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# NATIONAL AFFAIRS

## Opportunity Pluralism in Education

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I N RECENT YEARS, DISCUSSIONS ABOUT THE STATE of primary and secondary education have typically rested on two assumptions. The first is that the foremost goal of the K-12 system is for high-school graduates to acquire the knowledge needed to continue their education and receive two- or four-year college degrees. The second is that success can be measured primarily in terms of upward economic mobility. In other words, wealth accumulation is assumed as the end, and "college for all" is posited as the means.

These assumptions are both mistaken. They obscure the fact that there are multiple pathways to opportunity, and they diminish the vital importance of social skills, relationships, and networks for human flourishing. As the fields of education and employment undergo seismic shifts, it is high time we break free of these unquestioned beliefs.

Undoubtedly, improving one's economic condition is part of overall success. But any discussion of pursuing opportunity today must allow for what may be termed opportunity pluralism. It must also include forming and nurturing social relations and resources — what we might broadly term social capital. A more holistic education would prepare young people for success by helping them develop the cognitive skills, knowledge of disciplines, and social networks they need to live, work, and compete in today's society.

A new K-12 public-education program must accompany this more comprehensive vision, one that recognizes relationships and opportunity pluralism as essential dimensions of success in

education. States, localities, and organizations are already beginning to experiment with such initiatives, and they deserve to be expanded. Programs of the kind outlined below feature a K-12 career-pathways approach that links schools and employers and includes workplace exposure, exploration, and practical experience. This sequence immerses young people in a range of occupational courses that develop their knowledge and networks. And it replaces the solitary track of college for all, which restricts career achievement to the four-year college-degree credential. These new opportunity programs ensure a pluralistic approach that presents young people with multiple pathways to becoming flourishing members of their communities and nation.

## **THE CREDENTIALIST PREJUDICE**

"College for all" is the mantra of an educational model that seeks to move all K-12 students through a single pipeline: from elementary school to high school to college to a degree and finally to a career. Many policymakers have come to see this approach as the preferred

engine of upward mobility and have made it the primary vehicle for public support. While this fixed trajectory of high school to college to work arose around 50 years ago, it "became gospel...25 years ago," in the words of University Ventures managing director Ryan Craig.

This new dogma is not without its victims. Harvard political philosopher Michael Sandel coined the term "credentialist prejudice" to describe the bias that views a college degree as the key pathway to a flourishing life. This perspective considers a degree to be "a precondition for dignified work and social esteem...fueling prejudice against less educated members of society."

The negative consequences of the credentialist prejudice take multiple forms. First, it creates status inequality via degree inflation, resulting in more degree requirements for jobs that once did not demand them. For example, an extensive Harvard Business School study shows that while only 16% of existing production supervisors in 2015 had college degrees, two-thirds (67%) of

supervisor job postings now require such degrees. This is not because skill requirements have changed; the credential threshold for hiring has simply increased.

Second, the degree bias shrinks the talent pool. For example, a common hiring assumption is that low-wage workers without a degree are low skilled. But a study led by Harvard economist Peter Blair found that 16 million U.S. workers with only a high-school diploma had skills for high-wage work, defined as more than twice the national median wage. Credentialism also negatively affects the hiring of minorities and other groups. An Opportunity@Work analysis reveals that the degree bias bars 79% of Latinos, 68% of African Americans, 73% of rural residents, and 66% of America's veterans from seeking jobs they are qualified to perform.

Third, young people are increasingly not interested in pursuing higher education. Five national surveys beginning in February 2020 found that as of January 2022, around half of high-school students are considering attending a four-year college — 20 percentage points down

from a high of 71% in May 2020. Nearly a third prefer educational experiences lasting two years or less compared to a four-year degree. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that the percentage of high-school graduates enrolling directly in college declined from 66.2% in 2019 to 62.7% in 2020.

The credentialist bias is likely to come under more scrutiny as it increasingly conflicts with Americans' preferences for K-12 education. Especially after the economic and educational upheaval of the Covid-19 pandemic, the American public is less enthralled with the dream of college for all. A recent *Purpose of Education Index* report by Populace, a Massachusetts non-profit, shows that Americans want K-12 education to focus on practical, tangible skills and outcomes rather than college preparation. The importance of "getting kids ready for college," for example, dropped from a pre-pandemic 10th-highest priority to 47 out of 57. Americans' top priority is helping students "develop practical skills" (although only one in four respondents think schools actually do this), followed by "problem solve and make

decisions," "demonstrate character," and "demonstrate basic reading, writing, and arithmetic." In short, the public wants young people to have pathways to opportunity beyond the college track.

Historically, holding a degree has been associated with many positive outcomes, from better health to higher income and wealth. But some of these benefits may be fading. For example, an analysis by the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis shows that the college-income premium has declined for recent graduates while the wealth premium has fallen among all cohorts born after 1940. In fact, for any non-white head of household born in the 1980s, the wealth premium cannot be distinguished from zero. This holds true for those who have a postgraduate degree. For all these reasons and more, it is time we expand pathways to opportunity — and do away with the credentialist bias that universalizes college and funnels young people into a single pipeline for success. Opportunity programs that pursue this aim consist of two key elements: an opportunity equation and opportunity pluralism.

## THE OPPORTUNITY EQUATION

For too long, opportunity has been reduced to a measure of economic success achieved after completing a four-year college degree. But to offer more pathways for human flourishing, we must consider a broader definition of opportunity that includes both its cognitive and social dimensions.

The essential elements of the opportunity equation are *what* students know (knowledge) and *whom* they know (relationships). Pursuing knowledge and relationships requires behaviors learned and internalized through practice; it requires the cultivation of *habits*. Young people need to acquire habits of mind (such as academic and technical skills) but also habits of association (social and relational skills) that become the building blocks of opportunity. Healthy habits strengthen people's characters, equipping them to help build democratic civic communities.

Habits of mind include academic learning and mastering a discipline with its cognitive demands — the technical knowledge and broader understanding of fields that we acquire through a course of study in different subject areas. The late psychologist and senior Gallup scientist Shane Lopez identified three distinct strategies that we develop from engaging in cognitive learning. The first is "future casting" or *goals thinking*, which helps us define and set achievable future outcomes. The second is "triggering action" or *pathways thinking*, which creates a specific route to those outcomes. The third is *agency thinking*, which produces the mental energy and self-reliance needed to pursue one's goals along defined pathways. Pathways thinking and agency thinking work together to foster the pursuit of goals. This framework makes clear that mastering a discipline conveys more than the utility of acquiring a marketable skill; it also shapes our thinking in ways that conduce to setting and achieving goals.

Habits of association, meanwhile, include two kinds of social-capital networks or interpersonal connections: "bonding" and "bridging." Bonding

social capital occurs *within* a group of similar individuals. It reflects the need to be with others like ourselves for emotional support and companionship. Bridging social capital, on the other hand, occurs *between* social groups. It reflects the need to connect with individuals different than ourselves, expanding our social circles across demographics and interests. Bonding and bridging social capital are complementary. As social scientist Xavier de Souza Briggs notes, bonding social capital is for "getting by," and bridging social capital is for "getting ahead."

These forms of social capital align with what the sociologist Mark Granovetter calls strong and weak ties. We have strong ties with family and friends who are mostly like us. They know the same places, information networks, and opportunities as we do. We have weak ties with people we know but who are different from us. Because they are different, they are much more likely to connect us to new networks and opportunities. Weak ties become valuable when

we seek a new job, precisely because they provide us with connections and information we would not obtain through our usual networks.

Social capital operates on multiple levels: in relationships between individuals (such as between young people and prospective employers), connections with mid-level groups or firms (such as between young people and local community organizations), and associations with courts and other large local and national institutions that order society (also known as civic capital). Recent research by Raj Chetty and his colleagues shows that community-level friendships and mentorships across classes — which provide "bridging" social capital — help young people, especially low-income children, become upwardly mobile.

Cross-class friendships form largely through *exposure* to higher-income individuals in settings like schools, work, or religious organizations, and through *engagement* with individuals different than ourselves. This process creates bridging social capital that develops weak ties, helping us overcome our natural

tendency to associate exclusively with those like ourselves — the bonding form of social capital that produces strong ties. I have personally experienced the benefits of cross-class encounters. As a result of interactions at the local YMCA, the Northeast Ohio Red Cross headquarters, and St. Joseph Catholic High School (all in Cleveland, Ohio), I forged friendships with people from different class and ethnic backgrounds who opened my eyes to personal and vocational aspirations that I wouldn't have considered otherwise.

Economic connectedness ranks among the strongest predictors of upward income mobility — higher than measures like school quality, job availability, family structure, or a community's racial makeup. For low-income children who grow up in a community that features levels of economic connectedness enjoyed by the children of high-income parents, future incomes increase by an average of 20% — the equivalent of attending about two years of college.

It is not the friendships themselves that cause this improvement. Instead, the personal connections and friendships with teachers, coaches, and other mentors influence a young person's expectations, aspirations, and behavior and show them worlds and opportunities they would never have imagined. These relationships — and the information they impart about alternative pathways to jobs and careers — snowball and multiply over time. A greater dosage produces a greater effect. For example, the analysis of Chetty and his colleagues shows that young people who move out of concentrated poverty and into an economically diverse neighborhood at an early age tend to do better economically and socially than those who move in at a later age.

## **SOCIAL SKILLS**

The economics of skill development provides further insight into the relationship between associations and opportunity. This field studies the connection between our cognitive and non-cognitive domains — often referred to as "hard skills" and "soft skills" — and particularly how

they affect wages and labor-market success.

Findings show that soft skills play an increasingly central role in expanding an individual's opportunity.

Harvard economist David Deming has shown that since 2000, the significance of cognitive skills has declined as a predictor of labor-market wage success. Conversely, the economic importance of non-cognitive skills, especially social skills, has simultaneously increased.

These skills are characterized by high levels of non-routine, interpersonal exchanges with others. They manifest themselves in capabilities like communication, cooperation, collaboration, social intelligence, and conflict resolution.

"Social skills are a significantly more important predictor of full-time employment and wages for youth in the 2004 to 2012 period, compared to the late 1980s and 1990s," Deming concludes.

His analysis further reveals that, between 2000 and 2012, science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) jobs decreased as a share of U.S. employment, while the share of non-STEM professional jobs in management, nursing, and

business support grew faster than it had in the prior decade. Overall, between 1980 and 2012, the share of social-skill jobs increased by nearly 12 percentage points as a portion of all employment, with wages for these jobs rising more rapidly than those for other occupations. These non-STEM jobs rely extensively on analytical skills and interpersonal interaction.

Individuals with strong social skills make for good team players. Deming defines teamwork as "workers trading tasks...and reducing the worker-specific cost of coordination" with others. Deming and his Harvard colleague Ben Weidmann find suggestive evidence that these team players advance group performance by inspiring the efforts of colleagues. Thus, one can see why more "soft-skills" jobs are emerging in the 21st-century workplace. People who possess these soft skills tend to contribute more value to their companies in key ways, and the market has taken notice.

A 2021 analysis by Deming shows that, after age 35, life-cycle wage growth is substantially greater in occupations that rely on non-routine,

high-variance tasks that are decision intensive and require worker adaptation. In other words, possessing social skills produces a wage premium. And because these people-intensive skills are learned and developed through practice and feedback over extended periods of time, peak earning years have moved up the age spectrum from the 30s to the 50s. "Strong cognitive skills are increasingly a necessary — but not a sufficient — condition for obtaining a good, high paying job," Deming summarizes. "You also need to have social skills." Brent Orrell, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, characterizes the relationship between knowledge and networks this way: "A technical skill can help you get a job, but non-cognitive skills are necessary to building and sustaining a career." In today's workforce, adding networks to knowledge goes a long way.

## **PROGRAM STRUCTURE**

What does it look like to implement these principles of association and account for both cognitive and social skills? Successful career-

pathways programs integrate teaching, training, employment, support services, and job placement; these processes span K-12, postsecondary, and workforce development. They include models like apprenticeships and internships, career and technical education, dual enrollment in high school and postsecondary education, career academies, and boot camps for acquiring specific knowledge or skills, as well as staffing, placement, and other support services for job seekers.

While specifics vary, extant pathways programs share five features that offer a template for success in building new opportunity programs. First, they link learning to credentials by teaching academic and technical skills in a way that is tailored to the needs of local employers. The credential from the program gives students a leg up for securing a good job locally. Second, the programs focus on work and careers. Students explore vocations beginning early in school, listening to guest speakers and going on field trips. In high school, classroom instruction includes work placement and mentorships that connect them with adults. Third, adult advisors

help students overcome barriers and make informed choices, ensuring that job placement is not based on race, ethnicity, or other demographic considerations. They also help students learn how to make decisions for themselves. Fourth, employers, industry groups, and other institutions create community partnerships focused on program success. This includes a written agreement clarifying which parties are responsible for a governance structure, funding sources, and other program duties. Finally, supportive laws and policies on the local, state, and federal levels also help create a framework for program development.

Such programs acquaint students with the demands of the workforce by connecting them with adult mentors whose backgrounds are different than their own. These connections produce new forms of association and social capital. They do this by fostering cross-class friendships, social networks, and information sources among students, teachers, employer mentors, and other program supporters.

Relationships formed in these programs shape expectations, aspirations, and social behaviors

by showing young people worlds previously unseen and opportunities not imagined. These programs also nurture civil society by creating new social networks and forms of community for participants.

## **PATHWAYS IN ACTION**

While the full fruits of this growing movement are still being cultivated, these opportunity initiatives collectively represent a new paradigm in education that will enable people to thrive in the 21st-century workforce. Successful examples include statewide programs created by governors and legislators from both political parties. Then there are local programs with strong links to K-12 education, civic partners, and organizations that help on the ground. Finally, some programs operate outside traditional K-12 education.

In 2014, Democratic governor Jack Markell created Delaware Pathways to provide college and career preparation for middle- and high-school students. The program offers them "pathways" to careers aligned with state and regional economic needs in fields like advanced

manufacturing, engineering, finance, energy, Cisco networking, environmental science, and health care. The focus is on "middle-skill" jobs, like master electricians and dental hygienists. Middle-school students learn about career options, and when they reach their sophomore or junior year in high school, they take vocation-related courses. High-school students can take college classes at no cost to families, serve as interns, and earn work credentials. In the summer before senior year, students participate in a 240-hour paid internship that lasts through the academic year. The program engages K-12 educators, businesses, postsecondary educators, philanthropists, and community organizations — all of which offer opportunities for building cross-class relationships.

In 2015, Tennessee's Republican governor Bill Haslam created the Drive to 55 Alliance as a partnership between the state, the private sector, and non-profits to equip 55% of Tennesseans with a college degree or training certificate by 2025. It creates partnerships among school districts, postsecondary institutions, employers, and community organizations. The Tennessee

programs include grants for high-school graduates attending community or technical colleges and placement with private-sector mentors and non-profit partners. They also give grants to adults earning an associate's degree or technical certificate, state certification for K-12 programs that align high-school and postsecondary education and training with regional employment opportunities, assistance to high-school seniors not achieving college-mathematics benchmarks, and support for four-year postsecondary institutions to offer programs aligned with employers' workforce needs.

There are also local and non-traditional programs that feature collaborations between K-12 schools, employers, and civic partners. Prominent examples include 3DE in Atlanta; YouthForce NOLA in New Orleans; Washington, D.C.'s CityWorks DC; Cristo Rey, a network of 39 Catholic high schools in 24 states; and Wiseburn School District and Da Vinci Charter School in Los Angeles County, which award associate's or bachelor's degrees through UCLA Extension and El Camino College or Southern New Hampshire University's College

for America. Other organizations with regional, state, and local affiliates provide support to those wanting to create new programs, like the Pathways to Prosperity Network, Pathways in Technology (P-Tech) schools, Education Strategy Group, Jobs for the Future, and the Linked Learning Alliance.

Finally, there are partnership programs outside traditional K-12 and postsecondary education. Building Futures, for example, is a registered apprenticeship program in Rhode Island involving public, private, and non-profit organizations that award industry credentials in fields such as construction, health care, manufacturing, commercial fisheries, and marine trades.

Many of these programs award credentials that certify the successful completion of a specific course of instruction. Credential Engine identifies 1,076,358 unique U.S. credentials in 18 categories delivered through secondary education, postsecondary education, non-academic organizations, and Massive Open Online Courses. U.S. spending on training and

education programs by educational institutions, employers, federal grant programs, states, and the military is estimated to be \$2.133 trillion.

A Fordham Institute analysis shows that pathways programs strengthen workplace readiness and expand opportunity for young people. These programs have several benefits: They are not a path away from college, as those who take career-oriented courses are just as likely as their peers to attend college; they increase graduation rates; they improve college outcomes, especially for women and disadvantaged students; they boost income; and finally, they enhance skills like perseverance and self-efficacy.

Student outcomes suggest that these programs work. The Pathways to Work Evidence Clearinghouse, an initiative of the federal Administration for Children and Families, reviewed more than 8,000 research studies identifying 221 pathways interventions. It concluded "that 38 percent of the examined interventions improved outcomes in at least one domain of interest to the Pathways

Clearinghouse." Of the examined interventions, 27% improved employment, 24% increased earnings, and 14% reduced the use of public benefits. The international 38-member Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) examined the link between teenage activities, experiences and vocations, and adult career outcomes in eight countries. They found "evidence that secondary school students who explore, experience and think about their futures in work frequently encounter lower levels of unemployment, receive higher wages and are happier in their careers as adults."

OECD also has outlined a model for how to integrate a learner's passage through high school with increasing levels of employer engagement. This process begins with work exposure, presenting young people with information, ideas, and activities like career talks and workplace visits. It then moves to work exploration, as participants actively explore and investigate work through more in-depth research on specific occupations as well as job shadowing and internships. This includes developing a resume

and practicing job interviews. Finally, work experience includes sustained and supervised activities and student work-related projects. OECD has also described a Career Education Framework that begins in early childhood and continues through high school.

Exposure, exploration, and experience — these activities nurture the development of young people's social networks (especially their weak ties) and occupational identities, while deepening their understanding of the structure and culture of work. These methods are also in accord with how learning occurs in the developing brains of children and adolescents. One aspect of the brain's plasticity is its dependence on experience, meaning that young people's minds incorporate inputs from the experiences they have. This sustained engagement nurtures the general mental capacity called cognitive endurance, or the ability to practice thinking and doing for extended periods of time. Accordingly, the type of learning described here occurs through practice, exposure, and experience. Experience is thus crucial to career-pathways programs.

## OPPORTUNITY PLURALISM

The credentialist prejudice creates what Joseph Fishkin characterizes as a "bottleneck" to opportunity for young people rather than a bridge. The K-12 career-pathways approach breaks through the credentialist bottleneck by emphasizing a broader understanding of opportunity. I follow Fishkin in calling the latter approach opportunity pluralism. It offers

a variety of paths one might pursue, or enterprises in which one might engage [because] people hold diverse views about what constitutes a good life, and they have different preferences about which social roles and jobs they would prefer to hold. These different social roles and jobs genuinely offer [different] forms of human flourishing.

Even while seeking to create multiple pathways to success, this opportunity program does not discourage individuals from pursuing a college degree but rather makes it one valid approach among many. In refusing to equalize opportunity

along the single route of college for all, it makes the nation's opportunity infrastructure more pluralistic by valuing both educational and employment outcomes. Opportunity pluralism allows us to see credentials as something more than mere steps toward an associate's or bachelor's degree. It enables colleges to "unbundle" the four-year degree into building blocks, or stackable credentials, that are earned while working and, as a career progresses, can lead to a degree if that is what an individual chooses to do.

This new opportunity agenda differs sharply from the old vocational education that placed students into different tracks based mostly on family background. That sorting process often carried with it racial, ethnic, and class biases: While middle- and upper-class white students sat in academic, college-preparatory classes, immigrants, low-income youth, and students of color typically enrolled in low-level academic and vocational training. As Jeannie Oakes and her colleagues at the RAND Corporation found in their seminal 1992 report, "Educational Matchmaking," educators often characterized

vocational programs as dumping grounds for students believed to be incapable of doing serious academic work. Opportunity pluralism, by contrast, rejects this biased presorting.

Pathways programs also provide young people with social and psychological benefits. By exposing young people to occupations and helping them explore and experience them, these programs allow students to try on different futures and envision themselves as productive workers. Students develop clarity about who they are and what their interests, values, and abilities are, helping them to develop their occupational identity or vocational self. The pathways approach also cultivates the connections and bonds — the strong and weak ties — crucial to finding a job. Through the cross-class friendships they create, career pathways have the potential to boost a young person's long-term social and economic mobility without assuming that college for all is the only route to the good life. They also form civic entrepreneurs who undertake local initiatives and

nurture civil society. In short, these programs build the local infrastructure that helps young people pursue opportunity.

## **REALISTS IN THE HEARTLAND**

College for all once seemed like a good idea. If higher education was the surest ticket to a successful career, why not universalize it? But that is not the world in which we live anymore — not only because higher education has delivered diminishing returns on escalating costs, but also because the assumption that college is the only good path eventually hurt precisely those who most need help.

Credentialism has led to degree inflation, an underutilized workforce, and dead-end paths for countless workers.

The good news is that the future is already underway in states and local communities. It is time for us to leave this flawed, outmoded model behind and embrace a new opportunity framework that creates career pathways and credentials more closely linked with employers and labor-market demand. We must do this for

the good of the students who benefit from these programs and for the good of society, which can make better use of talents that might otherwise be overlooked.

Concepts such as cognitive skills, habits of association, and opportunity pluralism give us a way to frame a bipartisan conversation about the role of schools and other community institutions in student success. As demonstrated by the polling cited above about Americans' ranked priorities for K-12 education, parents, young people, and policymakers strongly support creating new education options that develop career pathways. These programs can help forge what the public-policy scholar Ryan Streeter calls an "ideological heartland" of "domestic realists." This is an *ideological* heartland because it is a state of mind rather than a physical location, and it's the land of domestic *realists* because it is inhabited by those who avoid political extremes. They may lean left or right, or belong to that forgotten group called moderates, but they care more for practical action than culture-war posturing.

Roughly two-thirds of Americans live in this ideological heartland. In comparison, about a quarter of Americans are staunch progressives or conservatives living at the edges of the political spectrum, immersed in the culture wars. Yet one would not know it from the coverage K-12 education receives these days, which presents the spectacle of a white-hot battleground of warring ideologies. That is not what this new opportunity framework is about. It aims instead to help young people make a living and make a life, giving them the financial and social resources they need to pursue human flourishing. Instead of offering a vision of college that is unmoored from reality, the new opportunity framework rests on both profitable knowledge and priceless relationships, on economic and social exchange. In addition to guiding young people toward social and economic well-being, this agenda advances local citizenship and civic responsibility. The time is right to expand these pathways programs and embrace opportunity pluralism for the good of current and future workers — and the good of American society.

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