

The Call to Duty: An Historic Overview of How Education Responds to Changes in the Economy

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An educated populace is vital to economic growth. Throughout the history of education in America, society has found it necessary to call upon education to address its economic challenges. During the twentieth century, the call for education to address technological advances, economic inequities, and to rescue free enterprise was dire.

The 20th century's education was fueled by a new economy that desperately wanted the advancement of technology to keep a competitive edge globally and lead as the world's super power. This would entail a more academic curriculum, which focused on the sciences, advanced mathematics, and linguistic competence. The educational institutions answered the call by the use of standardized testing, vocational training, becoming more academic, open to all, free, secularly controlled, publicly funded, and fiscally independent.

Although private interest would try to use the Cold War as an opportunity to promote their own visions of what defines progressive education, and who should control its curriculum, the purpose of education during this period in the history of education in the U.S. was to serve the agenda of national governments policies, and academics. Russia's education curriculum clearly superseded the US with longer school weeks and several years of science, biology and advanced mathematics, in addition to linguistics with English being a strategic focus. Fear of Soviet Union technical superiority with the launching of Sputnik sparked the development of the National Defense Act and the National Science Foundation which provide funding for the

sciences, math, and education in foreign languages (Williams, W. 1959, pp. 268-76).

Education Reform of the 20th century would be a movement led by an “intellectual elite” not only to address systemic problems and societal needs and government agendas, but economic needs as well, by preparing a ruling class to rule and a working class to work. The race for economic power was on and the establishment of an “intellectual elite” would emerge. Government, universities, and research centers would control the direction of education. This production of intellectual elite, educated through higher education, would supply the country with a continuum of academics and technicians that were hoped to ensure the U.S. superpower notoriety, with English, math, social studies, and computer science the answer for what was becoming a seemingly homogenized mediocrity within American education.

James Conant, former president of Harvard University and advocate of education reform believed that the U.S. should support the elite intellectuals and provide the average high school student a general education to prepare them for the workforce which supported the educational philosophy of social predestination. Standardized testing and student selection would be how education would address the need for producing economic leaders and who would be the laborers moving towards the fruition of the meritocratic society Conant envisioned (Conant 1970, pp. 49, 134; 428-32).

Vocational education has been perceived by many that in a class divided society, vocational curriculum is class biased, undemocratic, and a mere substitute for education, and that it fails to prepare students for the workplace, making them more employable, or providing higher wage opportunities. It was thought that school reform would remedy or at least forestall permanent class stratification with scholarships and accelerated classes for the intellectually gifted and vocational education for those who lacked academic aptitude, but separate schools for

the “gifted” and the seemingly “dull” would in the long run only further contribute to the production of an economically-stratified society (Conant 1940, pp. 1-18).

Vocational schools would continue to take the responsibility of preparing the general populace not considered “college” material for the workplace within the 20th century, with two of its goals being to integrate the “disadvantage” into the workforce and to solve national unemployment problems. The community college system would eventually play a crucial role of education in the U.S. during the 1960’s thru the 1990’s and into the 21st century. Programs like workforce services would be instrumental to a new phase of vocational education as it gradually moves out of high schools.

There would be many publications on education reform like “Who Shall be Educated (Warner et Al 1972), “A Nation at Risk” report by the National Commission on Excellence in Education of 1983, “Unfinished Agenda” report by the National Commission on Secondary Vocational Education of 1984, “Action for Excellence” report by the Education Commission of the States Task Force on Education for Economic Growth of 1983, and several acts proposed and initiated during the administrations of presidents during this era like “Education for Economic Security Act” and the “Carl D. Perkins Vocational Act” of 1984, with seemingly some of the same issues transferring from one administration to the next, and the renaming of the previous act to suit the agenda of that new administration. The focus continues to be reforming education to meet the ever changing societal and economic needs.

Just as during the progressive era, similar social and economic issues in the 1980’s are being seen as being directly connected to the necessity for school reform. One critical factor seen as putting the economy at risk was the rising proportion of Latino and African American students in the nation’s schools who were seen as having poverty, cultural, and language problems

causing them to be lacking academically and potentially inhibiting them to perform adequately in an information- processing economy that would enable the U.S. to be more competitive in the world market (Peters 1987 pp.37-38). The call to duty was the “*No Child Left Behind Act*”, signed into law on January 3, 2002 by President George Bush. The charge would call for higher standards and test based accountability in teacher training, elementary reading and math, and the freedom to transfer out of failing schools (Tozer, et al., 2006, p. 442).

“*A Nation at Risk*” (1983) was instrumental in building the new consensus on excellence in education which is necessary among government, business, and educational leaders at state and national levels (Tozer, et al., 2006, p.443). This consensus identified four main themes consistent through two decades of school reform as defining “educational excellence”, diversity and equity issues, school choice, and restructuring (Tozer, et al., 2006, pp.445, 447). These reoccurring issues are seen as being core to the U.S. economy being at risk and are still in need of addressing, but is it necessarily the fault and sole responsibility of education to remedy? Educators Frank Margonis and Christian Shea, critics of “*Action for Excellence*”, agree that much of this country’s failing economy is due to corporate policy, not educational failure as suggested by corporate liberal ideology (Tozer, et al., 2006, p. 452). An important analysis to consider is one of Margonis who argues that the United States inability to have dominion over world markets with military power, and corporate investment in non union states and foreign countries is what was responsible for the economic plight of America (Tozer, et al., 2006, p. 451).

Much of the educational strides during the 20th century could possibly be seen now as a constraint, rather than furthering education in this country’s desire to continue to be the super power. Much of education’s attempts to answer the call to duty during the 20th century, have run

their course for the particular time period that the need was sought, but have fail to be able to continue address the economics of a ever changing, more complex society. Much of education reform has been at the behest of corporate liberal ideology and “top down management”.

Vocational education has been perceived by many that in a class divided society, vocational curriculum is class biased, undemocratic, and a mere substitute for education, and that it fails to prepare students for the workplace, making them more employable, or providing higher wage opportunities (Tozer, et al., 2006, p.329). It was thought that school reform would remedy or at least forestall permanent class stratification with scholarships and accelerated classes for the intellectually gifted and vocational education for those who lacked academic aptitude, but separate schools for the “gifted” and the seemingly “dull” would in the long run would only further contribute to the production of an economically-stratified society (Tozer, et al., 2006, p. 236).

As priorities for education change, society changes leaving education in a state of constant review, revision, and reform. During the 19th century, the focus was socialization problems due to influx of immigration, during the Cold War, the fear was a perceived military threat from communist Russia, and the need to identify an “intellectual elite” in America, and the 20th century insecurities with international economic competition (Tozer, et al., 2006, p. 460).

The U.S. education system has once again been given the call to duty to address the fall of its economy and Community Colleges have always played a significant roll in education reform and are again being put to task to address this country’s economic issues via adult education. Community Colleges are the bridge between high school and four year institutions when it comes to Adult Education in their challenging role of accommodating all who want to

learn, develop a skill, professional development, a trade, or preparedness for transition into 4 year institutions.

When President Obama unveiled the Graduation Initiative in July 2009, he called for 5 million college graduates by 2020 in order to reach the goal of being the country with the highest graduation rate. According to President Obama, this “goal for America” can happen by ensuring that this country is adequately educating and preparing its populous for the “new jobs” of the 21st century providing them with competitive skills. The initiative is also expected to strengthen community colleges by giving them the charge of providing the education.

Opposition to the President’s plan may attack its financial practicality. How much will this initiative cost? What funding cuts must happen to allow this initiative to take place? If the federal government is allowed to control and originate student loans, will it actually save taxpayers billions over the 10 years? This initiative could also increase the amount of the expected cost for education loans due to the increase of people applying to colleges to update or obtain skills while unemployed or under employed (Marcus, 2011).

While this initiative increases funding to community colleges that will benefit from this new found money there is the question whether community colleges can retain this new flux of applicants because there is now funding available to finance the education of more economically challenged people?

There are critics who believe that many in this populous who would qualify for the PELL grants are not academically prepared to be successful for college level course work and this financial aid would be “wasted” on continuous remedial course work and students that will ultimately “drop out” of college and potentially acquire more debt and still lack marketable skills

(Marcus, 2011). While this initiative can create more teaching and administrative jobs at community colleges, will these jobs be temporary? Can this initiative guarantee the 5 million new graduates gainful, living wage employment? Many students are finding that due to their under preparedness that they have to take several remedial courses, sometimes having to repeat them which extend their educational journey beyond the required time frame (Marcus, 2011).

Then there is the failing economy to consider. While this initiative can create more teaching and administrative jobs at community colleges, will these jobs be temporary? Can this initiative guarantee the 5 million new graduates gainful, living wage employment? Considering our country's debt and unemployment rate, even if the graduation initiative was successful in producing 5 million new graduates in the next 10 years, will there be jobs in this country for 5 million new graduates?

While the American Graduate Initiative would provide a great opportunity for low income and many minority students to acquire a higher education and financially benefit higher education and community colleges in particular, the goal being so steep can raise opposition in a country operating in a financial crisis mode in a failing economy.

As we navigate through the 21st century with new dynamics of social, economic, environmental, private sector, and political venues, we all will face a more complex, multidimensional existence than ever before in this country. An effort is being made to transform the government roles in this process. Communities of visionaries and professionals have the challenging task of examining occupational relevance, environmental issues, social issues, multicultural dynamics, diversity and equity, rapidly changing technology, and the global market competition. Intense discourse will continue to be had which will include parents and educators

at the round table on whether the nation's students should possess instrumental skills-based education or traditional academic programs or a combination of both to satisfy the economic demands for workers possessing multiple marketable skills and prepare for a sustainable, equitable existence in a global community.

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