

Mutual Subversion: A Short History of the Liberal and the Professional in American Higher Education

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I want to tell a story about American higher education. Like many historical accounts, this story has a contrapuntal quality. As we know, historians frequently find themselves trying to weave discordant themes into complex patterns in the hope of making harmony. The reason for this is that simple themes are hard to find in the account of any complex social institution, especially one like education, which is composed of a motley accumulation of historical residues and social functions. We often come across one point about education that makes sense and then find a counterpoint that also makes sense. If we cannot eliminate one in favor of the other, then we try to put them together in a way that does not violate the rules of harmony and historical logic. In the effort to do so we, therefore, find ourselves in the business of writing fugues.

In this case I will be making two alternative arguments about long-term trends in the history of American colleges and universities. The initial argument is that over the years professional education has gradually subverted liberal education. The counterpoint is that, over the same period of time, liberal education has gradually subverted professional education. My aim is to show how these two views can be woven together by arguing that the professional has come to dominate the goals of higher education while the liberal has come to dominate its content. I will let you be the judge of whether this attempt produces more noise than music.

Point: The Shift from the Liberal to the Professional

One recurring theme in the history of American higher education is that the professional has been displacing the liberal. In a recent book, Norton

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Grubb and Marvin Lazerson develop this theme with great effectiveness, arguing that American education, especially at the tertiary level, has become increasingly vocationalized and professionalized over the years.¹ At the root of this change is what they call “the education gospel,” the firmly held belief that education exists in order to provide society with the job skills it needs and to provide individuals with the job opportunities they want. The authors acknowledge that this belief has yielded some real social and educational benefits. It has made higher education more attractive, both to students seeking jobs and employers seeking workers, and it has provided a strong basis for public support of higher education by demonstrating that the university is not simply a stronghold protecting the privileges of the elite but a people’s college promoting the public welfare. But they also point out the downside of this shift toward the professional. From that angle, the change has replaced broad liberal curriculum with narrow vocational curriculum, undercut the quality of learning by focusing on winning jobs rather than gaining knowledge, and stratified educational programs and institutions according to the status of students’ future jobs.

What is new about Grubb and Lazerson’s book is their view that this trend toward the vocational has a plus side, whereas the scholarly literature, in general, has portrayed the change as overwhelmingly negative. But the argument that this change has been taking place is commonplace in the historical scholarship on American higher education. In Laurence Veysey’s classic account, the rise of the American university in the late nineteenth century was characterized by the emergence of utility and research as dominant orientations, only partially offset by a lingering attachment to liberal culture.² Clark Kerr argued that the American university drew on two European precursors—the British college, with its emphasis on undergraduate liberal education, and the German graduate school, with its emphasis on research and graduate education—but then added a third distinctively American element, the land-grant college, with its emphasis on vocational education and providing practical solutions to public problems.³

Most historical accounts have emphasized this third element, which, in combination with the second, is seen pushing the university from a focus on providing students with a liberal education to a focus on preparing them for work and producing economically useful research. The evidence supporting this position is strong. The United States did not invent the university, but it did invent three distinctive forms of higher education, all of which had a strong vocational mission: The land-grant college was designed to prepare

¹W. Norton Grubb and Marvin Lazerson, *The Education Gospel: The Economic Power of Schooling* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

²Laurence R. Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965).

³Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University*, 5th ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 7-14.

graduates in the practical arts and to enhance industry, as reflected in the use of the words “agricultural” and “mechanical” in the titles of so many of these institutions; the normal school was targeted solely at the preparation of school teachers; and the junior college and its heir, the community college, were invented primarily to provide vocational education for what some founders called the “semi-professions.”⁴ The large majority of college students in the United States today are enrolled in colleges and universities that had their origins in one of these three types of vocational institutions.

The main explanation for the growing vocational orientation of the American university is its vulnerability to the market. As Martin Trow and others have pointed out, in the absence of strong state funding and state control, institutions of higher education in the United States have always been subject to strong market pressures.⁵ They depend heavily on student enrollments to generate income, in the form of both student-paid tuition and per-capita state appropriations, which means they have to cater to the demands of the consumer. They also rely on income from alumni donors and research grants. Their partial autonomy from state control gives them the freedom to maneuver effectively in the educational market in order to adapt to changing consumer preferences, donor demands, and research opportunities. Over the years, student consumers have increasingly expressed a preference for getting a good job over getting a liberal education, and donors and research funding agencies have demonstrated their own preferences for useful education and usable knowledge.

A broad literature has emerged that explores this market-based shift from the liberal to professional in American higher education. For example, there is: David Brown on the role of credentialism in generating the expansion of higher education in the late nineteenth century;⁶ Donald Levine on the rise of vocationally oriented programs, schools, and colleges in the 1920s and 30s;⁷ Alden Dunham on the emergence of practically oriented regional state universities in the 50s and 60s;⁸ Steven Brint and Jerome Karabel on vocationalization in community colleges over the twentieth century;⁹ Steven

⁴Gregory L. Goodwin, “A Social Panacea: A History of the Community-Junior College Ideology” (ERIC document ED 093-427), 157.

⁵Martin Trow, “American Higher Education: Past, Present, and Future,” *Educational Researcher* 7:3 (March 1988): 13-23; Dominic J. Brewer, Susan M. Gates, and Charles A. Goldman, *In Pursuit of Prestige: Strategy and Competition in U.S. Higher Education* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2002).

⁶David K. Brown, *Degrees of Control: A Sociology of Educational Expansion and Occupational Credentialism* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1995).

⁷David O. Levine, *The American College and the Culture of Aspiration, 1915-1940* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986).

⁸Edgar Alden Dunham, *Colleges of the Forgotten Americans: A Profile of State Colleges and Universities* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1969).

⁹Steven Brint and Jerome Karabel, *The Diverted Dream: Community Colleges and the Promise of Educational Opportunity in America, 1900-1985* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

Brint on the shift in the numbers of students, degrees, and faculty members within universities from liberal arts to professional schools in the late twentieth century;¹⁰ and Roger Geiger on the rise of consumerism and market-oriented research in the research university at the end of the century.¹¹ Also there is my own work, which has explored the consequences of the historical shift in educational goals, especially at the higher levels, away from democratic equality and toward social efficiency and social mobility.¹²

Counterpoint: The Shift from the Professional to the Liberal

The evidence strongly supports the thesis that American higher education has seen the expansion of the professional at the expense of the liberal. However, in many ways this argument may be dead wrong. Instead of professionalizing liberal education, maybe we have really been liberalizing professional education.

There is also a lot of historical evidence to support this counter thesis—especially when you look at the *content* of the expanding professional sector of higher education. Although most of the growth in higher education has been in the professional schools rather than the core disciplinary departments, Brint points out that the curriculum of the professional schools has become increasingly disciplinary. As he puts it: “Occupational and professional programs have moved closer to the center of academic life partly because they have modeled themselves on the arts and sciences—developing similarly abstract vocabularies, similarly illuminating theoretical perspectives, and similarly rigorous conceptual schemes.”¹³

Professional education has only recently taken this academic turn. Before the twentieth century, most professional training took place through an apprenticeship to an experienced practitioner, with the academic component of this preparation largely consisting of reading the books in the practitioner’s library.¹⁴ The shift toward the academic occurred as a result of the gradual incorporation of professional education into the university beginning in the late nineteenth century. Since World War II, the academic content of professional education in a wide range of fields has steadily increased, only

¹⁰Steven Brint, “The Rise of the ‘Practical Arts,’” in *The Future of the City of Intellect: The Changing American University* ed. Steven Brint (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 231-259.

¹¹Roger L. Geiger, *Knowledge and Money: Research Universities and the Paradox of the Marketplace* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

¹²David F. Labaree, *How to Succeed in School Without Really Learning: The Credentials Race in American Education* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

¹³Brint, “The Rise of the ‘Practical Arts,’” 238.

¹⁴John S. Brubacher and Willis Rudy, “Professional Education,” in *ASHE Reader on the History of Higher Education* ed. Lester F. Goodchild and Harold S. Wechsler (2nd ed.) (Boston: Pearson Custom Publishing, 1997), 379-393.

recently provoking a reaction demanding more attention to practice-based preparation.

Consider how academic the content of professional education has become in most professional schools, starting with the two most extreme cases—divinity and law. Practicing clergy have long derided their seminary training as largely useless in developing the skills they need to practice their profession effectively. Divinity schools are notorious for focusing primarily on the academic study of theology, not on preaching, pastoral care, finance, leadership, and the other central practices in the profession.¹⁵ Likewise law schools (especially at elite universities) have long focused on the study of jurisprudence, logic, and argumentation, all central elements in a liberal education. Little time is spent on developing skills at doing things that form the core of professional legal practice, like writing briefs, arguing cases in court, negotiating deals, and handling clients.¹⁶ In recent years both fields have developed movements to introduce clinical professional studies within the almost entirely academic programs in their fields, and these movements have encountered considerable resistance.

But what about other professional fields which have reputations for being less academic? Teacher education, for example, is considered a baldly vocational program by the arts and sciences faculty on campus. But the graduates of these programs have long complained that their professional education was relentlessly theoretical, focused on the psychology of learning and curriculum, the sociology of the teacher and the school, the history and philosophy of education, while offering little guidance about how to carry out the role of classroom teacher—that is, teaching a set curriculum to a particular group of students.¹⁷ Business schools have the same reputation. The master's degree in business administration in most business schools is remarkably abstract and academic, largely cut off from practices in the real world of business. Whereas the dominant discipline in education schools is psychology, the dominant discipline in business schools is economics. An M.B.A. provides a grounding in the theory of economics, enhanced by studies in the sociology of organizations, the psychology of effective leadership, and other disciplinary explorations of the business environment; business practice is something students are expected to learn on the job. Business education used to be more practical in orientation, but reforms initiated by

¹⁵Everett C. Hughes and Agostino M. DeBaggis, "Systems of Theological Education in the United States," in *Education for the Professions of Medicine, Law, Theology, and Social Welfare* eds. Everett C. Hughes, Barrie Thorne, Agostino M. DeBaggis, Arnold Gurin, and David Williams (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), 169-200.

¹⁶Barrie Thorne, "Professional Education in Law," in *Education for the Professions of Medicine, Law, Theology, and Social Welfare* Hughes et al. (eds). 101-168.

¹⁷John I. Goodlad, *Teachers for Our Nation's Schools* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990), 247.

the Ford Foundation and Carnegie Corporation in the 1950s promoted a model of business education that was academic, research based, disciplinary, and graduate level.¹⁸ Medical education has a much stronger component of preparation for clinical practice than most other professional programs, but even here most clinical training takes place after completion of the four-year medical degree program, which is dominated by academic study of the human sciences.

If the content of professional education has been growing more academic, then how can we understand the growth of professional schools relative to the arts and sciences? The traditional interpretation of the latter development is that the disciplines have been losing out to the professions within the university, thus demonstrating the growing triumph of the vocational over the liberal. Instead, however, the growth of professional schools may be a sign of the expanding power of the disciplines. Maybe the university is not becoming more professional; professional schools are becoming more academic. From this view, the theoretical is actually displacing the practical in higher education. The disciplines are in effect colonizing the professional schools, transforming professional education into liberal education in professional garb.

Our own field in the history of education is an interesting case in point. Only about a third of the members of the History of Education Society are found in history departments, whereas two-thirds are in schools of education. One interpretation is that this represents a decline in the field, showing a loss of our identity as historians and the subordination of the discipline to the professional mission of the education school. But the interpretation I favor is the reverse: that we are a strong field expanding its influence into the realm of professional education. We have a greater impact this way than if we remained within history departments. I have been teaching in education schools for twenty years, but my job is to provide students with a liberal education. I teach critical reading and analytical writing, and the material I use for this is the history of education. This is what education schools want me to teach; this is what the students need me to teach. I think large numbers of us are in the same situation. In many ways, students in professional schools need us more than students in history departments. Unlike the latter, education students are not in college to get a liberal education, but being there offers us an opportunity to give them a liberal education anyway. In this way the growth of professional education in the

¹⁸Steven Schlossman, Michael Sedlak, and Harold Wechsler, *The "New Look": The Ford Foundation and the Revolution in Business Education* (Santa Monica, CA: Graduate Management Admission Council, 1987); Steven Schlossman and Michael Sedlak, *The Age of Reform in American Management Education* (Santa Monica, CA: Graduate Management Admission Council, 1988); Steven Schlossman, Robert E. Gleeson, Michael Sedlak, and David Grayson Allen, *The Beginnings of Graduate Management Education in the United States* (Santa Monica, CA: Graduate Management Admission Council, 1994).

university provides rich opportunities for the growth of the disciplines. The latter is unintended, even unwanted, but it is nonetheless real.

From this perspective, then, the shift toward the professional and the vocational in the history of American higher education has been more rhetorical than substantive.¹⁹ Maybe it is best understood as largely a marketing tool, which makes a university education seem more useful and relevant than it really is. David O. Levine showed how liberal arts colleges after World War I marketed their traditional liberal programs as places to learn the practical skills needed for success in the white-collar workplace.²⁰ We see colleges and universities doing the same today. Liberal learning has come to be represented as training in business-relevant skills in communications, problem solving, and entrepreneurship. Over the past century, higher education in general may have simply been relabeling old curricula as new professional programs—more spin than substance. This is an old story in higher education, where the medieval curriculum and medieval structure of degrees have persisted in the face of enormous changes in economy and society in the last thousand years.²¹

If the disciplines have indeed subverted the professional schools in higher education, one explanation is academic inertia. Old curriculum content keeps colonizing new institutional forms and gaining new rationales for its relevance: a case of old wine in new bottles. Another explanation comes from Ralph Turner's characterization of American education as a system of contest mobility.²² From this perspective, the aim of education is to prepare students to compete effectively in the contest for social positions, and that means a system that maintains maximum flexibility for students by providing an education that allows access to the broadest array of occupational possibilities. In practical terms this leads us to defer specialization until the last possible moment in order to keep options open. Thus American education emphasizes general education over specialized education, and this is true even in the most advanced studies and in professional training programs. So, unlike most of the rest of the world, doctoral programs in the United States require extensive coursework before launching students into a dissertation, and most of these courses are aimed at providing a general background in the field. At the same time professional programs of study

¹⁹There is a parallel in secondary education as well. As Angus and Mirel have shown, vocational courses in the high school never constituted more than 10 percent of course-taking, and a lot of those courses were general education under vocational labels (business English, business math). David Angus and Jeffrey Mirel, *The Failed Promise of the American High School, 1890-1995* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999).

²⁰Levine, *The American College and the Culture of Aspiration*, 60.

²¹Emile Durkheim, *The Evolution of Educational Thought: Lectures on the Formation and Development of Secondary Education in France* [1938] (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969).

²²Ralph Turner, "Sponsored and Contest Mobility and the School System," *American Sociological Review* 25 (October 1960): 855-867.

include a hefty component of liberal arts content. Both Ph.D. and M.B.A. students want to be prepared for a variety of possible positions and not just one, and our consumer-responsive system of higher education gladly accommodates them.

Trying to Resolve the Paradox

So we have two opposing theses about the history of American higher education. One says that this has been a story of growing market influence, which has elevated professional education over liberal education. The other says that this is a story of curriculum inertia and consumer ambition, in which liberal education has perpetuated itself by colonizing professional education and in general has displaced specialized education. Both arguments have a lot of evidence to support them, and I do not want to abandon either. But how can we resolve these differences? I argue that these two themes can be brought together in harmony if we understand how they both resonate with several fundamental characteristics of American education. One such characteristic is *stratification*: the peculiar dynamic that organizes American education into an extended hierarchy. The other is *formalism*: the peculiar dynamic in American education that creates a gap between form and substance, between the purpose of education and its content.

Position in the Educational Pecking Order

Stratification is at the heart of American education. It is the price we pay for the system's broad accessibility. We let everyone in; but they all get a different experience, and they all win different social benefits from these experiences. In this way the system is both strongly populist and strongly elitist, allowing ordinary people a high possibility of getting ahead through education and a low probability of getting ahead very far.

If stratification is a central element in both elementary and secondary education, it is the dominant element in higher education. In this way, as in others, American universities are schools on steroids. A college or university's position in the academic pecking order is a fact of life that shapes everything else in that institution. And one of the key ways that institutions differ according to academic rank is in their location on the spectrum between the vocational and the liberal. At the bottom of the hierarchy are community colleges, which have a strong identity as places that provide practical vocational preparation for a wide variety of occupational positions. At the top are the leading research universities, which have an equally strong identity as places that provide theoretical and liberal education, even in programs designed to prepare professionals. In between is an array of colleges and universities that are more practical than the schools at the top and more theoretical than the schools at the bottom. In the public sector of higher education in my own state of California, the community college system is at the bottom,

the University of California system is at the top, and the California State University system is in the middle. Every state has its own equivalent distribution. It is just the way things are.

What this system of stratification suggests is that the changing historical balance between the liberal and professional, like so much else about American higher education, has varied according to the institution's position on the status ladder. So the expansion of community colleges and regional state universities have represented a shift toward the vocational, while the liberal disciplines have been holding their own at research universities and even expanding into professional programs. That is what observers like Steven Brint, Richard Chait, and Andrew Abbott have concluded.²³ If so, then what we are observing is just a simple bifurcation of change processes, where the professional is subverting the liberal at the bottom of the system while the liberal is subverting the professional at the top. From this perspective, the resulting dualism is just another case of stratified access to knowledge, which is an old story in American education at all levels.

Dynamics of the System: This characterization is true, as far as it goes. But I want to suggest that what is really going on is both more complicated and more interesting than this. There is a fascinating double dynamic that runs through the history of American higher education, pushing the system simultaneously to become more professional and more liberal. Like so much else about the system, this process has operated through market mechanisms rather than conscious planning. It is a story of how individual institutions have struggled to establish and enhance their positions in the highly competitive higher education market. The result is a set of institutional trajectories that are rational from the perspective of each institution's interests; but these trajectories accumulate into a dynamic structure of higher education that is both pathological (in the way it is at odds with itself) and dysfunctional (in its impact on society).

The general pattern is this: The system expands by adding a new lower tier of institutions that are more vocational in orientation than those already in existence. Over time these new institutions zealously imitate their higher status predecessors by shifting toward producing a more liberal form of education. Then another tier of institutions comes forward to fill the vacated vocational role. Thus the system as a whole is continually expanding the realm of vocational education while individual institutions are relentlessly turning away from the vocational and aspiring to the liberal.

There are three core dynamics that fuel these processes. One is that existing institutions of higher education enjoy enormous advantages over

²³Brint, "The Rise of the 'Practical Arts;'" Richard Chait, "The 'Academic Revolution' Revisited," in Brint (ed.), *The Future of the City of Intellect*: 293-321; Andrew Abbott, "The Disciplines and the Future," in Brint (ed.), *The Future of the City of Intellect*: 2002, 205-230.

newcomers: they have more social capital (since they have educated society's leaders), more cultural capital (since they have already enlisted the best academic talent), and more economic capital (since they have established access to wealthy alumni and accumulated substantial endowments).

The second core dynamic is that institutions at all levels of the status order in higher education have a strong incentive to seek a higher level: moving up promises to increase an institution's enrollments, grants, contributions, faculty recruitment, public influence, and overall prestige. And in order to move up the ladder, institutions need to imitate their betters, adopting the educational forms and functions that worked so well for those above them. Of course, since the older schools have a huge advantage in the status race, odds are that the aspirations of the newcomers will not be met. But this does not eliminate continuing hopes for future glory. As is true with the aspirations that individual citizens harbor for personal social mobility, a few successes are enough to keep hope alive for the many. High possibilities can trump low probabilities in the mind of the aspirant. Every up and coming college president looks at the great historical success stories of institutional mobility for their inspiration: Berkeley, Hopkins, Chicago, and Stanford were all relative latecomers who made it to the top. We could be next.

The third dynamic in the system is that expansion comes by introducing new institutions rather than by expanding the old ones. Existing colleges have every reason for letting others handle the influx. To increase enrollments would be to dilute the college's social exclusiveness, its academic reputation, and its distinctive identity. Better to segment the market by holding the high ground for yourself and letting newcomers establish positions in the less valuable ground below you. That way, the system grows by maintaining the classic dual principles of American education—accessibility and exclusivity.

Four Tiers of American Higher Education: Let us look at how this process has played out over time. In the beginning, there were the colonial colleges. Through the luck of being first more than through intellectual eminence, these colleges established a dominant position that proved largely unshakable over the next two centuries. They were followed in the nineteenth century by a series of public colleges that eventually developed into flagship state universities. Most of the first group and many of the second came together to form what is now the top tier of American higher education: research universities. The institutions in this tier are the most prestigious, selective, and academically credible in the country; they have the greatest wealth, offer the most liberal curriculum, and educate the smallest proportion of students.

Next up was an American invention, the land-grant college. These institutions were funded by an array of public land distributions, starting in the 1830s and continuing through the end of the century (most particularly the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890). They were explicitly (though not

exclusively) given a vocational mission. In the words of the original Morrill Act, these colleges were intended “to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts...in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions of life...”²⁴ These institutions became the core of the second tier of American higher education, made up of public universities below the top level, often identified by the label “A & M” or the word “State” in the title, to distinguish them from the flagship state university.²⁵

The next arrival was another institutional invention, the normal school, which began before the Civil War and flourished in the second half of the nineteenth century. These schools were founded for an explicitly vocational purpose, to train schoolteachers. They formed the core of what evolved into the third tier of American higher education, the regional state universities that educate the lion’s share of this country’s university students.

Last up was the junior college, which first emerged in the 1920s and later evolved into the community college. This became the fourth and final tier in the system. Like the land-grant college and the normal school, its mission was vocational—in this case to prepare people for semi-professional job roles (that is, jobs below the level sought by graduates of four-year colleges).

Running Away from Vocationalism: These are the four tiers of American higher education. As you go down the hierarchy, these institutions progressively show the following characteristics. They have: arisen more recently, adopted a more vocational mission, opened themselves to a broader range of students, and channeled graduates to lower-level occupations. And each of the lower three tiers continues to show more vocational tendencies than the tier above it. However, and this is the crucial point, these institutions all tried very hard to run away from their original vocational mission in order to imitate the high-status liberal model offered by the top tier. The result, of course, was not a replication of the latter model so much as a pale imitation. For each tier as a whole and for most of the institutions within it, attaining the next level up the scale was simply not possible. The incumbents retained too many advantages, and the newcomers did not have any of the three forms of institutional capital (social, cultural, or economic) in sufficient quantities to compete effectively with their betters. But this did not keep them from trying.

The pattern over time is clear. Students wanted the most socially advantageous form of college education they could get, and this meant one

²⁴The Morrill Act, 1862 (12 United States Statutes at Large, 503-505), section 4.

²⁵For example, there are Michigan and Michigan State, Texas and Texas A & M. An exception that proves the rule is Ohio State, whose official name is The Ohio State University, in order to distinguish itself from the older private institution named Ohio University and also show that the “State” label should not lead anyone to assume it is not the flagship institution.

that looked as much as possible like the Ivies and that opened up the maximum number of job opportunities. So each new tier of institutions expanded liberal studies at the expense of vocational training. As the research university became the hegemonic model for American higher education in the early twentieth century, the lower-tier institutions evolved into places that called themselves, and looked like, universities. Land-grant colleges led the way in this development. Normal schools had farther to go and their evolution took longer, but they got there as well. Starting as the equivalent of high schools in the mid nineteenth century, they evolved into teacher colleges at the turn of the twentieth century, became state liberal arts colleges in the 1930s and 40s, and finally turned into full service state universities in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s.

The exception in this evolutionary process was the community college, but not for lack of trying. Large numbers of students in junior colleges and community colleges have long been voting with their feet for transfer programs that allow them access to liberal education at four-year colleges and universities. If past practice had persisted, this consumer pressure would have forced these institutions to develop into universities, just like their predecessors in land-grant colleges and normal schools. But state legislators and policymakers finally drew the line. After all, it is an enormously expensive proposition to transform a narrowly focused vocational institution into a university, and the social benefits of this transformation are questionable. The university allows more consumers access to the high status model of higher education. But this model is much more costly than vocational education, and it produces a glut of graduates who compete for the top occupational positions, leaving middle-level jobs to be filled by the also-rans from the elite competition, who lack the required vocational skills. Social mobility goals have generally trumped social efficiency goals in the history of American education, but there are fiscal and occupational limits to America's willingness to subsidize individual ambition. Social efficiency calls for a more rational process of allocating people to positions and for an educational system that provides vocational as well as general education. So state governments in the twentieth century overwhelmingly refused to allow junior colleges to grant four-year degrees. Instead, they were encouraged to develop into the enormous community college system we see today. The process of institutional evolution finally came to a halt with the fourth tier.

Consider where this leaves me in my analysis. I began with the argument that American higher education has been shifting toward the professional, and then I tried to show how the system has actually been moving toward the liberal. But in light of the dual dynamic that mobilizes the history of American higher education, one answer to this paradox is that the system has been going both ways. It has recurrently moved from the liberal to the professional and then quickly returned toward the liberal over time. Each tier began as an exercise in vocational education and then regressed to the

liberal mean under the influence of market pressure and status emulation. This then prompted the development of another vocational tier, which also soon remodeled itself in imitation of the top institutions.

All of this finally ended with the community college, which was not allowed to pursue the path of its predecessors. But is the process still going on in the second and third tiers of the system? I think so. Many of the land-grant schools in the second tier have made it into the inner circle of the research university, as signaled by membership in the American Association of Universities, and others are trying. Regional state universities in the third tier run into structural problems: for example, the reluctance by state educational leaders to allow California State University campuses to offer doctoral degrees, which are generally reserved for the research universities in the University of California system. But this does not keep students at San Jose State from demanding an education that is as much like Berkeley as they can get. Given the vulnerability of universities to consumer pressure and the ingenuity of university presidents in pursuing institutional mobility, it would be risky to bet that these institutions will not continue to evolve toward the research university model. Faculty members are another important factor pushing hard in this direction. A hefty proportion of the faculty in third-tier universities are graduates of doctoral programs from first-tier universities. This is a simple consequence of the status order of higher education, where advanced graduate education is concentrated at the top while undergraduate education is concentrated at the bottom. Thus most professors experience severe downward mobility when they graduate and take their first academic positions. Their preference in resolving this status loss is generally to move up the ladder and return to a position at a research university; but since the math clearly shows that this is unlikely, a second best option is to increase the liberal content and graduate orientation of their institution. Thus the ambitions of students, faculty, and administrators in third-tier institutions all converge in a conspiracy to drive these universities to pursue the brass ring.²⁶

Vocational Purpose, Liberal Content

In my analysis of the relation between the professional and the liberal in higher education, the central message is this: *Professional education may be the biggest recurring loser in the history of American higher education.* Responding to the rhythms of the educational status order, the professional keeps surging

²⁶As Jeff Mirel has pointed out to me, even community colleges have made moves in this direction. They are prevented from evolving into universities, but educational compacts in many states offer community college graduates with AA degrees junior standing at public universities. This makes community colleges major providers of general liberal education in those states.

forward as the central thrust of new colleges and then retreating, as new institutions revert to the liberal norm.

Yet there is one way in which vocationalism has emerged as an increasingly dominant factor in American education at all levels: in shaping the system's purpose. In elementary, secondary, and higher education in the United States, practical education has indeed come to be dominant, but primarily in the broad realm of purpose rather than the contained realm of curriculum. The process of shifting educational purposes toward the practical has been going on in American education at all levels over the last 150 years. If you examine closely the sources I cited earlier in support of the proposition that higher education has become more professional, they are actually making a case for the dominance of professional purpose rather than practice.²⁷ Taxpayers and government officials have increasingly approached education as an investment in human capital, by providing the economy with the skilled workers it needs—a purpose I have called social efficiency. At the same time, students and their parents have increasingly approached education as a way to get ahead in society, by helping graduates to get a good job, a nice spouse, and a boost up the social ladder; I have called this goal social mobility. In my own work, I have argued that the social mobility goal in particular has come to the fore in the last century, pushing democratic equality and even social efficiency into the background. Since this is an argument I have made at great length elsewhere, I will not belabor it here.²⁸ Suffice it to say that the growing power of the social mobility goal has dramatically distorted the teaching and learning process by focusing students' attention on the extrinsic rewards that come from acquiring an academic credential and thus undermining the incentive to learn. The result is a rising culture of credentialism and consumerism in both lower and higher education in the United States, where the emphasis is on the exchange value of education rather than its use value.

However, just because practical purposes have come to infuse and disfigure American education at all levels does not mean that the content of higher education is also becoming more practical. On the contrary, as I have shown earlier, higher education is liberalizing professional schools and colonizing them with disciplinary theorists. At the same time that the purpose of education is becoming more practical, the content of education is becoming more liberal. This pattern is not as contradictory as it seems. As Ralph

²⁷Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University*; Kerr, *The Uses of the University*; Brown, *Degrees of Control*; Levine, *The American College and the Culture of Aspiration*; Dunham, *Colleges of the Forgotten Americans*; Brint and Karabel, *The Diverted Dream*; Brint, "The Rise of the 'Practical Arts,'" and Geiger, *Knowledge and Money*.

²⁸Labaree, *How to Succeed in School Without Really Learning*; see also Randall Collins, *The Credential Society: An Historical Sociology of Education and Stratification* (New York: Academic Press, 1979).

Turner points out, the same consumer pressure that promotes credential accumulation over learning also promotes general over specialized education, since general education is what opens up the most possibilities and defers the longest the need to put all your eggs in one vocational basket. Vocational education has always carried with it a degree of specialization that can easily turn into a dead end, as we have seen with high school vocational education programs, which too often have prepared people for jobs that no longer exist. The liberalization of professional education is in part driven by the contest mobility system of keeping your options open. But in part it is also driven by the realization that too much specialization is dangerous; that the best preparation for work is a liberal education; and that specialized training is more efficiently provided on the job than in the university.

In fact, the process of liberalization would be a great thing if it were not for the fact that credentialism manages to empty the quest for liberal learning of much of its learning. What we end up with, then, is an increasingly liberal form of education even in professional schools and doctoral programs—the opposite of what much of the literature has been telling us. But this expanded sphere of liberal education has been emptied of content by the same vocational purposes that brought about this expansion in the first place.

Therefore, maybe what we have is a case of *formalism* playing itself out at two levels in higher education. At one level, we have liberal content masquerading as professional education, where the practicality of the education rides on its ability to land you a job rather than to teach you vocational skills. But at another level, we have a system that offers students little inducement to learn this liberal content because their attention is focused on what they can buy with their educational credentials rather than how they can apply their knowledge. So liberal education has succeeded in colonizing professional education, but credentialism has turned this liberal education back toward vocational goals. The content is liberal, but credentialism means that the content does not really matter.

One thing is clear: This process is educationally dysfunctional. But colleges and universities still provide the degrees students need in order to qualify for the jobs they want, and employers still hire people based on these degrees; so for practical purposes, the system works. As a result, American higher education is both increasingly vocational in purpose and increasingly liberal in content. In light of the shaping power that vocational purposes have had over the years on American education at all levels, however, the victory of the liberal in the realm of curriculum seems largely Pyrrhic. So in the end, the two themes we started out with—the liberal and the professional—ultimately weave together into a fugue, but this fugue may not be music to our ears.