate of progression to degree was roughly 40%. This, of course, reflects the fact that so many students entered with academic deficiencies requiring remediation. Harsh though it is to say, you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. Of those who do advance to graduation, I would venture to say that an alarmingly high percentage do so without a reasonable grasp of literacy in their own tongue or basic quantitative reasoning skills.

What to do about this state of affairs? That brings me back to the title of this

essay, 'High School for All'. As much as I believe that cost should not impede any *well-qualified* student from receiving post-secondary education, to as great an extent as she or he can profit by, ultimately we need to address our problems at, or at least closer to, the root. In international comparative educational studies, disparities between the performance of students in the US and other 'advanced industrialized countries' begin to become significant, educationally and statistically, beginning in grades 7 and 8 and continue to widen from that point on. That suggests that we might begin our efforts at improving educational outcomes not by a blanket, largely meaningless pledge to make college affordable for everyone but by making certain that all pupils in the US are ensured access to a secondary education of quality.

What would that actually entail? A number of things, most of which are very unlikely to occur. For example, the first and most basic step is to provide adequate and equitable funding for education across all jurisdictions in a manner so that students from impoverished backgrounds have access to an education of a quality equal to that available to students from households of means. Obviously this would require a dramatic change in the mechanism through which elementary and secondary education are funded in this country. That change, given that the instruments of political power through which such a change might be achieved lie generally in the hands of those least interested in seeing it occur, will be well nigh unto impossible to effect. Further, though, in order to achieve something like genuine equivalence in educational opportunity, we'd need to attempt at least to ameliorate the pernicious effects of poor nutrition and inadequate housing on the academic efforts of students from low-income households. With a moment's reflection, one perceives both the necessity of this step if we truly wish to characterize ours as a society of equal opportunity - and how very unlikely it is that ever will be taken.

Still, as long as we're dreaming, what else needs to be done to make secondary education what it ought be? Secondary school teachers should be required to have a legitimate degree in the subject matter that they undertake to teach, preferably a master's degree in that discipline, followed by a separate year of training in pedagogy. In many states currently, pedagogy and subject matter are crammed together into a four-year 'secondary education degree' to the detriment of both pedagogical and subject matter knowledge. Of course, commensurate with this enhancement of teacher qualifications, secondary school teachers should be well-paid professionals, not given the execrable salaries and working conditions to which many are now subjected.

Since for most secondary school students education is a vehicle through which to acquire the skills for earning a living, they should be given meaningful access to vocational training while still in school. American corporations which regularly bemoan the lack of appropriate skill in the 'work force', can support this endeavor by cooperating in providing such training opportunities - and supporting a tax structure which provides sufficient resources for basic education for all rather than rewarding the wealthy for having and holding assets. A secondary school system which emphasizes the importance of students' exploring and discovering their talents in view of their subsequent working life, will ultimately benefit all students and all echelons of education by bringing an end to the current practice of aiming to send all students, qualified or not, to college simply out of absence of other useful options.

Of course, most of what I've proposed would be fervently resisted not only by the wealthy who would, in some sense, be called upon to collaborate in the dismantling of their own advantages, but my most elements of the current educational-industrial complex for whom the current system functions perfectly well in maintaining their authority and cloaking their incompetence. If even small elements of it were to come to pass, though, it would clear the way for a return to a circumstance in which reasonable adherence to standards could be maintained in high schools and a high school diploma would again signify admirable academic accomplishment. That, too, will be a painful adjustment for many American students, and their parents, who have come to see every mediocre effort as worthy subject of fawning praise. Sadly, though, nothing of genuine worth is ever accomplished without some struggle.