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Beyond High School, Before Baccalaureate:
Meaningful Alternatives to a Four-Year Degree

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COMMENTARY

Untangling the Post-Secondary Education Debate

By Mike Rose

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Preparing all students for some form of postsecondary training or education is a hugely important issue, but I worry that, as is the case with so many education debates, it will devolve into a binary polemic. The predictable result will be a stalemate or a partial and inadequate solution that will not address the web of concerns that underlies this debate or honor the lives of the young people at the heart of it.

As a person who has worked as both a teacher and researcher for many years with students who have not been well served by our schools, I am sympathetic to the push to prepare as many of them as possible for a college degree. Those who advocate an occupational education on strictly economic terms don't fully appreciate the damage tracking has done. And right at the point when college is being encouraged for a wide sweep of our population, we have this policy counterforce recommending occupational training, which is seen by some parents and civil rights groups as an attempt to protect privilege.

Yet it would be foolhardy to dismiss labor-market realities, for many low-income students are in immediate financial need. These students can commit to postsecondary education only if it leads to a decent wage and benefits. Furthermore, the record of postsecondary success is not a good one. Many students leave college without a certificate or degree that can help them in the job market, and, in many cases, they incur significant debt.

There is also the pure and simple fact of human variability. Students of all economic backgrounds are not always drawn to the kinds of activities that make up the traditional academic course of study, no matter how well executed. It is true that better teaching and a more engaging curriculum would make a difference for a percentage of disaffected students—but not all.

In an inner-city community college fashion program I've been studying, I see students with average to poor high school records deeply involved in their work, learning techniques and design principles, solving problems, building a knowledge base. Yet they resist, often with strong emotion, anything smacking of the traditional classroom, including the very structure of the classroom itself. This resistance holds even when the subject (textiles, history of fashion) relates to their interests.

The college-for-all vs. pathways debate is typically focused on structural features of the K-12 curriculum and on economic outcomes with little attention paid to the intellectual and emotional lives of the young people involved: their interests, what has meaning for them, what they want to do with their lives. A beginning student in a community college welding program gave succinct

expression to all this: “I love welding. This is the first time school has meant anything to me.”

But goals, expectations, and what a student imagines for himself or herself are deeply affected by information and experience. For a pathways approach to be effective and not rigidify into tracking, students will need a lot of information about college and careers and multiple opportunities to visit colleges and potential work sites, such as hospitals, courts, and laboratories. The differences in cultural and social capital between my University of California, Los Angeles, students and the students I am interviewing and observing at that inner-city community college are profound and widening as inequality widens in our country. Pathways advocates will have to confront this inequality head on, for it is as important as the construction of curriculum.

The fundamental issue underlying this debate, and one I don’t hear addressed, is the very divide between the academic and vocational course of study. This distinction emerged out of a cluster of troubling beliefs about knowledge, education, and the social order, and these beliefs continue to constrain our educational imagination.

The comprehensive high school and curriculum tracking were an early-20th-century response to the rapid increase of working-class and immigrant children in urban centers; the separate academic, general, and vocational courses of study seemed an efficient way to address the wide-ranging educational needs of this population. But perceptions of ability were made amidst the emergence of IQ testing and a full-blown eugenics movement of the 1920s. So there was much talk about the limited mental capacity of various immigrant and working-class groups and the distinct ways their brains functioned. In contrast to college-bound students (overwhelmingly white and middle- to upper-class) who were “abstract minded,” working-class and immigrant students were “manually minded.” We don’t use these phrases today, but they echo in loose talk about “learning styles,” “kinesthetic learners,” and other terms heard in contemporary educational discourse that reduce and reify cognition.

Sadly, these distinctions about cognition reflect broader social biases about kinds of work (blue collar vs. white-collar, hand vs. brain work) and the intelligence of the people who are labeled by these different occupational categories. Though we are a country built on egalitarian principles, we also hold a number of anti-egalitarian beliefs about cognition, education, and work. And we make weighty, status-laden distinctions between levels of postsecondary education—research university vs. community college—and these distinctions play into the college-occupation debate.

The academic-vocational divide affects both sides of the debate. It limited the practice of vocational education itself. Surveying the history of vocational education, the authors of the 1993 report “Vocational-Technical Education: Major Reforms and Debates, 1917-Present,” from the National Center for Research in Vocational Education, concluded: “[V]ocational teachers emphasized job-specific skills to the almost complete exclusion of theoretical content. One result was that the intellectual development of vocational students tended to be limited at a relatively early age.” No wonder that the mere mention of an “occupational pathway” sparks fears of a return to tracking and a watered-down curriculum.

But the academic-vocational divide also has a negative effect on those advocating a college-for-all approach, for it can blind them to the significant intellectual content of occupations, and the many ways in which occupational study, as John Dewey saw, can give rise to the study of the arts and sciences.

My hope is that keeping the totality of these issues in mind will bring the discussion of postsecondary education close to the complex needs and circumstances of young people as they find their way into the world beyond high school.

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