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The Education Gospel and the Role of Vocationalism in American Education

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The Education Gospel—the idea that formal schooling preparing individuals for employment can resolve all public and private dilemmas—has become dominant in the United States and many other countries. Over the twentieth century, it has led to high schools, community colleges, and universities becoming focused on occupational preparation and also to many other changes in the size and funding of education, the connections between schooling and employment, and the mechanisms of inequality. Moving ahead in the twenty-first century will require understanding the strengths and the limitations of both the Education Gospel and vocationalism.

Defining the Education Gospel

Our country has developed a standard litany of complaints about schooling. We call this ritual of critique and reaffirmation the Education Gospel because, rather than invite questions about its empirical assumptions, it has become an article of faith (Grubb and Lazerson 2004). Starting with a damnation of current schooling, the Gospel also brings glad tidings concerning schooling's potential, in this case the possibility that education reform can lead to economic and social and individual salvation. Like a gospel, it has been accepted by an extraordinary range of report writers, policy makers, reformers, many (but not all) educators, and much of the public. It has also been the subject of constant proselytizing, particularly through its sacred texts: *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983), other national commission reports, state and local reports mimicking national reports, writings

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of prominent academics, and the manifestos of international agencies. Like disciples of religious and secular gospels, its true believers have acted on its rhetoric: they have promoted the practices we call vocationalism, the emphasis of formal schooling on preparation for vocations. These actions have transformed education throughout the past century in response to an earlier version of the Gospel. The Education Gospel, therefore, contains both a critique of current schooling—the “rising tide of mediocrity,” as *A Nation at Risk* described it—and a reassertion of its importance.

The essential vision of the Education Gospel goes something like this: the Knowledge Revolution (or the Information Society or the Communications Revolution) is changing the nature of work, shifting away from occupations rooted in industrial production to occupations associated with knowledge and information. This transformation has both increased the skills required for new occupations and updated the three R's, enhancing the importance of “higher-order” skills, including communications skills, problem solving, and reasoning. Obtaining these skills normally requires formal schooling past the high school level, so that some college—though not necessarily a baccalaureate degree—will be necessary for the jobs of the future, a conclusion that requires College for All (Rosenbaum 2001). Currently, 87 percent of the general public agrees that a college diploma has become as important as a high school diploma used to be, and 77 percent says that getting a college education is more important than it was even 10 years ago (Immerwahr and Foleno 2000). As the National Commission on the High School Senior Year (2001, 1) summarized the new “common sense,” “In the agricultural age, post-secondary education was a pipe dream for most Americans. In the industrial age, it was the birthright of only a few. By the space age, it became common for many. Today, it is just common sense for all.”

Another strand of the Education Gospel maintains that individuals are more

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likely to find their skills becoming obsolete because of the pace of technological change. To keep up with advances in technology and also to change employment as firms innovate, workers must engage in Lifelong Learning. New forms of work organization—especially contingent labor, where employers hire temporary rather than permanent workers to increase the flexibility of hiring as technologies and products change—have exacerbated job changing and reinforced the need for Lifelong Learning. Other forms of work reorganization—including lean production and the elimination of multiple layers of responsibility—require frontline workers to have a greater variety of skills, including personal skills (sometimes called “soft” skills) like independence and initiative. International competition has also increased, and, because no developed country wants to fall into the ranks of underdeveloped countries relying on raw materials and unskilled labor, the need for greater levels of education over the lifespan is even more compelling. Countries may have to work harder just to maintain their standards of living, and individuals need more schooling just to maintain their own earnings. But the good news is that an expanded and reformed education system can meet all these challenges. The Education Gospel, therefore, includes both a conception of economic and social change and a vision of how to respond to that change through education and training alone.

While much of the Gospel’s rhetoric emphasizes national needs, it also incorporates the individual goal of “getting ahead.” Broad access to education, including College for All, is necessary so that each individual has the opportunity to compete for economic position. The Education Gospel thus balances the public purposes of an expansive education system with the private intentions of using education for personal ends. The two are best combined—and the public goal is the noblest—in the effort to make schooling more inclusive and equitable. As James Ketelson, the founder of Project GRAD, a program intended to improve urban schools, described his motives in a project flyer: “Saving inner-city children from academic failure is one of the most critical issues now facing our state and our nation. I got involved because I believe inner-city education has to be solved for the good of all of us. The cost of failure is too high—a devastating waste of human potential and severe economic costs to our country. To remain competitive as a nation, we must reverse the dropout rate and insure our graduates have the skills to compete in an increasingly high-tech world.” In some versions then—though certainly not all—the Education Gospel implies greater equity, justified more by economic logic and fears of international competition than by its moral imperative.

While the Gospel itself is largely rhetorical and normative, it assumes and

Democracy: The Public Schools (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). Lazerson and Grubb have been coauthors for 30 years.

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reinforces a set of educational practices that we have called vocationalism: an educational system whose purposes are dominated by preparation for occupational roles, one where there is sufficient access so that many individuals have a reasonable hope of more schooling, and one that is responsive to external demands—in this case, to demands for the “essential skills employers want” (Carnevale 1990) and the “skills of the twenty-first century.” *Vocationalism* is an awkward but useful term referring not primarily to traditional vocational education but to preparation for vocations—occupations as careers or callings rather than mere jobs, employment that provides personal meaning, economic benefits, continued development over the life course, social status, and connections to the greater society. The German term *Beruf* is closer to our intended meaning, and *Berufsbildung* or the development of all capacities necessary for a *Beruf* is a more comprehensive way to describe the many forms of development necessary for employment in its fullest sense. The English terms for work are not as comprehensive, just as our forms of work preparation are not as varied and carefully codified as the German system is, and so in English the terms *vocations* and *vocationalism* will have to do.

In this country, a vocationalized system of education emerged in fits and starts, beginning with changes in high schools and the establishment of university-based professional schools at the end of the nineteenth century. Its growth accelerated over the course of the twentieth century—the century of vocationalism, the century of professionalization, or (as economists might say) the century of human capital. This has been, we argue, the most substantial transformation in American schooling over the past century, opening the door to enormous growth in enrollments as well as many other changes in the purposes of education, the curricula, the meaning schooling has in our society, the mechanisms of upward mobility, the mechanisms of inequality, conceptions of equity, and a new version of the American Dream. It has taken somewhat different forms in high schools, four-year colleges and universities, community colleges, job-training programs, and adult education—though with enough common features so that we can describe a distinctly American approach to vocationalism.

There are also many international manifestations of the Educational Gospel and of vocationalism. Indeed, we borrowed the language of a gospel from Kwon’s (2001, 3) contention that “the idea of a knowledge-based economy is enthusiastically treated like a gospel among Korean people.” Korea has been calling for an Edutopia, Great Britain searching for “key” or “core” skills, Germany developing *Schlüsselqualifikationem* (key qualifications), the prime minister of Australia rousing his countrymen with *Sleepers, Wake!* (Jones 1984), the European Union promoting the Europe of Knowledge, and the Organization for Economic and Cooperative Development (2001) emphasizing the implications of the Knowledge Revolution and Tertiary Education for All. All over

the globe, countries have discovered the importance of the Knowledge Revolution requiring higher levels and new forms of human capital as ways of competing in the current millennium. Our long-run ambition is to analyze the forms that vocationalism has taken in different countries. Just as there are varieties of capitalism (Hall and Soskice 2001) and varieties of welfare states (Esping-Anderson 1990), there are also various forms of vocationalism, connected to different kinds of capitalism and to different welfare states in ways we do not yet fully understand.

For the moment, however, we confine our analysis to the United States. Paradoxically, although the United States is a relatively young country, the vocational developments in its education systems started much earlier than in most countries—in the middle of the nineteenth century, with substantial developments at both secondary and postsecondary levels occurring around 1900. The developments we document, therefore, have been taking place for at least a century, whereas many other countries have been changing in this regard only in the past several decades—European countries have been trying to expand their education systems over the past 30 years, the Asian Tigers have been improving education as part of their recent economic growth, and various emerging economies in eastern Europe and Asia (including China) have been following their own forms of the Education Gospel to justify expanding education. Potentially, then, we may be able to use our analysis to clarify the issues and dilemmas that many countries face as they transform their educational institutions into more overtly vocational systems.

To be sure, many other historians and academics have written about vocationalism. There have been many histories of high school vocational education, including our own (Lazerson and Grubb 1974) and, most recently, that of Kliebard (1999). Labaraee's (1997) contrast of social efficiency and social mobility with democratic equality captures the public and private dimensions of vocationalism nicely. Vocationalism in higher education has always been called professionalism so as to distinguish it from its low-status cousin in high schools, and the development of professional education has been a staple of higher education histories (see, e.g., Rudolph [1962], with his contrast of different purposes over time) as well as the analysis of professionalism as a particular approach to occupations (see, e.g., Larson 1977). The debate in community colleges regarding their early academic or transfer mission, their occupational mission, and more recently their economic development activities (such as specific training for employers) has been endlessly examined by both partisans and critics of vocational roles (e.g., Brint and Karabel 1989). But the phenomenon of vocationalism is larger than its manifestation in any one level of education, and its effects have been more pervasive than simply adding to the multiple purposes of education. Moreover, debates over vocationalism have often taken the simple positions that Dewey (1938, 17) criticized as

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“Either-Ors, between which [mankind] recognizes no intermediate possibilities.” A large group of supporters, whom we call the Education Coalition or (to take a metaphor too far) the Gospel Choir, has included prospective students and parents seeking upward mobility, educators seeking expansion of their institutions, the business community hoping to reduce training costs, policy makers searching for solutions to economic and social problems, and advocates for equity and for particular groups like women, immigrants, and low-income and minority individuals. In opposition, a less well-organized group of critics has included academic curmudgeons, supporters of civic and moral education, defenders of academic standards, and partisans of the “school of hard knocks” who distrust the formal school to prepare workers. However, a more nuanced discussion of both the Education Gospel and vocationalism—an understanding of the advances they have made over earlier forms of schooling, as well as the dangers they pose for the future—has been much less common.

In this article, then, we review the many consequences of vocationalism before we analyze the problems that it creates. In the final section of this article, we will come to some understanding both of the positive and negative elements of the Education Gospel and of vocationalism as a way of understanding the potential directions for the twenty-first century.

The American Approach to Vocationalism

The most obvious consequence of the Education Gospel has been its role in transforming the purposes of schooling from civic and moral purposes (in grammar schools) or mental discipline and character development for potential leaders (in higher education) to occupational preparation. This process has happened in slightly different ways at different levels of education. Changes in high schools around 1900—the shift from civic to occupational purposes and the creation of different vocational tracks—were particularly influential in changing the conception of why formal schooling is important, even for academic students bound for college. These changes were most obviously responses to the decline of apprenticeships as forms of work preparation, and they reveal a great deal about the disadvantages of work-based preparation over school-based preparation, including the tendency for masters to stint on training in favor of routine production, the difficulty of apprentices gaining access to well-rounded rather than specialized preparation, the inability of apprenticeship mechanisms to keep up with changes in production or to cope with unstable economic conditions, and the equity problems inherent in a system where a father would find apprenticeships for his sons from among his relatives and friends. The master-apprentice relationship, which has been romanticized in recent support of work-based learning like Lave and Wenger

(1991), was often abusive rather than supportive, leading to massive runaways and to some of the early unionizing efforts. Formal schooling had at least the potential for remedying these serious problems and, after a period of experimentation with private forms of training like corporation schools, vocational preparation moved into high schools.

The transformation of universities in this country has been interwoven with conceptions of professionalism. This idea specifically promotes formal schooling as the basis of stature and privilege, justifying high-level occupational preparation even though it suffers from many of the same dilemmas as vocational education. The process of vocationalizing universities has proceeded in fits and starts, starting with the Morrill Act of 1862, which was created “to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life” (cited in Rudolph [1962], 227); continuing with the development of professional schools after 1890; and continuing further in the massive expansion of higher education after 1960, largely in vocational (or professional) majors. The process also differentiated institutions of higher education. In particular, the elite research universities emphasizing the integration of research with postgraduate education became vocational in their own ways, while they still remained selective and incorporated older forms of liberal education in programs of general education. However, the second tier of regional universities, which developed largely from schools of education and agriculture, were much less selective and concentrated on overtly professional majors in business, health professions, engineering and information technology, and many smaller fields (e.g., leisure studies, fashion accessories marketing) that offend defenders of older academic traditions. Probably the clearest measure of vocational purposes is the continued drift toward explicitly occupational majors. While the 1960s, with its idealism and economic expansion, saw a slight fall in occupational majors—from 62 percent in 1959–60 to 58 percent in 1970–71—the proportion went back up to about 65 percent in 1987–88, before declining slightly during the expansionary period of the 1990s (Brint et al. 2002). These figures are probably underestimates since some “academic” majors like psychology and economics are largely vocational; at the beginning of the twenty-first century, therefore, two-thirds to three-quarters of undergraduates are in fields with overtly vocational goals, and the proportions are much higher in regional universities.

In between the high school and the university, the community college represents a newer institutional form, though it partakes of both. From its early emphasis on academic and transfer education, the community college became increasingly dedicated to occupational preparation, particularly in response to a persistent mid-twentieth-century version of the Education Gospel that argued that the second half of the twentieth century would require more technical workers and semiprofessionals; by the 1980s, these views had po-

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sitioned the community college squarely in the middle of the occupational distribution (Brint and Karabel 1989; Dougherty 1994). In community colleges, unlike universities, occupational preparation has taken many flexible forms, including upgrade training for incumbent workers, retraining for workers who need to shift occupations, and remedial training for welfare recipients and the long-term unemployed. Many community colleges have thereby come to serve various occupational purposes as well as continued to provide academic education and various forms of community service.

Vocationalism has also affected other forms of education outside of mainstream schooling. Adult education in this country historically was provided by a large number of private groups, providing an extraordinary array of religious education, cultural education, labor and political education, avocational courses, and study in music and the arts. However, under the pressures of vocationalism, public support for adult education has come to support only those forms of adult education—especially basic academic education and English as a Second Language (ESL) for immigrants—that are necessary for work, making publicly supported adult education a utilitarian enterprise and impoverishing the greater tradition of adult education (Kett 1994). Finally, the United States has experimented, since the 1960s, with short-term job training in a variety of institutions (especially community-based organizations) that are independent of formal schooling and that are funded and regulated by the Department of Labor. These can be interpreted as efforts to develop yet another institutional setting for work preparation, one that is neither work based nor school based but that is lodged in a variety of institutions with varying connections to students (or “clients”) and to employers. However, these forms of short-term job training have been almost universally failures (Grubb 1996; Lafer 2002), partly because they have been confined to the lowest-quality jobs and partly because short job-specific training provides little economic benefit, especially over the long run. The efforts to provide alternatives to school-based preparation have been all but abandoned since the current Workforce Investment Act, enacted in 1998, provides for almost no training.

In the United States, but obviously not in all countries, a corollary of school-based preparation for work has been the weakening of apprenticeships, internships, and other work-based forms of preparation. The collapse of apprenticeships by the end of the nineteenth century and the rise of school-based vocational education in effect allowed employers to withdraw from training their own workers. The exceptions—the provision of firm-based training or firm-subsidized tuition to continuing education—have been relatively uncommon compared to what is available in European countries, and those that do exist have concentrated on upper-level managers and professionals (Lynch 1994). Furthermore, it has proved extraordinarily difficult to resurrect work-

based learning. In the 1970s, the efforts to create experienced-based career education foundered on the unwillingness of employers to come up with high-quality internships. The more recent failure of the School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994—legislation justified by concerns straight out of the Education Gospel about falling productivity and the limits of formal schooling—reflected a ludicrously short timetable (five years), piddling sums of funding, the inability of most schools to move beyond conventional practices like counseling, a lack of educative work placements, and disjunctions between the main conventional curriculum and work-based activities (Hershey et al. 1998; Stull and Sanders 2004). Following the German system, with its use of both school-based and work-based learning, has been a dream of reformers since the early 1900s, but the efforts of these reformers have consistently failed to recognize how much involvement by employers, unions, and government regulation is necessary for apprenticeship mechanisms to function effectively.

With the demise of apprenticeship and the rise of school-based preparation, perhaps the most obvious consequence of vocationalism has been the expansion of formal education over the twentieth century. In 1900, only 6.3 percent of each age group finished high school; this proportion increased to a high of 79.1 percent in 1969, before dropping back to 70.6 percent in 2000. In 1900, only 2.3 percent of those ages 18–24 were in college; by the close of the century, 58 percent of this group attended college—while short of College for All, this nevertheless encompasses the majority. By the year 2000, the community college, nonexistent in 1900, enrolled about 40 percent of all students entering higher education in addition to large numbers of older students attending for upgrade training, retraining, remedial education, or avocational purposes; regional universities, unknown in 1900, had become the modal universities of the late twentieth century. In the United States, no level of schooling (except perhaps early childhood education) has ever expanded unless it has already been vocationalized, in the sense of having both vocational goals and some internal differentiation by vocations; this includes the high school expanding in the 1920s and 1930s, universities expanding in the 1920s and then the 1960s, and the community college booming after 1960. The segments of education dedicated to purely intellectual or moral traditions—the elite liberal arts colleges, a few private religious colleges, a few selective public high schools, and some private high schools dedicated to an older academic tradition—have dwindled in relative importance as vocationalized high schools and enormous professionalized universities have grown up around them. Those who have promoted expanded education for many different reasons, including the loftier goals of general education and equity, owe a substantial debt to vocationalism.

In the American approach, expansion has taken place in comprehensive educational institutions—not, as in many European countries, in vocational

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high schools, technical colleges, or specialized universities. While there remain a few specialized high schools in large cities, a few technical institutes, and some specialized postsecondary organizations in the arts and psychology, overall, institutions in the United States have been comprehensive, especially the expanding institutions like high schools, community colleges, and regional universities. The U.S. preference for comprehensive institutions partly reflects an equity issue, as specialized schooling has consistently been attacked for segregating some students—for example, the “manually minded” in high schools and professional aspirants in colleges—from others. In addition, students have voted with their feet, preferring comprehensive institutions that maximize choice and keep the promise of further education open. Too, vocational institutions have wanted to become comprehensive institutions as a way of reaching for the higher status of academic programs and access to yet further education, leading inevitably to “institutional drift.” Comprehensive institutions have had mixed effects. On the one hand, their academic programs have often overshadowed vocational and professional programs and sometimes degraded the quality of occupational preparation compared to what might be possible in sophisticated technical institutes. On the other hand, they have made it easier to move between academic and vocational programs and to integrate both academic and occupational learning. Whatever their potential liabilities in purely vocational terms, they have become a permanent feature of the American landscape.

And what about the future? In the United States—and, we suspect, in most other countries—several mechanisms reinforce the process of vocationalizing educational institutions as more and more occupations come to require school- or university-based preparation and as students and parents then lobby for entry into education for economic reasons. One reinforcement involves the shift away from the “school of hard knocks” or experience into formal schooling. A particularly vivid example includes various artistic occupations, including visual artists, actors, dancers, musicians, and filmmakers. Traditionally, artists made their way by working on their own, living in garrets, and learning from each other—for example, the Impressionists working in Paris around 1900 or the Abstract Expressionists in New York during the 1950s. In the last two decades, however, most artists in the United States have started by earning a bachelor’s or master’s degree in fine arts from a conventional university or art school, as have increasing numbers of actors, musicians, and dancers. Schools provide access to materials and expensive equipment, to a community of other artists, to the credentials necessary for teaching jobs, and to the academic theorizing (a.k.a. bullshit) necessary for so much conceptual art. And so occupations that once epitomized freedom from formal schooling have become credentialed. In another pattern, many middle-level occupations have striven to develop the status of professionals, with required levels of education

and certification by industry groups; in the United States, these include farmers and foresters, real estate agents, auto mechanics, workers in the hotel and restaurant industry, and even ski guides certified by the American Mountain Guides Association. These efforts extend the logic of professionalism and therefore school-based preparation to many more occupations.

New occupations have evolved in much the same way, proceeding through a cycle that ends up with formal schooling. The occupations of the “new economy” based on computers and electronics began with computer programmers, whose preparation in the 1960s and 1970s was informal: programmers learned by reading manuals and by doing. Gradually, however, programming moved into formal schooling, with baccalaureate programs for programmers, subbaccalaureate programs for those working with applications (e.g., word processing and spreadsheet programs), and graduate programs for those aiming to enter research and development. The cycle of informal preparation being superseded by formal schooling is now being replicated in Web-related occupations. Similarly, in biotechnology, new programs are being developed in community colleges and universities to prepare individuals ranging from researchers to production workers. The reorganization of work also generates new specialties that become distinct occupations with their own educational requirements. Business has created suboccupations with specialized programs, including those for purchasing agents, sales representatives, accountants, and insurance and real estate agents; in medicine, school-based programs have emerged for physicians’ assistants, certified nurse practitioners and nurse’s aides, midwife-practitioners, cardiac technologists, radiological technicians, and physical therapists. The law has spawned paralegals and legal secretaries, engineers have begotten engineering technicians, architects have sired architectural drafting, and accountants now rely on para-accountants, all with distinct educational programs. Of course, talented individuals can still find their way into computer programming or art or culinary occupations without formal credentials; formal schooling is not required, as it is for doctors and lawyers. But in all these occupations formal schooling is increasingly the dominant path of entry.

Another mechanism of reinforcement comes from students seeking to amplify their professional qualifications. Once vocationalism is under way, more schooling becomes increasingly necessary for students as a form of self-defense, particularly if they want access to the best professions. And so we see places in high-status professional schools and four-year colleges oversubscribed, with battles ensuing over access, the validity of standardized entrance tests, and affirmative action. Finally, educational institutions themselves contribute to the pressures for vocationalism, particularly by engaging in competition for additional students. The most typical form of competition is to open new programs as demand develops: almost every suggestion for a new program comes with an assessment of the anticipated job market, and public agencies

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typically ask for demand data before approving new programs in public universities. In addition, education institutions strive for higher status through “institutional drift”—by offering degrees for jobs higher in the occupational hierarchy. In the United States, most public comprehensive universities used to be normal schools preparing teachers; many of them subsequently became comprehensive state colleges serving undergraduates with a few master’s-level programs, and then some of these pressed on to offer the PhD. At the sub-baccalaureate level, regional vocational schools, established in the 1970s to provide secondary vocational training, have adopted adult vocational programs and have thus become technical institutes; these have, in turn, become comprehensive community colleges, and the pressure from community colleges now is to provide baccalaureate degrees. This kind of institutional drift contributes to more and more institutions providing occupational credentials at higher levels.

By the end of the twentieth century, then, the American system of education was thoroughly transformed, with occupational goals adding to (and sometimes displacing) earlier goals; with enormous increases in education levels; and with substantial changes in how parents, students, policy makers, and employers view formal schooling—for better and for worse, as we shall see. Our forecast, therefore, is that the occupational drift of our education system will become even more pronounced in the coming decades, with dangers that we will examine in the final section of this article.

The Conflicts of Vocationalism

Even as vocationalism has succeeded and expanded, it has created a number of problems. The result is that, while it has more than its share of political supporters in the Education Coalition and the Gospel Choir, it remains embattled in various ways. Perhaps the most obvious is that, when new occupational purposes emerge, the older purposes of formal education—civic, moral, intellectual, or ideological in different countries—persist, and defenders of older traditions remain among the most articulate critics. In the United States, where public schooling initially developed with civic and moral goals, many educators and conservatives have reasserted the value of education for citizenship and have argued for the retention of a broad range of subjects (like the humanities) that are unconnected to vocational goals. In higher education, this position has argued for the retention of the liberal arts and general education, and it has sometimes argued against trivial professional fields—leisure studies and fashion accessories marketing, again—in favor of older academic fields. But, particularly where students have real choices and are predominantly motivated by occupational goals, there seems to be a relentless diminution of the older purposes

of schooling. Liberal arts have given way to general education, the notion of a well-rounded program; colleges have substituted communications skills, critical thinking, and other “skills of the twenty-first century” for the traditional liberal arts. The inability to define what general education is has allowed many odd “courses”—for example, band, varsity sports, and a drill team called Strutters—to count toward “gen ed” requirements. In a world of student choice and faculty uncertainty, it seems that anything goes.

A second unavoidable conflict is that the meaning of vocational or professional education is itself ambiguous, and therefore conflicts emerge among the different conceptions of vocationalism. One meaning involves “occupational intentions,” where students and others view the purpose of a school or a university as occupational preparation. This obviously happens in professional schools, but it also occurs when students expect that completing secondary school will gain them entry into a university to gain access to better jobs. Of course, parents, teachers, students, and institutions may disagree about whether a particular school or university is vocational or not, which may lead, for example, to conflicts between instructors promoting intellectual engagement and students viewing schooling in purely instrumental terms. A second meaning depends on whether an institution’s subject matter is directed toward overtly vocational ends—the criterion of “occupational curriculum.” Like occupational intent, this concept at first seems simple: professional programs in universities, community colleges, and technical institutes all have occupational curricula designed to prepare for particular occupations. But here, too, occupational curricula have been contested. Except in narrowly defined job training, differences exist over what curriculum produces the most effective workers—over the appropriate skills to teach, the appropriate mix of academic (or theoretical) versus vocational (or applied) coursework, the balance between school-based learning and work-based learning in internships, and sometimes the best pedagogies for teaching vocational competencies. Indeed, in most occupational areas, discussions regarding appropriate curriculum content are among the most heated of debates.

A third conception of vocationalism, “related employment,” involves the connection between education and employment. A fully vocationalized education program is one in which the large majority of its graduates find employment in the occupational area for which they have been trained. However, when a program’s completers enter diverse occupations, as do university students in the humanities, then we tend not to consider the program vocational. In other cases, a program can be vocational in intent and curriculum, but its completers fail to find related employment; then the failure of related employment gives the institution a bad reputation. This kind of problem is generally avoided with a fourth version of vocationalism, “required schooling,” where a particular kind of schooling is an absolute requirement to enter an

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occupation; examples include medical school for doctors, PhD programs for professors, and prebaccalaureate licenses for aviation mechanics.

When education or training programs fail to satisfy all four of these criteria, conflict is almost inevitable. Some institutions are clearly vocational by all of these criteria, but others are vocational only through one or two of these. The alignment of all four conceptions of vocationalism is rare precisely because nonvocational components persist, because participants disagree about the purposes of education, and because aligning educational programs and employment requirements is difficult. So even as schools and universities become increasingly vocational, conflicts emerge—not only with older, prevocational conceptions of schooling but also among the different strands of a fully vocational form of education.

Yet another problem of vocationalism is that the shift of work preparation into education institutions has effectively separated work preparation from work itself. This separation has caused many difficulties in the school-to-work transition, problems that necessarily arise once schooling is separated from employment (Ryan 2001). Several mechanisms linking schooling and work have been created in most countries, ranging from informal to formal, though how they work remains problematic. The first such mechanism encompasses various efforts—particularly through career information and guidance (CIG) and through internships—to prepare students to be rational choosers. If these mechanisms work well, then students emerge from education knowledgeable about the variety of occupational options and their educational requirements and capable of making rational (or self-interested) decisions among them. However, when these mechanisms work poorly—and the quality of CIG is generally quite mediocre in most high schools and community colleges (Grubb 2004; National Research Council 2003)—then students are left misinformed, make the wrong decisions, and wind up in occupations for which they are unsuited.

A different linkage mechanism relies on direct connections between educational institutions and workplaces. Examples include school-business partnerships, advisory committees, customized training in which technical institutes provide training for specific firms, and the dual system or cooperative education where schools and employers jointly prepare workers. But here, too, the quality of these linkages varies greatly. In the United States, these are largely informal and ineffective, in contrast to countries with a dual system where employers participate actively in planning curricula. Where these connections are weak, the possibilities for educational preparation becoming disconnected from work requirements increase.

A third linkage mechanism includes a variety of credentials, licenses, and qualifications, again ranging from highly formalized to informal. When an educational credential works as intended, it provides uniform expectations

among all participants. Employers can specify the competencies they need, education and training programs use credential requirements to shape their curriculum and motivate students with the promise of employment, and students know what competencies they must master to become marketable. This is the positive sense of credentials, as market-making devices coordinating the activities of employers, education providers, and students. However, unlike prices, credentials are not set by the invisible hand of the market. They require considerable institutional effort to create and to enforce, and they require three distinct elements: (1) competencies or standards must be established, (2) a method of assessing competencies must be created, and (3) a mechanism for policing the process must be developed. Each of these is complex and potentially controversial, and each can be implemented in many different ways, ranging from *laissez-faire* to a high level of bureaucratization.

If any of these three are inconsistent with the others, then the value of a credential becomes uncertain and “credentialism” takes on the negative connotation of educational requirements not rationally related to employment requirements (Collins 1979). If, for example, employers hire on the basis of experience and ignore degrees, then credentials may become superfluous. If the competencies taught are not those required on the job, then both students and employers are disappointed with the results. When jobs require skills (like highly specific skills) that schools cannot or should not teach, then the mismatch generates employer complaints that students lack necessary skills. Further, as always, the nature of credentials varies substantially among countries. In the United States, with its *laissez-faire* government, there is very little effort (except for licensed occupations and professions) to codify the content of credentials; most credentials are informal and depend on the reputation of educational institutions rather than monitoring by an external agency, and so the quality of these varies enormously.

The mechanisms linking vocationalized education to employment, therefore, have been the subject of extensive dissatisfaction and debate. The resolution of these debates varies widely, and the positive and negative meanings of credentialism depend on the nature of these solutions. Our point is simply that, once preparation for work has been separated from work itself, such problems are inevitable—and, in the United States, these approaches, often weak and informal, have left the connections between schooling and employment uncertain.

A fourth large arena of debate created by vocationalism involves the nature of inequality. Vocationalism did not, of course, create inequality, and it certainly did not do so in countries like the United States, which has a high level of inequality. However, vocationalism has changed the mechanisms underlying inequality by shifting from a world in which parents directly fostered the success of their children—through apprenticeships or inheritance of a farm or a family

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business—to indirect sponsorship of success through formal schooling. As schools and universities have developed clearer connections to occupations, struggles over access to and success in formal schooling have become more critical for everyone because the consequences for earnings, class standing, and upward mobility have become so enormous.

Vocationalism has had ambiguous effects on equity. The expansion of access, particularly to universities, has extended education to groups that previously had not had much chance at higher education, including the working class, minorities, and immigrants; the goal of College for All has promised a new form of potential equity. But greater access has not meant equitable access. About 25 percent of each cohort in this country, and even a higher percentage of low-income, black, and Latino students, still fail to complete secondary education, even as there have been efforts to expand higher education—thereby increasing the variance of schooling attained. In addition, the “new students” in postsecondary education have gained access to institutions increasingly differentiated along occupational lines: elite universities, preparing for the highest professions; regional or second-tier universities, with lower levels of resources and lower rates of completion, aiming at lower-level semiprofessions and managerial jobs; and community colleges, with even lower levels of resources and rates of completion, preparing for middle-skilled jobs—implying that greater access does not mean equal access to the same kind of institution, the same levels of resources, or the same kinds of occupational outcomes. The differentiation of every education institution along roughly occupational lines has been both horizontal—in differences among tracks and programs, like the university-bound track in secondary schools distinct from tracks unlikely to lead to university, or engineering majors distinct from education majors—and vertical in differences among institutions preparing for different levels of the occupational hierarchy. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a vocationalized system of education that is not differentiated in this way, as long as doctors and lawyers require different amounts and kinds of schooling than do accountants, teachers, clerks, and auto mechanics. But then the familiar differences of income and class, of race and ethnicity, of foreign birth and language status, and of gender show up in the outcomes, now through the mechanisms of vocationalism and educational attainment rather than the direct transmission of status from father to son.

Finally, vocationalism may undermine the learning that is at the heart of the Education Gospel. If students think of schooling in purely utilitarian and credentialist terms, then they have every reason to get away with as little work as possible, as long as they obtain the credentials necessary for employment. For example, Cox (2001, 2004) interviewed a number of students in community colleges and determined that they were highly vocationalist, concerned only with schooling as a mechanism of economic advancement, and therefore

suspicious of anything (including related academic coursework and general education) that appeared to be irrelevant; the vocationalist question, “Why do I have to learn this?” is particularly common among such students. They were also highly credentialist in the sense that they thought that grades and credits accumulated—rather than the learning that these grades and credits were supposed to represent—were most important. They, therefore, made many cost-benefit decisions about whether extra effort was worth it. As one said about a paper revision, “What’s the least amount of change I need to make to get the paper accepted?” Finally, they tended to think of learning as accumulating facts, and they avoided the discussions that many instructors used as a way of exploring different conceptions and attitudes. Under these conditions, instructors and students differ, without recognizing it, about the vocational relevance of the curriculum; in addition, students may consistently undermine the learning and the broader competencies that would prepare them best for the long run.

So the coming of vocationalism always brings with it a series of battles, innate in the sense that they are rooted in the very idea of preparing for work within educational institutions with other purposes, other histories, and other institutional imperatives. There may be better and worse resolutions to these battles—and, indeed, there is a substantial history of some countries looking enviously at other countries’ systems of education, particularly the Anglo-American countries wishing they could import some features of the German dual system or the periodic efforts of the British to mimic American education or the current efforts in many countries and in the Bologna agreements to emulate the U.S. structure of higher education. While the resolutions are specific to particular countries, the phenomenon of vocationalism and the conflicts it creates are much more general.

The Education Gospel and Vocationalism: What Is Right and What Is Wrong

It is easy to poke fun at the excesses of the Education Gospel and its rhetoric of renewal through education, but we should understand how much of it is truly admirable. The Gospel places its faith in education as a salvation of a society—rather than, for example, geographic expansion, colonialism, or a hyperactive militarism or free-market ideology. Education has, in so many places, carried the hopes of civilization, and a vision that reinforces its value is surely to be valued. A second positive element is that the Education Gospel has consistently paid attention to the public dimensions of schooling, including its potential value in maintaining economic growth and in promoting equity and social cohesion, rather than emphasizing individual benefits only. As a

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result, it has justified the public expenditures necessary to expand schooling. Finally, the Education Gospel has expanded the goals of educational institutions, making them richer enterprises where students and teachers alike can establish connections among the political, moral, and economic aspects of society and where the vocational and the academic can be explored simultaneously. The vocational goals of education become objectionable only when they displace all prevocational purposes. The worst excesses of the Education Gospel should not blind us, however, to the expansive possibilities of adding new purposes to old institutions.

Nevertheless, the Education Gospel also contains a number of failings. The most obvious is that the Gospel constantly exaggerates the pace of change. The enormous transformations in occupations, from agricultural labor to manufacturing occupations to service work to “knowledge” work, have taken place over two *centuries*. By 2010, about 70 percent of new jobs will require no more than a high school education and about 75 percent will require no more than modest on-the-job training (Hecker 2001). These data hardly encourage College for All, or even serious emphasis on the “school of hard knocks.” Occupational changes will continue to unfold gradually, and the cataclysmic language of the Education Gospel is simply unwarranted. In developed countries, the real problem is not the undereducation bemoaned by the Education Gospel but a newer problem of overeducation—of levels of schooling that are too high for the occupations individuals have. Indeed, in several countries, including the United States, England, and Germany, the evidence suggests that perhaps 35–40 percent of workers are overeducated for the jobs they hold (Hartog 2000). While there may be counterexamples among rapidly developing countries—for example, China and the Asian Tigers in the 1980s—in many places, the Education Gospel badly exaggerates the proportion of jobs requiring more education.

Similarly, the Education Gospel has generally exaggerated the contributions of education to economic growth (Grubb and Lazerson 2004; Wolf 2002). Levels of education are easy to quantify, so they have often been incorporated into the statistical work of growth economists. However, a much greater variety of factors have been responsible for growth, including national governance; the sociopolitical climate, including its stability; macroeconomic policies (fiscal, monetary, trade, and tax policies); institutional settings, including financial, legal, and corporate institutions; structural and supportive policies, including education, labor relations, and science and technology policy; and regulatory and environmental policies (Landau et al. 1996). The remarkable growth of the Asian Tigers and now China, the decline of the United States in the 1980s and its resurgence in the 1990s, the varied fortunes of the European Union and its apparent ascendance at the moment, and the stagnation of most African countries (except a few “good government” examples like Botswana) are all

due to many different factors, not just the expansion or decline of education. The rhetoric of the Education Gospel around growth has been badly exaggerated.

Finally, the Education Gospel—as its name implies—has always been pre-occupied only with education, emphasizing improvements in education rather than parallel changes in workplaces or other social and economic policies necessary to achieve equality of opportunity. Particularly in countries with relatively weak welfare states, like the United States (Esping-Anderson 1990), there has been a tendency to substitute education policies for a broader array of policies related to health care, housing, nutrition, labor market regulation, public employment, and other social policies. This is a self-defeating policy, however, since educational institutions themselves cannot cope with the differences among students caused by inadequate housing and health care, poor nutrition, and poisonous community conditions. For many students in higher education, the pressures of work and family in addition to those of schooling lead to dropping out, and these pressures cannot be alleviated without childcare policies, income support, and employment policies well beyond what educational institutions themselves can provide.

In contrast, a worthy version of the Education Gospel would acknowledge the limitations of the current version. It would avoid the exaggerations of common rhetoric and try to be more careful about the pace of change. It would work harder to recognize which changes are compatible with historical developments and which require sustained effort to incorporate into existing institutions. It would avoid sloganeering, particularly by being concrete about the practices entailed in phrases like Lifelong Learning or “developing the skills of the twenty-first century” or smoothing the “school-to-work transition.” It would not treat education as the only solution to complex social and economic problems, as exaggerated versions of the Education Gospel often do, but would instead acknowledge that education is often part of the solution to growth or social stability or equity or unemployment and that other social and economic reforms are both necessary and complementary.

Similarly, the practices associated with vocationalism have had much to offer, but they, too, can take exaggerated and inequitable forms. The most encouraging aspect of vocationalism is that it has made formal schooling much more important. In many ways, occupational preparation in formal schooling has been superior to traditional work-based learning and apprenticeships, which suffer from endemic conflicts between production and learning, the tendency of employers to poach workers rather than train their own, the fragility of paternalistic relationships between masters and apprentices, and the inequities of family-based mobility. In some cases, however, educational inflation seems to be taking place with no benefit either to the individual or to society—for example, when individuals fail to obtain the vocations they

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have prepared for or when individuals continue their schooling because alternative forms of preparation have been eliminated. So educational expansion is often positive, but it has its dark side as well.

As formal schooling has replaced apprenticeship, it has brought a different approach to the teaching of “skills” or competencies. It has replaced apprenticeship, with its unavoidable conflict between production and educational purposes, with a form of preparation devoted entirely to education. It has facilitated the incorporation of new knowledge and new skills, including those based on research and advances in technology and work organization, and it has brought new subjects into the curriculum, broadening conceptions of competence and bringing the outside world closer to the classroom than was true in the nineteenth century. This is a development that all critics of academic education consider positive. However, vocationalism constantly threatens to become unbalanced in the competencies it teaches. In some cases—particularly with low-level vocational education and short-term job training—it has become too job specific, particularly in a society of constant change; it fails to educate individuals for work over the longer run and for continued learning on their own (“lifelong learning” and “learning to learn”). In other cases, the academic slant of formal schooling has downgraded noncognitive competencies like visual and kinesthetic abilities, important though they may be to many walks of life, and has converted vocational and professional programs into academic exercises as remote from the world as nineteenth-century mental discipline. The version of vocationalism that seems most admirable to us is one that incorporates a variety of competencies—cognitive and noncognitive abilities, conceptual approaches and their application in different spheres including production—but that leaves job-specific and firm-specific skills to be learned on the job.

Vocationalism has also transformed the potential for equity in crucial ways, particularly in replacing apprenticeship mechanisms, controlled entirely by parents, with public schooling and public universities, where equity of access and resources might be subject to general debate. But the shift to formal schooling has not really led to greater equity, as we argued in the previous section, since vocationalism has contributed its own forms of inequality through differentiation of education and through educational institutions mirroring the hierarchies of the labor market. Therefore, countries adopting vocationalist practices need to articulate more equitable forms of vocationalism. This requires a range of policies traditionally associated with the welfare state, like housing policies, health policies, income support, community development, and other efforts to create the conditions where all students can progress through formal schooling. Elsewhere, we have articulated the need for such policies as part of a Foundational State, creating the foundation for investments

in human competencies in broad and equitable ways (Grubb and Lazerson 2004).

Yet another admirable feature of vocationalism, at least in liberal societies where choice is important, is that it has expanded options in educational institutions. This has led to the incorporation of new subjects and competencies, to more dynamic and entrepreneurial institutions, and to an education system that is less inward looking and more responsive to external demands—from students, employers, and the public. In contrast, the policies that would make all individuals able to take advantage of choice—particularly career information and guidance—have been underdeveloped, particularly in the United States and especially in high schools, where students are making crucial choices. A new competency—knowledge of the education system and the appropriate paths to different occupations, along with the ability to make appropriate choices at crucial junctures—itself becomes unequally distributed. So the expansion of choice, and more broadly the marketlike mechanisms that vocationalism brings, have negative consequences as well as expansive possibilities.

Overall, then, vocationalism has ushered in substantial advancements over prevocational practices, particularly in expanding the roles of schooling, promoting both public and private goals, changing the nature of skill acquisition, enhancing our collective ability to address equity, and expanding choices and the flexibility of educational institutions. For all these transformations, there are both positive and negative consequences, as well as everything in between. The version of vocationalism that we favor is one with a greater role for work-based learning, rather than one that relies almost exclusively on school-based learning. Our version would also develop a careful balance between public and private goals; emphasize a broad range of general competencies, rather than narrow skills; extend professional standards and planning mechanisms; assure equity through a variety of school and nonschool policies; and regulate markets in education. Nevertheless, it is easy to outline a scenario in which the negative elements of vocationalism dominate the twenty-first century—a world we label HyperVoc. This is a world where narrow work skills are all that matter, a great deal of work has been routinized so that it can be carried out with limited skills, and nonutilitarian subjects such as the arts and the humanities have been eliminated. Employers seek specific skills narrowly tailored to their production, and educational institutions are limited to providing preparation for employer-specific hiring. All the elements of HyperVoc can now be seen in the United States. The challenge for the twenty-first century is to develop moderate versions of the Education Gospel and to strengthen the positive elements of vocationalism rather than to descend into HyperVoc.

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