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## The Educational Lottery

STEVEN BRINT

on the four kinds of heretics attacking the gospel of education.



**Felicity Allen, ed.**

***Education***

Whitechapel/MIT Press (Documents of Contemporary Art), August 2011. 240 pp.

**Philip W. Jackson**

***What Is Education?***

University of Chicago Press, December 2011. 136 pp.

**John Marsh**

***Class Dismissed: Why We Cannot Teach or Learn Our Way Out of Inequality***

Monthly Review Press, July 2011. 328 pp.

**Professor X*****In the Basement of the Ivory Tower: Confessions of an Accidental Academic***

Viking Adult, March 2011. 288 pp.

Education is as close to a secular religion as we have in the United States. In a time when Americans have lost faith in their government and economic institutions, millions of us still believe in its saving grace. National leaders, from Benjamin Rush on, oversaw plans for extending its benefits more broadly. In the 19th century, the industrialist Andrew Carnegie famously conceived of schools as ladders on which the industrious poor would ascend to a better life, and he spent a good bit of his fortune laying the foundations for such an education society. After World War II, policy makers who believed in the education gospel grew numerous enough to fill stadiums. One by one, the G.I. Bill, the Truman Commission report, and the War on Poverty singled out education as *the way* of national and personal advance. “The answer to all of our national problems,” as Lyndon Johnson put it in 1965, “comes down to one single word: education.”

The American education gospel is built around four core beliefs. First, it teaches that access to higher levels of education should be available to everyone, regardless of their background or previous academic performance. Every educational sinner should have a path to redemption. (Most of these paths now run through community colleges.) Second, the gospel teaches that opportunity for a better life is the goal of everyone and that education is the primary — and perhaps the only — road to opportunity. Third, it teaches that the country can solve its social problems — drugs, crime, poverty, and the rest — by providing more education to the poor. Education instills the knowledge, discipline, and the habits of life that lead to personal renewal and social mobility. And, finally, it teaches that higher levels of education for all will reduce social inequalities, as they will put everyone on a more equal footing. No wonder President Obama and Bill Gates want the country to double its college graduation rate over the next 10 years.

The advance of the education gospel has been shadowed from the beginning by critics who claim that education, despite our best efforts, remains a bastion of privilege. For these critics, it is not that the educational gospel is wrong (a truly democratic, meritocratic school system would, if it existed, be a good thing); it is that the benefits of education have not yet spread evenly to every corner of American society, and that the trend toward educational equality may be heading in the wrong direction. They decry the fact that schools in poor communities have become dropout factories and that only the wealthy can afford the private preparatory schools that are the primary feeders to prestigious private colleges. The higher education Establishment recognizes critics like these as family. They accept the core beliefs of the education gospel and are impatient only with its slow and incomplete adoption.

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Other heresies are more radical, and thus more disturbing to settled beliefs about the power of education. One currently growing in popularity we might call “the new restrictionism.” According to the new restrictionists, such as the economists Philip Babcock and Mindy Marks, co-authors of the 2008 paper “Leisure College USA: The Decline in Student Study Time,” access to higher education may have gone too far. Our colleges and universities are full to the brim with students who do not really belong there, who are unprepared for college and uninterested in breaking a mental sweat. Instead of studying, they spend time talking on the phone, planning social events, chitchatting about personal trivia and popular culture, and facebooking. Faculty members demand less of these students, according to Babcock and Marks, both because they are incapable of doing more and because they will punish faculty members with bad evaluations if they are pushed to try harder. The students often consider courses that require

concentration “boring” and “irrelevant.” They argue and wheedle their way into grades they do not deserve. The colleges, out of craven financial motives, do not squarely face the fact that not all of their students are “college material.” Worse, they cater to ill-prepared and under-motivated students, dumbing down the curriculum to the point where a college degree is worth less, in terms of educational quality, than a degree from one of the better high schools. Institutions at the tail end of academic procession are, as David Riesman once put it, “colleges only by the grace of semantic generosity.”

In previous generations, critics of access for all were found mainly among the upper classes, who found the working classes unsuitable companions in learning. Hard-driving working-class kids were not the sort of people with whom one wanted to associate, and they lacked the cultivation to appreciate what the best education had to offer. This is the world of William F. Buckley’s *God and Man at Yale*. Today’s restrictionists are not snobs but staunch meritocrats: people who made their way through the schooling system, and who believe in it. They are dismayed by what the system has become in an age they see as one of near-universal access.

Furthermore, where the old restrictionists merely wanted to keep the working classes out, new restrictionists argue that colleges are not providing what poorly prepared students need to succeed. James Rosenbaum, the author of *Beyond College for All*, for example, has argued that many students have no use for the abstract intellectualism of liberal arts course work. What they need instead is basic literacy and numeracy, good training for occupational life, instruction in “social skills” (how to present oneself to an employer and colleagues, including no visible tattoos or loud music on home answering machines), and teachers who can connect them to potential employers and provide reliable information to employers about their students.

Thanks to the new restrictionists, we have become familiar with worrying statistics on the surprisingly lax requirements of college today. On average, students socialize more than 40 hours a week but attend and prepare for class only 26 or 27. Only half of the sophomores in a recent study said they had had a class during the last term that required them to write 20 pages or more during the term, and one-third said they had taken no class that required them to read as much as 40 pages a week. Even among English majors in the University of California, half say they do less than 80 percent of the assigned reading in their courses. If English majors do not read, what can we expect of business or communications majors? The answer is, not much. Nearly two-thirds of all UC students said they do less than 80 percent of the reading for their classes.

Professor X, the *nom de guerre* of an English composition adjunct instructor toiling in the bottom reaches of academe, is easily the best writer among the new restrictionists (whose ranks also include Mark Bauerlein, professor of English at Emory; PayPal founder Peter Thiel; and Michael Ellsberg, author of *The Education of Millionaires*, among others). Professor X’s students are nurses, firemen, and claims adjusters. None have any literary interests, and very few know how to compose a clear paragraph, much less an arresting essay. Nor do they appear to have the ability or drive to learn how to do so, in spite of X’s spirited efforts. They are in college because they need a credential to obtain a job or to move up in their current one. They take his classes because they have to pass English composition to earn their degree.

X’s standards are not particularly high. The fundamental principle is that writing “should not wobble”: “We expect our houses to be plumb, our tables solid — why not our paragraphs?” And yet his students write sentences that wobble and collapse. Many have read fewer than 10 books in their lifetimes. They have never studied grammar. Adherence to the sloppy, elliptical language of texting and tweeting has become an acceptable way to hide the fact that these students are not capable of composing adequate English sentences. They do not know how to use revision to come closer to the quality and depth of good writing because they do not have an archetype of good writing in their minds. As X notes, such an

archetype is created over the course of a lifetime, not in a 15-week semester.

X is scandalized that his students are going deeply in debt for an education that is not particularly useful to them, and from which many will not emerge with degree in hand. He rails against the “magic” business model of colleges and universities: Assure your students that a college degree is required for any decent job (whether the education they receive is related to the work they will eventually be doing or not) and pave your school’s way to riches. If all this sounds a bit like the housing bubble and crisis — unscrupulous lenders promoting the aspirations of ill-equipped borrowers — it is no accident. The housing crisis provides the touchstone, and catalyst, for *In the Basement*; X stumbles into adjuncting as a way to pay the mortgage on a house that he and his wife wanted but could not afford. He is sensitive, therefore, to the analogous plight of students: In X’s eyes, colleges are as guilty as the mortgage lenders of gulling hapless consumers into taking on too much debt for a shot at the American Dream. But the consumers are also guilty of expecting easy terms and believing that the value of their investment will always appreciate. Like the American Dreamers who helped fuel the mortgage crisis, these students want to believe that their small scholastic capital is sufficient to allow them to qualify for decent grades. The colleges don’t want to say no to anyone, so they try to find merit, even where it doesn’t exist. X summarizes the attitude thus:

We don’t like to admit that one student may be smarter, sharper, harder working, better prepared, more energetic, more painstaking — simply, a better student — than another ... Our quest to provide universally level playing fields has made us reluctant to keep score.

In books like *In the Basement*, students who live in wealthy suburbs are off the hook, not only because they tend to be better prepared for college, but because they do not face the long odds or deep indebtedness of X’s students. This includes a large number of students who are destined for college simply because they were fortunate to be born into families in which both parents went to college, where ideas were discussed around the dinner table, large words were used in the household, and academic expectations were set high. Some of these well-to-do high school achievers also loaf in college. The difference is that they loaf around with others like themselves, and they carry their social networks and their prestigious college names with them into the labor market.

We might ask X, “What options do the students in his target sights have?” The United States has been notably unsympathetic to German-style apprenticeship programs. Instead, our vocational training “system” is a patchwork of regional voc-techs, community colleges, for-profits, union-sponsored programs, and corporate training. Unlike in the German system, employers do not participate directly in support of most American vocational training institutions and programs. Students in Germany are trained for a particular occupation, and they cannot easily move to a new one. Our approach has been to say “it’s never too late” to move up the ladder with a higher-level credential. We are long on second and third chances, and anxious about “forcing” students to commit to a particular line of work. Our system is one that provides opportunity to obtain credentials, but lacks responsibility for employment. This is expensive and wasteful, but it is also optimistic in a cockeyed way. Some students make it on the second or third or fourth try. Most feel that they have had a fair shot.

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Another heresy, and a very old one, is the idea that schooling provides education for servitude rather than freedom. It crushes the spirit, rather than expanding it. It is easy to see the elements of truth in this critique: Schools do line students up in rows, make them raise their hands, set them on task after evaluated task, insist on discipline in the classroom, and reward the motivated conformists. The “free the students” heresy goes back at least to Rousseau; though popular among Romantics of all eras, it had a

major resurgence in the 1960s, when Paul Goodman, John Holt, and Ivan Illich carried the “free the students” flag. For them, children are born creative and curious, only to have the schools drum out these natural dispositions in order to create good soldiers for “the system.”

Romantic heretics of the “free the students” school are surely correct that many kids are more creative and curious when they start school than when they leave it. In a recent talk at the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce, the British educational theorist Ken Robinson cited a study indicating that 98 percent of kindergarteners can come up with more than 200 uses for a paper clip, a level of creativity that would rank in the top percentile among adults. What Robinson fails to mention is how much of this youthful creativity goes into thinking of new ways to torture weak, different, or unpopular peers. An estimated 160,000 students in the United States stay at home every day to avoid a bully. It is difficult for anyone who has had a *Lord of the Flies* experience to see children simply as nature’s darlings hammered into servility by schooling. It is also difficult for any successful student who has lived in the bleak environment of an undereducated household to see the materials of education as anything but a gateway to a broader and more luminous world of human experience.

The goal of educational Romantics, as Hannah Arendt observed in a 1954 essay on “the crisis in education,” is to obliterate as far as possible the distinction between play and work — in favor of the former. This tends to make the state of childhood into an absolute, rather than a temporary stage on the way to adulthood. “Creativity” is of doubtful value if it is disconnected from deep immersion in forms and genres, passionate interest in a particular activity, and the discipline to stick with long-term projects. (Virtually every successful artist has these qualities; think of how deeply immersed rock-and-roll musicians — those most spontaneous and “free” of modern artists — were in the blues. They studied, lived, and re-created the blues. As Keith Richards testifies in his autobiography, *Life*, if after hours of practicing one of his bandmates wanted to leave for the night, the others would shame him into staying until everyone was happy with the evening’s musical progress, or too exhausted to continue.)

Undoubtedly, schools can do a better job encouraging divergent thought than they do. The British artist Roy Ascott describes the curriculum of the Ealing School of Art in London, where empirical and scientific studies are balanced by studies intended to encourage new ways of thinking and seeing. Examples of the latter include, “Imagine you wake up one day to discover that you are a sponge. Describe visually your adventures during the day,” and, “Using only wood, sheet aluminum, string, and pins, construct analogs of a high-pitched scream, the taste of ice cream, and a football match.” The Romantics are read because schools are not very successful in linking discipline to creative thought.

The “Documents of Contemporary Art” volume edited by London-based artist and curator Felicity Allen carries on this tradition, albeit without the capacity for sustained argumentation found in earlier generations of Romantics. *Education* seems more a manifestation of the problems of our educational system than a solution to them. The book includes 80 selections from artists and theorists like Vincent Katz, Les Levine, and Dennis Atkinson, their contributions averaging a slender two and one-half pages apiece. Katz recollects the experimental Black Mountain College as “a sojourn of great fertility” geared toward “new ways of doing, rather than learning and repeating the past.” Levine opines that formal art criticism must be “judged as organized power” because of its “umbilical” ties to collecting. Atkinson observes that terms like “accuracy” and “technical skill” are “discursive practices” in which “particular norms ... are established and according to which students’ practices are positioned, regulated, and understood.” Much better, according to him, are “flexible teaching-learning spaces” that accommodate “unpredictable or unexpected directions ... (disrupting) established states of pedagogical knowledge.”

Dozens of ellipses are scattered throughout every piece. (I felt that it was raining confetti on some pages.) Allen presumably finds this a winning form of provocation — and consistent with the bricolage aesthetic

many associate with our postmodern times. But I cannot applaud the style, as I find the book symptomatic of a larger conflict. I see a contest between popular culture and the educational system in which the educational system has been all but drubbed into submission. Part of this undoubtedly has to do with the shortcomings of the educational system. Part also has to do with the difficulty required to think hard, perform complex tasks competently, and write about them well. Popular culture — and, increasingly, it seems, contemporary art — requires no such hardships; instead, it mocks them. Allen’s is a self-styled radical intervention intended to improve schools. But in its short attention span, its dizzying shifts in perspective, its tolerance for sloppy thinking, and its haphazard organization, this book stands on the side of the drubber.

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John Marsh is a proponent of another old heretical sect: the “fool’s gold” group. These heretics specialize in debunking the social progress beliefs of the educational gospel. Although education does indeed lead to social mobility for some, Marsh argues, it cannot do so for most. For the working classes, a much better approach, he believes, would be to attack the proximate sources of inequality: tax laws that privilege the rich and labor laws that restrict the rights of unions and set the minimum wage below a decent living standard. “Given the political will,” he writes, “whether through redistributive tax rates, massive public works projects, a living wage law, or a renaissance of labor unions, we could decrease poverty and inequality tomorrow regardless of ... the number of educated and uneducated workers.” Left to its own devices, he argues, expansion of the educational system will produce not social equality but credential inflation: the condition in which higher levels of education (or distinctive brands of education) are necessary to “buy” standards of living previously associated with lower levels (or generic brands) of education. As workers attain the bachelor’s degree, middle-class incomes become associated with the attainment of master’s or first professional degrees, and access to truly powerful opportunities requires attendance at an elite institution.

For “fool’s gold” heretics like Marsh, higher education promises what it cannot deliver. They reject the premise put forward by Carnegie and his disciples: Education, they argue, does not necessarily offer a ladder to the good life. Because of the collapse of the labor market for workers with only high school degrees, higher education is a defensive necessity, but all it offers most people is a way of running in place. The gospel persists because employers like the effect of higher education on workers’ attitudes and because ordinary citizens have fewer and fewer alternatives to education as a ladder of ascent. Meanwhile, living wage laws are rare and vigorously resisted, unions have been decimated by right-to-work laws, the mobility of capital keeps workers on the defensive, and campaign contributions to politicians of both parties keep higher marginal tax rates for the rich all but off the table.

In my opinion, Marsh is on the right track here; placing all of our hopes for greater equality into the education basket ensures that schools will fail to deliver, while plausibly making it more difficult for them to accomplish the primary tasks for which they were designed. One reason that education cannot solve problems of inequality is that most jobs do not in fact require high levels of education. Far from becoming a society of hyper-rational and high-powered “knowledge workers,” as theorists of post-industrial society predicted, the United States is becoming a society of hospital orderlies, cashiers, compliance officers, and computer technicians — to judge by its fastest-growing occupations. College educated professionals and managers constitute just 15 percent of the work force. If the size of the professional-managerial stratum is relatively fixed, the educated children of the well-to-do will find ways to keep all but the most determined children of the working classes out. They will size each other up by comparing the quality of the schools from which they graduated, how articulately they can discuss current affairs or their summer travel experiences, and how they navigate any number of other cultural checkpoints.

I am not as confident as Marsh is, though, that a stark presentation of the facts will puncture the myths of higher education. People want to believe, and they see no alternative to belief. When our leaders tell us that everyone will need at least a bachelor's degree in the post-industrial future, very few of us will say, "Do you mean the people who clean the homes and mow the lawns of professionals?" — if only because none of us want to think of ourselves as those people. Instead, one-third of Americans think they are in the top few percentiles of income, or soon will be. We may no longer be the land of opportunity, but we often seem determined to remain the land of credulity.

Even for Marsh, the weight of the educational gospel is too great to overcome in the end; the best he can do is to smudge its luster a little. Chastened by the bleak options, Marsh pirouettes in the last pages of *Class Dismissed*, embracing the very doctrine he has spent 200 pages debunking. He calls for American society to allow all children to hold a ticket in the form of a good education to "the lottery of useful and remunerative jobs." There is little the American working classes like more than a lottery, and using the educational system as a means of ascent certainly beats the odds of most lotteries. After all is said and done, "fool's gold" still glitters!

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Finally, there is the "true educators" sect, to which University of Chicago professor of education Philip W. Jackson belongs. This group takes the standpoint of the Platonic form of education to inspire deeper appreciation of craft and, at least indirectly, to hold up a mirror to the deficiencies of our current system of schooling. For these heretics, upward mobility is beside the point; to dwell on such sociological factors is to neglect the true nature of education. What does "true education" look like? Drawing on Hegel, Kant, and Dewey, Jackson has an answer.

Jackson distinguishes between mimetic and transformative education. Mimetic education "gives a central place to the transmission of factual and procedural knowledge from one person to another, through an essentially imitative process." By contrast, transformative education seeks to accomplish a "qualitative change ... a metamorphosis" and particularly addresses "all those traits of character and of personality most highly prized by the society at large." Mimetic education, in other words, imparts knowledge; transformative education does so as well but, more importantly, it *changes* people. Transformative education is an enterprise in which the spirit of wanting to know is also cultivated. Students who catch the "education bug" identify deeply with a given subject and want to know more about it. A music appreciation course can be successful if it imparts knowledge about the symphonies it covers. If the course is transformative, however, students will want to find out more and more about the symphonic form, the great composers, ways that themes in different symphonies interweave, develop, and culminate. They may even begin to see the world and its relations, metaphorically, as a symphony. In transformative education, human beings become capable not only of knowing, but of self-reproducing growth.

For Jackson, the good teacher strives for perfection, leavened by a loving outlook. Striving for perfection is important to Jackson. Like religion, education aims high. It wants to tell the truth. It is a moral enterprise, because it seeks to make everyone it touches better than they currently are. Because education is about truth, it is also about correction. The possibility of elevation, as Hegel knew, requires the negation of error. Yet because they must kindle an interest in the spirit of learning, teachers are inclined to downplay students' weaknesses while applauding their efforts. Because she wishes students to remain on the path of improvement, the teacher makes more of their contribution to knowledge than perhaps is warranted.

To transform people, education requires a particular attitude of students too: the attitude of receptivity

and affection. “We feel close to those objects toward which we profess love,” Jackson writes. “We identify with them ... We possess them. They become ‘ours’ ... These forms of attachment reduce the separation between subject and object. They bring the two closer together, which is the principal goal of education.” Because education is a relationship between teacher and student, students need to be known by their teachers. The possibility of identification with the subject matter flows as much through the teacher as through the course material. If students do not feel known by the teacher, it will be difficult for them to identify with the course materials, and even to feel the desire to know more about the topic. They must want, at some level, to be like the teacher. For the student, learning involves both grasping and shaping. Students grasp course materials and the spirit of the subject through appreciation, and they shape them for their own uses through assertion.

In our current mass access to higher education institutions, we clearly do not have anything remotely like Jackson’s ideal educational experience. Instead, large class sizes, busy schedules, and a low-expectations culture discourage both teachers from knowing their students and students from identifying with their teachers. The back rows of lecture halls fill with students paying attention to football scores or the postings of Facebook friends. For many, the interest of the school is found primarily in the opportunities for socializing and extracurricular activities it offers. Classes are necessary, but dull.

For teachers, good performance in a large lecture hall is at first exhilarating, but as that exhilaration wears off, they feel more and more like trained seals performing for less-than-rapt audiences. Exams are mangled rehashes of readings or posted lecture notes. Whole quarters can pass without a teacher being able to identify a single student who is able to engage in a meaningful critical dialogue with the course materials. The only times the teacher sees students in office hours are the week before exams, or if the students have a class performance staring them in the face.

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Heretics often offer penetrating insights about the flaws of dominant doctrines. They are usually less perceptive about the limitations (or dangers) of the alternatives they favor. The new restrictionists run the risk of forgetting about the problem of inequality and further privileging the privileged. Romantic dissenters do not often require the complement of deep knowledge and discipline on which adult creativity also rests. The “fool’s gold” school has no concrete plan for erecting a just social system in which workers are paid a living wage, non-corrupt labor unions are encouraged, and the wealthy are taxed enough to support decent public services. And “true educators” live in a rarefied world of one-on-one tutorials and private education, one that, however inspiring, is utterly divorced from the contexts in which most teachers actually work.

It is worth reflecting on the possibility that our educational institutions support the current state of social organization in the United States more effectively than heretics allow. Let’s imagine a world in which motivation is very important. Opportunities in this world are pyramidal. Fifteen percent of adults are professionals or managers, 10 percent or so are upper-middle class in income, and 1 percent is rich. But leaders feel it is important to persuade as many people as possible that they have a realistic chance of reaching these positions. In this society, the idea of opportunity has been central from the beginning to the legitimacy of inequality. Rags-to-riches stories still figure prominently in folklore. Nearly 30 percent of the population completes a college degree. Although college education is no guarantee of achieving a secure life in the upper-middle class, it is very nearly a precondition. Moreover, without colleges serving as pastoral warehouses for non-academically oriented students, too many young people would be put out on the labor market, raising unemployment rates and reducing wages. This is a consumer-oriented society and people need to feel they have or will have the means to enjoy the items they covet. At the same

time, the work world is highly regulated. A few jobs require specialized skills that can only be acquired in technical programs, but most jobs are relatively routine. They require workers to know basic literacy and numeracy, but other skills can be picked up on the job. The most important requirements are that workers show up and do their jobs every day, feel comfortable working with people from a variety of backgrounds, and know how to find information they need in non-routine situations. Following the directives of supervisors is essential. Reliability and steady effort are highly valued.

This, of course, is the society in which we live. In this society, educational structures that might otherwise seem low-performing, expensive, and inefficient make perfect sense. Dedicated work is not required in college because it will not be required at work. In most jobs, showing up and doing the work is more important than achieving outstanding levels of performance. No one is excluded from the possibility of attending college and thereby competing for a ticket to the upper-middle class. Life is insecure and can be full of troubles below this level, so ambitions to succeed are high. If families and schools do not have the resources to prepare students for success in most cases, that's fine, because too many well-prepared students would put pressure on the system to offer rewards that it cannot supply. In this world, inequality is legitimate, talent can always be identified, a regulated work force is possible, technical training is possible, adjustments for credential inflation are possible, the regulation of ambition is possible, and the elite is preserved in gilded educational enclaves.

Yet change may be in the air. *The Economist* reports that the lives of college graduates will be more insecure in the future; rising countries will be more competitive and technology will chop up many of the activities of brain workers into routine tasks. Tapped out American states are withdrawing funding from public colleges and universities on the theory that the benefits of public education are mainly privately consumed and should therefore be paid for by those who gain from them. Severely underprepared students are channeled into community colleges where they rarely emerge from remedial and developmental courses. Elsewhere, students find that they are frequently shut out of classes or stuck in classes they do not want for lack of choice. No longer supported very well for their efforts to provide access, public universities are raising tuition and competing aggressively for full-paying and international students.

Notwithstanding the Carnegian aspirations of Obama and Gates, these forces may put wind in the sails of the new restrictionists. If they do, we will hear more stories about student debt burdens and the low levels of performance of under-prepared college students. We will hear more about the “uselessness” of non-technical degrees. In this environment, taxpayers could decide that the country's ideals surrounding educational opportunity have become, finally, too expensive to maintain. The result would be a smaller higher-education system, a more “globalized” system, and fewer opportunities for ambitious children of the domestic working classes.

Or we could decide to invest in a revival of the gospel, this time with the ideas of Jacksonian “true educators” woven more clearly into our designs. I, for one, welcome this, but I do not recommend relying on external regulation for this purpose. Concerted efforts are going into bringing greater “accountability” to colleges and universities through assessments of student learning outcomes. These efforts are likely to bring modest gains in tested skill and subject areas, as occurred in K-12 education at the beginning of the “accountability era” in the 1980s, together with greater disengagement from the learning of untested subjects and skills and the further de-professionalization of college teaching. These measures can advance mimetic education in small ways, but they will not encourage a truly transformative education for anyone.

Instead, revitalizing reforms will require changes from inside our institutions. I cannot be optimistic about the prospects for reform because of the deeply embedded consumerist attitudes of students and the real constraints faced by institutions, including pressures to teach larger classes to students who often

lack enough money even to purchase textbooks. Nevertheless, educators are far from powerless, and they now know how to improve undergraduate education, if they have the will to do it.

Improvement will require breaking down our large institutions as often as possible into smaller groupings of learners by creating first-year learning communities, salting in more seminars into the curriculum, capping upper-division courses, encouraging undergraduate research, and requiring senior projects. In these ways, teachers and students can learn to know each other again. Improvement will also mean stiffer requirements in fields that have severely lowered their expectations for learning. In larger classes, it will require many more opportunities for students to participate in class, both in old and new ways. (One promising new way is through “clicker” technology, which allows all students to answer questions posed by the professor, providing immediate feedback to the professor about how many students understand lecture points.) It will require more opportunities for students to be held publicly accountable for performing what they are learning — not just in anonymous tests and clicker polls, but in the presence of their classmates — much as musicians and athletes publicly perform what they learn in practice. And it will require an end to the all-too-prevalent attitude among under-motivated students that “the only thing that matters is the credential.”

In short, we will need to turn our backs on assumptions of our most fervent boosters of universal higher education: that access alone is the primary purpose, and that when students and teachers are co-present, education occurs. The challenge will be to reweave the uneven and tattered undergraduate experience in more durable and vivid patterns.

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