

UNDER REVIEW

The Education Gospel: The Economic Power of Schooling

By W. Norton Grubb and Marvin Lazerson

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Occasionally a book is published that may not at first attract a great amount of attention, but over time proves to have considerable intellectual influence and eventually causes a retooling of conventional ideas. *The Education Gospel: The Economic Power of Schooling* by N. Norton Grubb and Marvin Lazerson may be such a work.

Conventional wisdom conceives of vocational education as primarily limited to direct work preparation, provided mainly through secondary or post-secondary programs of less than baccalaureate level. Academic education, on the other hand, is thought of as something quite different, and even the mention that academic coursework is also useful for vocational preparation may raise some heated dissent. But Grubb and Lazerson defy such conventional thinking. The authors observe that virtually all of American education is vocational education. They contend that progressively throughout the twentieth century the economic function of preparing youth and adults for gainful employment slowly worked its way through the system so that today schooling at all levels is dominated by an emphasis on widely defined vocational preparation. The vocational transformation of schooling over the past century has been bolstered by what the authors term the "Education Gospel," a set of ideas promoting the belief that education raises both personal and public economic wealth and solves a myriad of social problems.

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Vocational and technical educators probably best know Grubb through his work at the National Center for Research in Vocational Education (NCRVE) when it was located at the University of California, Berkeley. During his association with the center from 1988 to 2000, Grubb published numerous studies, monographs, and books addressing work preparation policy issues. His work is insightful, provocative, based on sound research, and comprises a major contribution to the field. In this current volume, Grubb teams with Marvin Lazerson of the University of Pennsylvania. The two first worked together more than thirty years ago when they collaborated on *American Education and Vocationalism: A Documentary History, 1870-1970*, which remains a useful reference for primary source material. Lazerson's most recent work has focused on the uses of schooling to further democratic citizenship.

When vocational education first entered secondary schools on a large scale in response to the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917, work preparation was conceived primarily as skills training for local or regional industrial jobs. Instruction tended to be centered on craft-based forms of work and teaching was carried out in shops separate from academic classrooms. In the early twentieth century, work was based on the division of labor and its completion on assembly lines. Today, in contrast, work is no longer regional, but is international in scope, with components produced and functions performed throughout the world. With the final product coming together at central assembly points, work must be carried out in teams, with integrated push-pull and flexible manufacturing systems characterizing production. Information systems reduce time and collapse distance. Computers perform amazing control and processing functions. Compartmentalized knowledge has given way to integrated fields of study that cut across more traditional knowledge groupings and skill sets. More management and information processing skills are required by all, and differences between the academic and the technical have become blurred. More work is intellectual, and what once were manual skill operations are now performed by machines. Consequently, much of what was formally considered good academic preparation has now become necessary vocational preparation.

At the same time, educational opportunity has expanded. Throughout all grade levels, considerably more individuals are enrolled in educational institutions than were a few decades ago. More alternative forms of education are also available, providing a variety of different study options to individuals. The knowledge and information base has expanded, and higher-order, communication, problem solving, and reasoning skills are considered ever more important. The overriding driving force behind these educational changes is economic, and the focus of these changes is the preparation of individuals for entry into a complex, dynamic, and competitive work world. In the words of the authors, "Virtually all educational institutions from the high school on up have become more explicitly vocational, concerned first and foremost with preparation for employment" (p. 13).

In the first section of the book, comprising chapters 1 to 3, the authors present an overview of high school, community college, and university education. They observe that each level of education "has only expanded after occupational goals were added to earlier academic goals; each has become a comprehensive institution incorporating a diversity of purposes and an increasing variety of students" (p. 25). In each of the first three chapters the authors expand on the evolving goals, functions, and programming of the respective institutions and examine the effects of vocationalism on these goals.

In chapter 4, discussion shifts to job training and adult education. The authors provide an overview of the development of programs created to address job preparation for individuals on the social and economic margins of society—dislocated workers, the unemployed, welfare recipients, and the disabled. While the promises inherent in such second-chance programs are remarkable in the eyes of the authors, they believe that the full potential of such programs has yet to be realized.

Chapter 5 examines work preparation in the United States and contrasts U.S. practices with those of other countries. The authors note that one prominent difference is that in the United States there is no "well developed vocational education path through secondary education" mainly because of the emphasis in the U.S. on college education for all. "The United States spends much more than other countries on postsecondary

education relative to K-12 schooling," the authors observe (p. 132). There are links, nevertheless, between educational levels. Often what appears to be academic preparation at one level is actually pre-vocational preparation for the next. Furthermore, the pre-vocational or vocational preparation in the United States tends to be "less pure" and characterized by general instruction in "moral, political and intellectual education." It is indeed, the authors contend, "rare to find public forms of work preparation that are single-minded vocational" (p. 133). As a result, except at the upper levels of specialization, vocational preparation in the United States is less specifically defined than it is in other countries.

Chapters 6 and 7 focus on issues surrounding the placement of work preparation in formal schools and colleges. Why, for example, is it assumed that the best place for vocational preparation is formal institutions separated from actual employment? In these chapters, the authors also examine perplexing issues of status as well as both the private and public benefits of schooling. They explore the effects of vocational programs at various levels of schooling and draw the provocative conclusion that "the question of whether overtly occupational forms of schooling pay off therefore depends on the level of schooling involved. At the lowest level, in high school vocational programs, it is difficult to find any substantial effects of occupational specialization. At the baccalaureate and postgraduate level, these differences become increasingly substantial. In our system of vocationalism, the importance of a particular occupational focus matters the most at higher levels of schooling and the least at the lowest levels" (p. 162). Work by Bishop and Mane (2004; 2005), Gray and Neng-Tang (1992), Mane (1999), and others, however, find contrary results. These studies conclude that there are substantial private and social returns for high school level vocational preparation, particularly in the case of those who train for specific occupations through advanced courses. Although some of the assertions made by Grubb and Lazerson in these chapters may be debatable, the issues they raise probe into areas of policy that are often not thoroughly examined and deserve exploration.

Chapter 8 focuses on another controversial policy issue, the role of vocational education in the perpetuation of inequality. The authors contend that alongside the beneficial outcomes of vocational education lurk potential detrimental effects on individuals and society. These negative results can come about when vocational education diverts attention from more basic academic studies, closes off choices, or directs individuals into low status and low paying jobs. In addition, there exist personal issues of identity, job fulfillment, inequality, opportunity, and questions of long-term social and economic mobility. Under the Education Gospel schooling has become a strong determinant of an individual's life chances and, in the case of some class and ethnic groups, has grown extremely powerful.

In Chapter 9 the authors discuss the implications of the "Knowledge Revolution" for work preparation in the twenty-first century. Counter to popular public perceptions, today only 30 percent of all jobs require postsecondary education. Nevertheless, changes are at hand, driven as much by the international, global market place as by the explosion of knowledge and technological innovation. In a balanced discussion, the authors examine what is right and what is wrong with American vocationalism. They outline a possible future negative scenario in which there is an undue concentration on narrow skill development. In this adverse event, students search for fast employment access to the detriment of a more balanced education, neglecting the arts, humanities, and general education. The result is workers who hold certification in firm-specific credentials which have little employment transfer value. In this worst-case scenario, unregulated education and training programs proliferate, and, in consequence, due to market competition, education standards decrease. The authors see a particular danger in the possibility that public institutions may be forced to compete and emulate unregulated, poor quality providers of educational services and "abandon all pretense of public responsibility and become dispensers of credential-preparing programs and narrow skills-orientated courses for increasing numbers of semiprofessionals" (p. 259).

The authors contrast this grim outcome to a more promising prospect that reinforces the constructive elements of

our current work preparation system. In this positive scenario, individuals are offered extended schooling opportunities that include both considerable education and adequate training for multiple educational levels and knowledge-based work. The authors stress above all the critical need for clarifying the obligations of collective responsibility. According to the authors, this responsibility centers on a vision of vocational preparation that places human capacity building before limited economic goals. They argue for strengthened, well-rounded, coherent programs that combine technical and academic instruction in order to build broad human competencies. "Powerful" teaching is required, a "kind that can integrate the general and the specific, that can incorporate flexible internships coordinated with classroom content, and that can provide higher-order skills" (pp. 261-262). To achieve this goal, teaching credentials must be broadly defined, barriers to equal opportunity in vocational preparation must be removed, and work itself may need to be restructured.

One does not need to agree with the views of the writers of this provocative work in order to recognize its value. In the United States we have tended to view education in terms of a duality: the academic and the vocational. This thinking is grounded in the Smith-Hughes act of 1917 and much of the subsequent federal legislation. The academic-vocational duality is found in the way that we prepare teachers. It is found in the ways that schools are structured and administered, and it is present in how classes are organized and run. The authors contest this duality by pointing out that in a real sense all education is vocational. This book challenges its readers to think about how we can forge a new concept of vocational preparation, and how we can eliminate barriers to more equitable and fulfilling vocational education. This thought-provoking work succeeds in its design to bring about new and unconventional considerations of work preparation in the United States

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