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College is Trade School for the Elite

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Abstract

Donald J. Trump has a degree from an Ivy League university—my alma mater, in fact—but he is not one of the Ivies’ admirers. “We must embrace new and effective job-training approaches, including online courses, high school curricula, and private-sector investment that prepare people for trade, manufacturing, technology and other really well-paying jobs and careers,” the president declared in March. “These kinds of options can be a positive alternative to a four-year degree.”

If ever an issue seemed assured of bipartisan support, you’d think it would be an initiative that helps connect workers with work. But up went the howls of injury anyway. “I’m worried that the idea of vocational education has become so popular,” wrote David Leonhardt of the New York Times. “We shouldn’t be promoting vocational education at the expense of general education.” Instead, “expanding the number of four-year college graduates also deserves to be a national priority.”

Maybe. Mr. Leonhardt is pitting vocational education against the ideals of higher education—independence of thought, breadth of knowledge and understanding. It’s not hard to see how important these ideals are to a democracy, in which political sovereignty lies with the people at large. If the people are ignorant or fixed only on grubbing for a living, they may make awful—and irreversible—mistakes. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

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College Is Trade School for the Elite

Even education in the humanities has become vocationalized, though the transformation is subtle.

By Allen Guelzo

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Donald J. Trump has a degree from an Ivy League university—my alma mater, in fact—but he is not one of the Ivies' admirers. "We must embrace new and effective job-training approaches, including online courses, high school curricula, and private-sector investment that prepare people for trade, manufacturing, technology and other really well-paying jobs and careers," the president [declared](#) in March. "These kinds of options can be a positive alternative to a four-year degree."

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The problem is that so little of those ideals really operate in most of American higher education.

Judged by the catalogs, curricula and websites of American colleges and universities, American higher education already is vocational. The number of degrees in nursing,

social work, education and the holy quartet of STEM—science, technology, engineering and mathematics—vastly outweighs those awarded in the humanities, which is where we’re supposed to find the pure arts of thinking. One out of every five bachelor-level degrees is in business—which is to say, accounting, marketing, management and real estate—while one in 10 is in a health-related field.

Business and education lead the parade among master’s-level degrees; the bulk of doctoral degrees are in medicine, law, biology and engineering. The highest-growth fields since 2008 have been homeland security, law enforcement, firefighting, parks, recreation, leisure and fitness studies.

Even education in the humanities has become vocationalized, although the transformation is subtle. Take almost any college or university literature department at random, and its faculty will be composed of people who have been trained in other college and university literature programs to be literature professors. History majors are, in department after department, seen—and taught—as future history professionals, whether in museums or colleges. Even in schools that still valiantly defend the virtue of a liberal arts education, much of it tends ineluctably toward professional formation, not breadth or understanding. Vocational training is what higher education has been doing without even realizing it.

I wonder if the real complaint about Mr. Trump’s praise of vocational education is that his interest in the “wrong” vocations—“trade, manufacturing, technology”—and in the wrong places.

College-based vocationalism is still vocationalism; there’s no intrinsic difference between peeling a spud and popping a vein. But it is a vocationalism of merit, defined by testing, credentials and cultural signaling. In this version of vocationalism, the four-year college experience becomes a path by which the talented and brainy are induced to abandon their neighborhoods, churches and families to become the next generation of staffers for multinational corporations and nonprofits. Either you arrive already equipped with merit (through your meritocratic parents and your meritocratic college-prep program) or you are cherry-picked to receive it, and thereafter spurn the base rungs by which you do ascend.

Why the meritocracy's college-based vocationalism should be considered superior to Mr. Trump's vocationalism has little to do with dollars and cents and a lot to do with the cultural imperialism of the meritocracy. Mike Rowe, creator of "Dirty Jobs" and "Somebody's Gotta Do It," was perplexed to find that even in the depths of the Great Recession small-business owners hung out "Help Wanted" signs in all 50 states, but couldn't find people to hire. Why? Because of "the stigmas and stereotypes that dissuaded people from exploring a career in the trades."

Everywhere, Mr. Rowe met with the blank convictions that "opportunity is dead" and "success can only occur if you purchase a four-year college degree." Tell that, he says, to the employers who have 5.6 million job openings that aren't in danger of being filled by robots.

Mr. Trump's determination to revive vocational education is a validation of varieties of work the meritocracy disdains. But meritocracy, as the cultural critic Christopher Lasch wrote, "is a parody of democracy." It promises advancement, but only for a few, and only at the expense of a common culture. By validating a real vocationalism, we might also arrive at a new revival of democracy, and even—who knows?—a true rediscovery of the humanities.

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