

PUBLIC HEARING

It is no ordinary work which we are set to do, and it comes to us under no ordinary conditions. We are not here to reproduce, in this new locality, some old and well known style of college or university. . . . The hungry eyes of toiling millions are turned, with mingled hope and fear, upon us, to see what new and better solution we can possibly offer of the great problems on which their well-being and destiny depend.

—John M. Gregory¹

Education is here placed among the articles of public care.

—Thomas Jefferson²

What are public universities and why do we need them? Here is an answer that gets right to the point: “If college opportunities are restricted to those in the higher income brackets, the way is open to the creation of and perpetuation of a class society which has no place in the American way of life.”³ This comes not from some leftist manifesto but from a report commissioned by Harry Truman, *Higher Education for American Democracy* (1947). Indeed, there should be nothing radical about rejecting a system that tracks family wealth into corresponding levels of educational and economic opportunity for the next generation. Recast as a positive claim, a democratic society must have educational institutions that offer both wide access and social mobility. However, it is exactly this combination that proves so difficult. As David Labaree has shown, our simultaneous pursuit of access and advantage “has not succeeded in shuffling the social deck”; rather, it has “lock[ed] us in a spiral of educational expansion and credential inflation.”⁴ “People who had an educational edge on the competition,” Labaree explains, “were, by and large, able to maintain this edge by increasing their schooling at the same rate as those below them in the status order.”⁵ Each time we open the

doors wider on the ground floor, we add levels to the structure. Thus, at the exact moment that access to the high school is widened beyond the middle class, we see the invention of curricular tracking. At Philadelphia's Central High School, for example, the new "commercial" track was put in place just in time (1898) for Central to drop its traditional entrance exam (1900).⁶

However, internal stratification was not enough to preserve advantage. With a tenfold increase in US high school attendance from 1890 to 1920, "middle-class students in the upper tracks were now heading to college, leaving [working class] children in the same relative position they occupied before—one step behind in the race for educational advantage."⁷ The pattern then repeats itself in higher education. Sparked by the GI Bill and fueled by Labaree's spiral, US college enrollments increased eightfold between 1940 and 1980.⁸ As before,

the newcomers did not flood into the same institutions that had become home to the middle class students in the years between the wars. Instead, higher education created a series of new lower-level institutions to make room for the influx, leaving the college's core middle-class constituency safely protected in institutions that, instead of becoming more inclusive in the face of greater demand, chose to become more exclusive.⁹

For Labaree, Paul Simon was right all along: "One man's ceiling is another man's floor."¹⁰

Today we find a system of higher education finely calibrated to reproduce social-economic advantage. While the extreme contrasts are startling—the poor go to college at roughly the same rate (around 40%) as the ultrarich land a spot in an elite college¹¹—more chilling may be the uncanny detail with which family income maps onto college access (see table 2).

Pick any part of the country and you will find a series of distinct class pathways. Table 3 shows one quartet from New Jersey. Passaic County is certainly affordable for students from all walks of life; but partly for that very reason its credential commands less respect in the labor market. For respect, one needs a degree from Rutgers or Princeton, but in both cases access narrows sharply. At Princeton, you are more likely to bump into an obscenely rich student (.1% signals an annual income of \$3,881,715) than you are one whose family income falls in the bottom quintile.¹⁴ Though not Princeton-pricey, even the in-state tuition at Rutgers remains steep. In the meantime, state flagships are increasingly "prioritizing affluent out-of-state

Table 2

Distribution of students by parental income in each college tier (2018)¹²

	Nonselective	Selective	Highly selective
Poorest quintile	14.3%	7.7%	6.0%
2nd quintile	18.2%	11.4%	8.5%
3rd quintile	21.5%	16.5%	11.7%
4th quintile	24.9%	24.5%	17.2%
Richest quintile	21.2%	40.0%	56.6%
Richest 10%	8.9%	22.2%	41.5%
Richest 5%	3.7%	11.4%	28.2%
Richest 1%	0.5%	2.1%	8.6%

Table 3

Class pathways in four New Jersey colleges (2014)¹³

	Passaic Co. Comm. Coll.	St. Peters College	Rutgers University	Princeton University
Net cost (in state)	\$177/credit	\$57,980	\$29,991	\$83,140
Net cost (out of state)	\$310/credit	\$57,980	\$47,691	\$83,140
Median family income	\$35,900	\$55,800	\$103,500	\$186,100
Poorest 20%	26%	12%	6.8%	2.2%
Richest 20%	9.6%	19%	47%	72%
Richest 10%	3.1%	9.5%	27%	58%
Richest 5%	1.2%	2.7%	12%	44%
Richest 1%	<1%	<1%	1.3%	17%
Richest .1%	<1%	<1%	<1%	3.1%
Grad median income (age 34)	\$25,200	\$45,500	\$58,400	\$90,700

students . . . over the moderate- and low-income state residents who they were created to serve.”¹⁵ According to James Angell, its third and longest-serving president, the University of Michigan sought to offer “an uncommon education for the common man.”¹⁶ Now only half of the seats in Ann Arbor are filled by students from Michigan. The in-state tuition (\$34,500/year) is intimidating enough; with its out-of-state premium (\$74,000/year), it seems that Michigan too has its sights set on the Ivy League.¹⁷ By

comparison, Rutgers has managed to maintain a large in-state enrollment (82%), but this goes to show that tuition is not the only barrier for less affluent students. A highly selective admissions process also selects for class. Thus, even the ostensibly public Rutgers enrolls seven times more students from the top quintile than from the bottom.

Anticipating the sticker shock faced by students and families, state universities resort to shameless spin. Here are examples from the costs pages at three Big Ten schools. At the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) (\$37,842 in-state/\$57,959 out-of-state) the word “Tuition” is tucked in a small font (yellow on light green) just above the extra-large, bolded phrase, “Invest with Confidence.”¹⁸ Indiana University Bloomington (\$28,670/\$56,620) adopts a similar strategy, heading their tuition and fees page with “IU Bloomington’s costs are just one part of the equation,” explaining that they “do a lot to manage costs and keep your return on investment high.”¹⁹ “Return on investment” is a hyperlink taking you to a page stating that “95% of IU seniors feel they’ve acquired job- or work-related knowledge and skills.”²⁰ My favorite may be the University of Maryland, where an algebraic graffito shows how to solve $X^2 - 4X + 4 = 0$ in five steps.²¹ The idea is that the tuition (\$30,488/\$59,290) is fair considering the skills you’ll acquire. I prefer another reading: only with moderately advanced mathematics can one understand how such a large figure was ever derived.

Adjusting for inflation, the cost of attending a four-year public university has tripled since 1980 and risen 65% since 2000.²² Even so, many publics charge premiums for professional majors. The University of Iowa charges you \$26,883 (\$48,846 out-of-state), unless you are a pharmacy major, in which case you will pay \$34,683 (\$50,225 out-of-state). If you major in classics at UIUC, you pay \$35,210 (\$54,046 out-of-state); if you major in civil engineering the bill rises to \$40,474 (\$61,872 out-of-state). At UVA, while education majors are given a slight break at \$38,772 (\$76,852 out-of-state), nursing majors pay a premium at \$43,148 (\$81,400 out-of-state). The argument for these variable rates is that some professions pay well, but, as we noted, this was precisely the promise of our state universities: that even people of humble means could aspire to such professions and improve their lot. The hope was that comprehensive public universities could serve as switching yards, rerouting class trajectories. With stratification across and within publics, we have all but settled on a two-track system,

with blue-collar institutions delivering working-class outcomes and elite institutions perpetuating privilege.²³ What is driving our abandonment of the democratic ideal articulated by the Truman Commission Report?

No doubt many social and economic factors are at play. Here I simply want to explore one central ratcheting mechanism in the downward spiral of US public higher education. If we look at the interaction of economic forces and educational values, we discover a disturbing negative feedback loop:

1. Decreases in state funding of higher education drive up tuition, putting financial stress on students and families.
2. Financial stress fuels jobbification, a cycle-within-the cycle as credentialization triggers program cuts that enfeeble general education, and this reinforces the credential mindset.
3. Jobbification cements the idea that higher education is a private not a public good.
4. Skepticism about the public role of universities saps taxpayer support for higher education, leading us back to where we began with decreasing state funding for public universities.²⁴

Now let us look at each of these steps in greater detail.

Step 1. While there are multiple drivers of rising tuition, the main culprit appears to be the waning of state funding.²⁵ The dark humor of another former University of Michigan president, James Duderstadt, sums it up nicely: “We used to be state-supported, then state-assisted, and now we are state-located.”²⁶ Between 2001 and 2019, average state higher-education per-student appropriations dropped 22.6%.²⁷ In 2012, tuition raced past state appropriations as a percentage of the operating budgets of public colleges and universities (the tipping point for four-year publics happened even sooner, in 2003).²⁸ At most state universities, state appropriations now constitute only a fraction of operating expenses. In many cases, the decline has been precipitous. At Berkeley, state support has declined from 50% to 14% over the past three decades.²⁹ At UVA, between 1987 and 2012, state funding fell from 37% to 14%.³⁰ That figure is now down to 8.6%.³¹ Over the last two decades, state support plummeted at institutions from the University of Washington (66% to 34%) to the University of Kansas (34% to 18%).³² A quick survey turns up no fewer than fourteen flagships at which the state funds a fifth or less of the budget: Rutgers (20%); Minnesota

(17%), UNC Chapel Hill (16%), UW Madison (15%), Arizona (13%), UT Austin (13%), Michigan (12.9%), Missouri (12%), South Carolina (11.6%), New Mexico (11%), New Hampshire (8.8%), Oregon (7.3%), UC Boulder (4.3%), and Penn State (3.9%).³³ One startling analysis, looking at the trend-lines from 1980 to 2011, discovered that thirteen states were on pace to *zero out* their funding by 2040, and another fifteen by 2070.³⁴

As state support vanishes, tuition soars, putting tremendous financial stress on students and families. During the same period, 1973–2013, in which inflation-adjusted public college tuition rose 270%, median household income rose a mere 5%.³⁵ Unsurprisingly, student indebtedness has reached stratospheric levels, now totaling \$1.75 trillion. As David Blacker points out, there is something especially insidious about this form of debt: since the bank cannot repossess your knowledge and skills, you are the collateral. Blacker thus sees student debt as a late capitalist form of indentured servitude.³⁶

Step 2. Being caught in this vise-grip alters what students and families expect from higher education. It is, after all, perfectly rational to inquire into the terms of one's indenture. What is surprising is how readily universities themselves adopt the language of return on investment. A few years back, to find out what UC Berkeley cost (currently \$46,008/\$78,582), you had to click through a page informing you that "a Berkeley education earns our graduates an additional \$26,333 each year in income over those who did not go to college."³⁷ This is textbook proofiness, but this statistical sleight of hand is just one feint in a larger shell game.³⁸

It is good to ask about the value of college. Indeed, there is nothing wrong with construing this value in terms of use. For Marx, a use-value is anything that "through its qualities satisfies human needs."³⁹ It "makes no difference," he immediately adds, whether these needs "arise . . . from the stomach . . . or the imagination."⁴⁰ Use is as rich and variable as our needs and desires, our purposes and projects. Even for the supposedly useless arts and humanities, practicality is not a problem. What could be more practical than figuring out how the world works, who you are, and what you stand for? When we fault someone for reducing value to utility, what we are really saying is that they have an impoverished imagination. Here precisely lies the (existential) use-value of liberal learning: it addresses our need to stop begging the fundamental question of what is worth wanting. It saves us from the fate, as Emerson warned, of reducing life to "an

affair to put somewhat between the upper and lower mandibles.”⁴¹ If you don’t keep your eye on the ball, someone will swap out the capacious idea of use for this mandibular idea of utility. Actually, Berkeley’s pitch pulls off an even more daring trick, vanishing use altogether. All that remains is “exchange-value,” which, as Marx says, does “not contain an atom of use-value.”⁴² What is the value of a Berkeley education? Apparently the answer is, whatever you can trade it for.

Given this race to the bottom line, we should not be surprised that a majority of students now hold a completely transactional view of higher education. In their exhaustive recent study, Fishman and Gardner found that fully 54% of students (at the medium selectivity institutions in their sample) equate college with degree-getting.⁴³ Imagine someone who took a four-year journey, and when we asked him what he was seeking, he said receipts from all of the toll booths.

Once this credentialing mindset revs up, the jobbification cycle really begins to spin.⁴⁴ Students vote with their feet, heading toward programs that provide, or at least appear to provide, a clear path to a well-paid position. Universities respond by putting their most careerist foot forward, starving the arts and humanities and stifling the already muffled invitation to general education.⁴⁵ Between 2012 and 2020, enrollment in humanities majors declined alarmingly, at universities and liberal arts colleges alike: Boston University (down 42%), Ohio State (46%), Tufts (nearly 50%), Vassar (nearly 50%), Bates (nearly 50%), Notre Dame (50%), SUNY Albany (75%).⁴⁶ This is when professors in the arts and humanities start to look both expensive and expendable. Right on cue, we see program closures:

- An astonishing 651 foreign-language programs were cut between 2013 and 2016.⁴⁷
- In 2018, the College Art Association was tracking threatened arts and humanities closures at fifteen public universities, including five flagships.⁴⁸
- Just since 2021, philosophy majors, if not entire departments, have been eliminated at six institutions and targeted at another four.⁴⁹
- At Emporia State University, the cuts are so widespread (anthropology, English, French, German, history, Latin American studies, philosophy) and the situation so fluid that a recent article in the student paper led with this request: “If you or your professor receive an email letting you know that your program has been suspended, please reach out to *The Bulletin*.”⁵⁰

What does general education mean if it excludes the study of language, literature, culture, and the meaning of life? And so the cycle spins: turning the curriculum into a job fair tightens the equation between college and credentialing; reducing college to an exchange-value undercuts the perceived value of humane learning.

Step 3. As the university becomes more jobbified, it becomes more and more difficult to perceive higher education as a public good. The discourse around “public goods” comes out of neoclassical economics, where it is assumed that most goods are private. Public goods are the exception to the rule that production and distribution can and should be driven by individual consumption and market mechanisms. Far from a lofty ideal, on this economic view, “public good” is a synonym for “market failure.” The idea is that market mechanisms are disrupted by the presence of “non-rivalrous” goods (e.g., looking at a painting in museum), for which “each individual’s consumption . . . leads to no subtraction from any other individual’s consumption of that good.”⁵¹ Market efficiency is further undermined by so-called free-riders who consume “non-excludable” goods (e.g., fish, in public waterways) without paying, who benefit from positive “spillover effects” or “externalities” generated by the consumption of others (e.g., when one house’s renovations lifts real estate values for the whole block), or who pass on the costs of negative externalities (e.g., pollution). Externalities are easy to find in education. When we teach a kindergartener to care about others, this educational good will be enjoyed not only by that student, but also by all those with whom he or she later comes in contact. Conversely, when we fail to teach students the difference between sound arguments and rhetorical manipulation, we all suffer under the demagogues who come to power. As a result, it has seemed prudent to educate collectively, breaking with market logic to invest in educating each other’s children.

Notice, though, that these paradigmatic examples of educational externalities involve young people engaged in civic and moral education. The argument weakens as we move into secondary and especially tertiary education, and as the coupling of education and credentialing grows tighter. It is easy to see why we all might benefit by teaching a young child to read. It is harder to see our collective interest in the teaching of AP Physics to a kid gunning for MIT. It is harder still to make the case that you stand to benefit by helping to fund your neighbor’s kid’s marketing degree at Michigan

State. The most common defense of public higher education is—recalling the agricultural roots of the land-grant universities—what we could call “the fertilizer argument.”⁵² If we send our farmers to Corvallis or Lincoln or West Lafayette, they will learn new techniques for increasing crop yield, and we will all reap the bounty with more food on our tables. In a testament to Montana State University, Sarah Vowell updates this argument. Vowell recounts the story of Maurice Hilleman, who grew up raising chickens on the outskirts of Bozeman and was headed after high school to a position at J.C. Penney before his older brother nudged him to try for a scholarship at MSU. Hilleman got the scholarship, finished first in his class, and went on to develop more than half of the “standard recommended vaccines—including those for measles, mumps, meningitis, pneumonia and both hepatitis A and B.” “In a century soaked in genocide,” Vowell writes, “his work saved millions of lives, including, potentially, yours and mine. J. C. Penney’s loss was humanity’s gain.”⁵³ Today, for every Hilleman, there is a battalion of Big Ten business majors whose educational gains do not so much ripple outward as fall safely into their own wallets.⁵⁴

Step 4. Thus, we arrive at the final step in the death spiral of contemporary public higher education. With the attenuation of the arts, humanities, and general education, and the predominance of a credential mindset, the goods of higher education appear entirely rivalrous and privative. It is one thing to say that we should collectively fund higher education as a space where intellectual, moral, aesthetic, and civic dispositions are formed. College as a party-punctuated professional pathway is a much harder sell. Given the strength of anti-tax rhetoric—protesting the funding of such luxuries as food inspection, roads, and courts—it is difficult for state politicians to make any argument for raising taxes, let alone one tied to higher education. And if they did make such an argument, who would blame overstretched families for rejecting it? When higher education is framed as a private investment in future earnings, how can you make the case for collective investment? In such a climate, state appropriations to higher education will continue to decline, and around the spiral we descend.

To be sure, feedback loops are hard to interrupt. At the same time, this analysis has revealed a weak link in the seemingly inexorable logic of privatization. The public argument that is failing is narrowly economic, as if the common good were synonymous with GNP. Two decades after the

Truman Report, presidential hopeful Robert F. Kennedy launched his presidential campaign at the nation's first land grant, Kansas State University. He then traveled to Lawrence to speak at Kansas's flagship public university, where he had this to say about "the mere accumulation of material things":

Gross National Product counts air pollution and cigarette advertising, and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage. It counts special locks for our doors and the jails for the people who break them. It counts the destruction of the redwood and the loss of our natural wonder in chaotic sprawl. It counts napalm and counts nuclear warheads and armored cars for the police to fight the riots in our cities. . . . Yet the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country, it measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile.⁵⁵

It does matter whether universities contribute to our economic well-being, but RFK reveals the calamity of reducing well-being to a simplistic metric for one aspect of human flourishing. Indeed, the dominant, economic conception of public goods is not only reductive: it's not really public. As Charles Taylor suggests, what economists call public goods are really just "convergent" private ones: this matters to me and it matters to you and we happen to pursue it collaboratively. Genuine public or "common" goods, Taylor says, matter to me *because they matter to you*.⁵⁶ This upsets the usual market logic in which goods are understood as commodities and the public as temporarily non-rivalrous consumers. In pursuing the goods described by Taylor, we are pursuing the public itself. Our relational prizing is always also a prizing of relation. On this view, the public is understood not as a standing body but an always fugitive formation, a way of coming together to dialogue about our shared fate. This brings into view a much deeper connection between higher education and public life. We do not gather to learn together in Bozeman, Lawrence, and East Lansing because of a market failure. This is not a fertilizer co-op. We are convening the public. Or at least this is what higher education could be if we reject the jobbification and naked transactionalism of the contemporary university. A degree-holder, even a degree-holder with some technical skills and

information, is hardly a satisfactory vision of the educated person. Of this I believe we can convince anyone who will listen. If we rededicate ourselves to general education, the citizenry may start to see education as a public investment, as an investment in the public. But we cannot begin to realize a curriculum that cultivates the full humanity of our students when we are killing off the arts and humanities. This is not a call for an otherworldly, impractical education. As I explain in the essay that follows, “Job Prospects,” humane learning and true vocational education go hand in hand.

Unhappily we cannot spend all of our time at the workbench. We are not only apprentice workers, we are apprentice men; and the apprenticeship in this latter trade is harder and longer than in the former one.

—Jean-Jacques Rousseau¹

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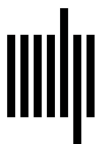
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