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Access to Opportunity

The Need for Universal Education and Training After High School

By Anthony P. Carnevale

The gold standard for adequacy in K-12 education—for all children, both our own and other people's—is access to postsecondary education and training. Already, the share of primeage workers, ages 30 to 60, in jobs that require some level of postsecondary education has doubled since 1973, rising from 30 percent to 60 percent. And in spite of the increasing supply of workers at this level, postsecondary wage advantages also have doubled over the same period.

Official data on job openings understate the true share of jobs that require postsecondary education. The number of openings that require high school or less is inflated, because turnover is higher in those jobs. (There are a lot more brain surgeons who used to be dishwashers than dishwashers who used to be brain surgeons.) In addition, the official numbers ignore the 14 percent of Americans—about 20 million workers—who complete from one to five years of postsecondary nondegreed training, including apprenticeships as well as nondegreed vocational certificates and certifications.

Nor do these official “snapshot” data show the postsecondary momentum in job requirements. Most occupations are hybrids that include people with a variety of education and training credentials, but the strong trend in these hybrids, especially among new, younger entrants, is toward more postsecondary education and training and higher wages for those who have it.

Access to postsecondary education and training has become the tipping point that determines entry into and persistence in the middle class. Since 1967, families headed by workers with bachelor's degrees or better either stayed in the middle class (annual earnings of from \$28,000 to \$81,000 a year in 2004 dollars) or moved up. The proportion of families in the middle class headed by workers with some college but no bachelor's degree has fallen from 68 percent to 55 percent, with half of those who have left the middle class moving up, and half falling. In 1967, almost half of families headed by high school dropouts, and 70 percent of those headed by high school graduates, were in the middle class. By 2004, only a third of those headed by dropouts and half of those headed by high school graduates were still in the middle class, and virtually all of those who left had fallen out.

In the new knowledge economy, learning and earning are cumulative. Those who get the most postsecondary education or training have access to jobs with the most formal and

informal training and use technologies that complement education knowledge, rather than substitute for the lack of it (the PC vs. the cash register with pictures of hamburgers and fries on the keys). Postsecondary education and training sets in motion the runaway train of earnings differences that have made us a nation of postsecondary haves and have-nots.

The relationship between postsecondary education and opportunity has become much stronger, both in the real economy and in American politics. Americans welcome our increasing reliance on postsecondary education as the arbiter of economic opportunity because, in theory, it allows us to expand merit-based opportunity without surrendering individual responsibility. After all, we each have to do our own homework to make the grades and ace the tests that get us into college and put us in line for the good jobs.

Providing access to postsecondary education is all that remains of the centrist common ground in the current political dialogue. Using education to allocate economic opportunity complements our other key preferences for an open economy and a limited government. Education has become the nation's preferred "third way," between the economic instability that comes with runaway global markets and the individual dependency that Americans associate with the welfare state. The growing economic power of postsecondary education allows us to anchor economic opportunity in individual talent and striving, without government interference in the economy or the labor market.

We need to dramatically increase postsecondary attainment, especially among underserved groups. Without them, we simply cannot produce enough skilled workers for the jobs of the future.

If the past is any guide, the future promises more of the same. Altogether, there will be, between 2002 and 2014, 25 million new jobs for workers with postsecondary education. Baby-boom retirements should also add a steady stream of replacement openings for workers with postsecondary training. By 2020, for example, there will be 40 million postsecondary-educated baby boomers between the ages of 55 and 75. In addition, at the current enrollment and persistence rates in postsecondary institutions, new workers with postsecondary education will increase by only 3 percent by 2020—compared with a 20 percent increase in the 1990s.

Because of demographic shifts combined with shifts in workforce needs, we need to dramatically increase postsecondary attainment, especially among underserved groups. Without them, we simply cannot produce enough skilled workers for the jobs of the future, and we risk further expanding the American family-income divide.

The most obvious targets for increasing access to and persistence and diversity in postsecondary education are students in the upper half of the test-score distribution who come from working-class and low-income families, with a median income of about \$40,000. These college-qualified students currently get lost in the middle, between students from affluent families and the lowest-performing students who get help from programs such as those mandated by the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

More than a million of these college-qualified students from working-class and low-income families get lost along the way to their high school senior year. Roughly 430,000 of these strivers are still in the top half of the class by high school graduation, but never get a postsecondary degree.

Of course, we need to be careful that the increasing economic value of postsecondary attainment does not turn education into narrow job training. Education is about more than dollars and cents. But the inescapable reality is that ours is a society based on work. If educators cannot fulfill their economic mission to help youths get the postsecondary education and training they need to become successful workers, they also will fail in their cultural and political missions to create good neighbors and good citizens.

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