

Vocational Training In Higher Education and the Loss of Civic Literacy

By Ellen Schrecker

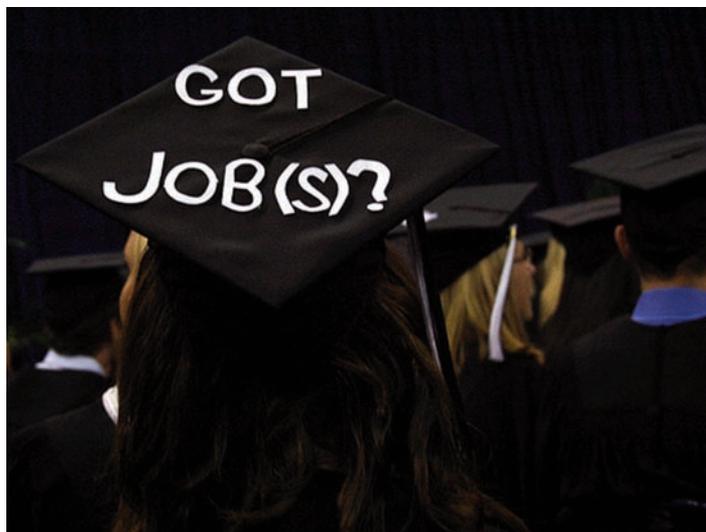
In their rush to attract students with an ever more vocationally-oriented curriculum, America's colleges and universities risk producing a nation of civic illiterates. Propelled by the economic forces that have been restructuring American society for the past few decades, the academy has abandoned its commitment to the common good. Ever since well-paid blue-collar jobs vanished overseas and higher education replaced the frontier as the main engine of individual mobility, an academic credential has become the ticket to the middle class. Of course, colleges and universities have always served an economic function; now, it seems, they serve no other.

From the Obama administration that wants to punish institutions that don't provide their graduates with the means for "gainful employment" to the undergraduates and their parents who demand to be slotted into jobs that will pay off their mounting student debts, the academic community is under enormous pressure to ramp up its vocational offerings. But colleges and universities are not – and certainly should not be – employment agencies. Whatever is wrong with our institutions of higher learning, transforming them into glorified vocational schools will not solve the problems.

To begin with, the narrow focus on job training will not help students adapt to their future occupations. Today's undergraduates will probably change their careers an average of six times before the end of their working lives. Many may never find secure full-time employment, but will bounce from one temporary consulting job to another, taking advantage of the volatile economy to carve out careers as what Richard A. Greenwald calls "micropreneurs." Moreover, tailoring their current education to a specific occupational niche could prove disastrous if the technology

these students are trained to use becomes obsolete or the positions they hold are shipped to Bangalore.

For our students to survive in the turbulent economy of the 21st century, they must obtain an education that emphasizes flexibility, creativity, and the ability to apply what they have learned to new situations. It must enable them to situate themselves within the world around them not only by providing them with the lenses they need for under-



standing and appreciating its cultural diversity, but also by allowing them to fashion a meaningful sense of identity for themselves. Their education must open their minds by exposing them to the different ways of thinking that the basic sciences, humanities, and humanistic social sciences provide. Above all, they need to learn how to learn, to realize that a complicated universe yields no easy answers.

Of course, some undergraduates are already getting that kind of education. They go to the elite private colleges and research universities that are still immune from the pressures for vocationalization. They major in physics, philosophy, or history without worrying (too much) about what kinds of jobs they will ultimately land. The status and connections that their prestigious institutions confer ensure that the graduates of schools like Stanford, Michigan, or Wesleyan usually obtain positions that

are more remunerative than those of their more narrowly trained peers. That they are intellectually, as well as socially and economically, privileged only underscores the increasingly undemocratic and hierarchical nature of American higher education (and the society that it all too accurately reflects).

There is, however, no reason why the millions of less fortunately situated students should be directed onto a narrow vocational track rather than provided with a more liberal education. Not only would that broader education offer them the tools for dealing with the fluid world around them, but it would also help them become more effective participants in their own society.

Here, finally, is where American higher education has gone off the tracks. By focusing so heavily on the narrowly economic benefits that a college degree confers, the nation's colleges and universities have abandoned their civic responsibilities. Some, it is true, boast of their involvement with their communities and the ways in which their students under-

take so-called public service. But such an undertaking, valuable in itself, is really social work, not education. What is needed is a commitment on the part of every academic institution to providing an education to all their students that will expose them to the entire range of human experience. Such a commitment may sound hopelessly utopian, but, given the massive problems confronting the United States today, we can no longer afford to limit our students' minds.

Ellen Schrecker is professor of history at Yeshiva University and author of The Lost Soul of Higher Education: Academic Freedom, Corporatization, and the Assault on the American University (The New Press, 2010).

Post responses to this article online and share your thoughts on this issue with us at www.pbk.org.