

College-for-all vs. career education? Moving beyond a false debate

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At New Orleans charter schools, even students in the primary grades sometimes start the day with rousing chants professing their commitment to college. “This is the way, hey!/ We start the day, hey!/ We get the knowledge, hey!/To go to college!” kids shout. During several years writing about the remaking of the school system since Hurricane Katrina, I have heard high school teachers remind students to wash their hands before leaving the restroom because otherwise they might get sick, which might cause them to miss class, which would leave them less prepared for college. College flags and banners coat the walls and ceilings of schools across the city. College talk infuses the lessons of even the youngest learners. College trips expose older kids to campuses around the country.

While particularly strong in New Orleans, the “college-for-all” movement has swept the nation over the past decade, with education reformers in different cities embracing the notion that sending more low-income students to and through college should be America’s primary antipoverty strategy. In his first address to a joint session of Congress, President Barack Obama echoed that theme when he asked every American to pledge to attend at least one year of college. “We will provide the support necessary for you to complete college and meet a new goal: By 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world.”

At schools that have embraced the college-for-all aspiration, career and technical education is seen as being as outdated as chalkboards and cursive handwriting. Instead, the (mostly poor and mostly minority) students are endlessly drilled and prepped in the core humanities and sciences—lessons their (mostly middle- or upper-income and mostly white) teachers hope will enable the teenagers to rack up high scores on the ACT, SAT, and Advanced Placement exams and go on to attend the four-year college of their dreams (although it’s not always clear whose dreams we’re talking about). On the surface, the tension between college-for-all and career and technical education pits egalitarianism against pragmatism. What could be more egalitarian, after all, than sending the nation’s most disadvantaged secondary students off to the vaunted halls of institutions once reserved for the most privileged? Only eight percent of low-income children in America earn a bachelor’s degree by their mid-twenties, compared to more than 80 percent of students from the top income quartile.



Students study at Akili Academy, one of dozens of charter schools in New Orleans. (Photo: Sarah Garland)

Yet what could be more pragmatic than acknowledging that in cities where more than half of students fail tests of basic academic skills, imposing purely academic aspirations might be a fool’s errand? Some studies have shown that only about one-third of low-income students who start college earn bachelor’s degrees by their mid-twenties; the large majority who drop out are left, in many cases, with thousands of dollars in debt. At some institutions, including the historically black Southern University at New Orleans, the graduation rate is less than 10 percent.

Understanding grassroots realities

The neat dichotomy between egalitarianism and pragmatism breaks down when we consider the players and grassroots realities, however. The desire to send impoverished students to the best four-year colleges undoubtedly stems from worthy motives. In New Orleans, only about five percent of African-American public school children graduated from college in the years before Hurricane Katrina—a statistic that everyone with common sense and a

conscience would agree needs to change. But while the reformers' big-picture goal of sending the other 95 percent to and through college might be egalitarian in theory, the means to that end are often quite paternalistic.

In their efforts to set poor children of color on the path to college, the idealistic young educators attempt to inculcate middle-class aspirations in their students through a form of body and mind control: instructing them in everything from how to take notes to how to sit, talk, walk, and move; embracing the goals of "re-acculturating" and "re-calibrating" them; and calling them "scholars," in honor of the new pursuit. One veteran principal refers to it as "lockstepping." In a not atypical scene inside a New Orleans charter school, a kindergarten teacher told her young charges, "We have a lot to do this year—a lot if we want to go to the first grade. The first graders already have read this book and moved on to other books. I know all of you want to go to first grade because all of you want to go to college. But you need to show discipline over your bodies to do that."

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Many parents (and even some "scholars") welcome this structure and the intense focus on college. But some would like to see the new charters incorporate more trade and technical training in addition to their heavy college-prep emphasis. And others see a disconnect between the reformers' goals and their methods. New Orleans grandfather Ronald McCoy shook his head during a 2010 interview with NPR when he thought about some college-prep charter schools that force their students to walk a straight line—marked out with tape—in the hallway between classes. "This walking the line?" he said. "I have been incarcerated, and that's where I learned about walking behind those lines and staying on the right-hand side of the wall."

Applying the college-for-all ethos in a top-down fashion in low-income communities of color creates the risk of being more imperialistic than egalitarian. But emphasizing career and technical education can do another kind of harm, simply because of the dismal state of many programs. "The idea that career and technical education is high quality and somehow rooted in the real world is just bunk," says Kati Haycock, president of the Education Trust, a Washington, D.C., nonprofit organization that works to improve student academic achievement.

Even advocates of career and technical education acknowledge that the programs are often divorced from economic and industry needs. Many of them were designed not out of a desire to prepare students for high-wage jobs in growing technical fields, but on the basis of classist, racist assumptions that low-income students and children of color cannot learn at high levels. To the extent that these programs fill an economic need, it's to create a permanent underclass of workers destined for minimum-wage jobs. In New Orleans, before Katrina, that meant the schools produced an endless supply of graduates to serve as housekeepers and dishwashers working for less than \$20,000 a year in the city's tourist-based economy, but very few who could repair air conditioning units, a job that pays more than twice as much.

The origins of college-for-all

A confluence of forces has fueled the college-for-all push of the last couple of decades. Apart from the well-publicized hollowing out of the economy, a raft of reports have shown the differential benefits of college and graduate school education in terms of earnings, job stability, and health. In 2010, for instance, the median wage for a male high school graduate between the ages of 25 and 34 was \$32,800, compared to \$49,800 for one with a bachelor's degree.

At the same time, the standards movement—with its emphasis on disaggregated data, high-stakes testing, and school accountability—exposed huge failures in the schooling of low-income and minority children. "This very good idea that all kids need a strong academic underpinning morphed into the idea that all kids need to be prepared to attend a four-year college," says Robert Schwartz, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. He doesn't think the two ideas are necessarily the same.

"We have a class snobism that the only jobs that matter are the jobs we do: white-collar jobs in offices." *Robert Schwartz, professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education*

The 1990s and 2000s also saw the rapid growth of programs such as Teach For America, which sends recent graduates of elite colleges into poor communities in New Orleans and other places for missionary-style stints. TFA

members and recent alums founded several of the charter schools and charter networks, such as KIPP (the Knowledge Is Power Program), that dominate in post-Katrina New Orleans and are the most strident, best-known backers of the college-for-all—or at least college for far *more*—movement.

Some prominent educators have pushed back against the movement in the last two years, citing its lack of pragmatism. In 2011, for instance, Schwartz coauthored an influential paper, *Pathways to Prosperity*, which reported burgeoning demand for “middle-skill” workers, including electricians, construction managers, and dental hygienists. The report focused on fields where the average wage is above \$50,000 (\$53,030 for electricians, \$70,700 for dental hygienists, and \$90,960 for construction managers, according to 2012 figures from the Bureau of Labor Statistics); workers in other traditional vocational fields, including health aides and short-order cooks, make far less.

The “middle-skill” fields described in the report typically require an associate’s degree or occupational certificate, but not a four-year bachelor’s degree. “The ‘college-for-all’ rhetoric . . . needs to be significantly broadened to become a ‘post high-school credential for all,’” Schwartz and his colleagues argued.

The Harvard report stressed that schools and officials should not downplay efforts to improve traditional academic instruction. But it concluded that secondary school career training should be significantly upgraded and expanded by introducing more opportunities for work experience, extensive employer involvement in shaping programs, and enhanced hands-on (as opposed to classroom-based) learning.

Earlier this year, the Brookings Institution published a report that dissected the college payoff by school selectivity, major, and occupation. “While the average return to obtaining a college degree is clearly positive, we emphasize that it is not universally so,” the authors wrote. They cited the low, or negative, “return on investment” for less selective, yet pricey, private universities and for majors such as art and psychology. “By telling all young people that they should go to college no matter what, we are actually doing some of them a disservice.”

Many of the most thoughtful backers of college-for-all and expanded career education agree on more than they disagree on: They all hope to boost the percentage of Americans with some form of postsecondary degree or training and thereby increase social mobility. And they all believe that the high school curriculum could be improved. But they part ways on the best means to their shared ends.

“If we’re talking about earning enough to support a family, the smartest choice is a four-year degree,” Haycock says. “It is the only sure route out of poverty.”

Schwartz maintains that there needs to be more emphasis on alternate pathways to well-paying jobs. “We have a class snobbism that the only jobs that matter are the jobs we do: white-collar jobs in offices.”

The best way to address this divergence is not to give up on college-for-all, or on expanded career and technical education. We need to look at the debate in a different way, incorporating individual experience as well as data, and humanistic as well as economic perspectives. Using this lens, we can come to a more nuanced understanding of how to make our education system both more pragmatic and more egalitarian.

Too much focus on elites

As with most social issues in America, the debate over college-for-all and career education has taken place mostly at an elite level, with little understanding of the desires and needs of low-income students and their parents. During several years of close observation of New Orleans charter schools, I saw how hard it is to prescribe a set of educational aspirations to a group of people, no matter how convincing the data and experts might be.

Two teenage students I interviewed provided a case in point. Both were poor, smart, creative, and intense, but that’s where the similarities ended. Brice was talkative, clever, mischievous, and, despite his kindness and generosity, constantly in trouble. One of his teachers described him this way: “Brice’s mouth is his weapon. But if you don’t understand Brice, you would think his weapon is more than his mouth.”

By contrast, Anthony (whose name has been changed) was soft spoken and reserved, and avoided conflict at all costs. Yet he occasionally burst forth with statements that revealed how much he saw and knew, such as his description of the topics covered in an elective philosophy class: "How come people come in different races and what's the difference? Why is everything this way? How do we know what's ethically right or wrong? Who are we? Why do we speak to each other and why do we have five fingers and five toes? How can we make the things we make? How do we know what matter is, and why can we feel things?"

Anthony, whose mother scraped by as a hotel housekeeper, desperately wanted to go to college, while Brice preferred the military. (He only somewhat facetiously declared that guns and violence were what he knew.) But in a twist of fate, Brice enrolled in a KIPP high school whose principal endlessly recited the school's mantra: "One thousand first-generation college graduates by 2022." Meanwhile, Anthony attended a long-struggling and less ambitious non-charter New Orleans high school where, in 2010, the year before he enrolled, only 14 of 44 graduating seniors continued on to college. Among those 14 graduates, 10 needed to take remedial courses and the average ACT score was 13.9. (The ACT is scored on a scale of 1 to 36, with a national average of about 21.) Anthony earned a 12 when he took the test in the spring of his junior year.

The education system failed Anthony and Brice in different ways. Anthony suffered from a failure of training: He had more than enough desire and ambition, but his schools did not provide him with the skills and tools to make college graduation an easy (or even likely) prospect. Brice, on the other hand, suffered from a failure of imagination: He attended a school hell-bent on giving him the skills and tools he needed to thrive in college. Yet he retained a limited view of his own potential in spite of all the college banners, slogans, chants, and ambitions that surrounded him.

Anthony graduated from high school in the spring of 2012 and entered Southeastern Louisiana University at the start of 2013, where he struggled academically during his first semester but remained determined to persist. Brice was arrested for second-degree attempted murder during the spring of his freshman year at KIPP. He spent more than a year in jail before his lawyer negotiated a plea deal during the summer of 2012. Brice has not returned to a traditional high school, although he hopes to earn a GED.

Most of the new college-for-all charter schools in New Orleans are just graduating their first cohorts of students, so only time will tell if they succeed in their mission. (A national study of KIPP's earliest graduates found that 33 percent had received a degree from a four-year college within 10 years—four times the national rate for students with similar backgrounds, yet a far cry from the organization's stated goal of 75 percent.) But it struck me as sadly ironic that a restructured school system so focused on getting students through college could fail so utterly to give both Brice and Anthony what they most needed to get there.

Stop treating academic and vocational education as 'silos'

There are changes we could make to our schools and way of thinking that would help students like Anthony and Brice—changes that would, however, complicate our understanding of what's pragmatic and what's egalitarian.

To more pragmatic ends, we should stop treating academic and vocational education as curricular silos and develop more strategies for boosting college completion rates among low-income students. There's little point in expanding technical education or four-year college matriculation rates if both pathways are, by design or default, bridges to nowhere. And replicable small-scale efforts aimed at shoring up career education and improving college graduation rates already exist.

For instance, nine school districts participating in a California-based initiative called the Linked Learning Alliance agreed to expand their career and technical education courses while also integrating them with academic classes. Students might study both algebra and computer-aided design (a modernized vocational subject) in the same class and no longer choose (or get nudged toward) an early college-prep track or a career track. It was assumed that all students would have access to both a rigorous academic curriculum and work experience, such as an internship or employment at a school-based business. "We are trying to overcome the mindset that career and technical education is 'just shop,'" said Olivine Roberts, the chief academic officer at the Sacramento City Unified School District, one of the participating districts, in an interview with *School Administrator* magazine.

Operating in large cities such as New York and Chicago (as well as New Orleans), the Posse Foundation sends cohorts of 10 low-income children from the same urban community off to elite colleges as a group. The theory is that the students will feel more comfortable, and will be more likely to stay in college, if surrounded with peers who have similar backgrounds and culture. Neither Linked Learning nor Posse is, on its own, a solution to educational or economic inequity in America. But they are both much-needed practical approaches in an area that's been dominated by abstract, and at times ideological, arguments and approaches.

To a more egalitarian end, we should stop viewing low-income children of color as a form of "other" in the debate over secondary and college education, a bias both sides can be guilty of at times. Children growing up in poverty are not incapable of higher-level thinking and learning, as many backers of vocational tracks have explicitly or implicitly maintained for generations. But neither are they empty vessels who need to be filled with mainstream middle-class ambitions and values at super speed. One extreme discredits and undervalues poor children of color through the end it envisions for them (uniformly working-class jobs), the other through the means it employs (a form of cultural indoctrination). Both fail to fully conceive of these children as talented and aspirational in their own right.

Before we redesign our education system to better meet the needs of the most disempowered, we must acknowledge how this idea of otherness has fostered the most simplistic (and least constructive) positions in this debate. In the long run, social policies and programs that deny the overwhelming power of individual agency are destined to fail.