

Who Will Hire Ed?

Eddie Neeb, the inspiration for my title this evening, was my roommate during my freshman year at Indiana University in 1958-59. Although he and I were both unaware of it at the time, he was one of three people - the other two were distinguished university professors - who taught me profound lessons during my undergraduate studies at IU. (I might add, the aforementioned professors were equally unaware and unintentional with respect to their roles in my education.)

Ed and I were part of a post-war surge in college enrollment in the United States. At the time, no one was yet speaking of the baby boom. That came some years later. But the surge in our national birth rate following World War II was well documented, and before the post-war children were known as baby boomers, they were often referred to as war babies. Now as my knowledge of history was much better than my knowledge of biology, and since I was born after Europe went to war in 1939, I went for years assuming that I - and good old Eddie, for that matter - was included in that rather heroic-sounding cohort, war babies! The bottom line is that college enrollment was swelling for a number of years before the first genuine baby boomers hit the college campuses. The factors behind this surge in enrollment were several. The most obvious, of course, was the GI Bill. As most everyone is aware, the United States still had a massive unemployment problem at the start of the war. The entrance of America into the global conflict in 1941-42 solved that problem in two ways. First, massive numbers of able-bodied men were drafted into the Armed Forces, thereby eliminating the pool of the unemployed. Second, there was an enormous increase in demand for manufactured goods - in this case ships, tanks, guns, planes, and the ammunition needed for the war effort. As a result, there was an increased demand for workers to produce these goods, leading to a large-scale increase of women in the manufacturing labor force. With the surrender of the Japanese in 1945, there followed a massive demobilization. At the same time, there was no longer a demand for war materiel. As there was an understandable concern that the country might plunge back into an economic depression, policy makers were anxious to mitigate a flood of unemployment with the return of the war veterans. The GI Bill was one of the ways by which they attempted to forestall this problem. And, clearly, it worked! As things turned out, not only did America not plunge back into the Depression, it made a huge investment in what later came to be termed 'human capital'.

The impact of the GI Bill extended far beyond its immediate effect of mitigating unemployment in our country. As noted, it resulted in a significant increase in productive employment skills. It had, additionally, a subtler but highly significant impact on the likelihood of others attending college. Prior to the GI Bill bringing to university campuses large numbers of individuals who would almost certainly never have considered attending college, the only people seeking a college diploma were likely to be those who desired to enter a profession - preachers, teachers, doctors, and lawyers, one might say - plus the children of the upper class and/or the social strivers of American society, the Nick Carraways and Scott Fitzgeralds, if you will.

With a growing number of American youth enrolling in college and moving onto campus upon graduation from high school rather than entering the blue-collar workforce, the basis of a profound split in the middle class was put in place. Sociologists have customarily defined socio-economic status (SES) in terms of income and education. By way of illustration, a friend of mine served as the minister of the only church in a small New England mill town back in the late 1940s to early 1950s. The mill owner lived in a sumptuous home atop a hill in the town. Any ordinary person in town who had business at that home knew that they were to announce their presence by knocking on the side door. There was only one other local family who would pay a social visit and enter through the front door. That was my friend and his wife. He, of course, earned no more than most of the mill workers, but both he and his spouse were educated people – and, therefore, social peers of the affluent mill owner by virtue of sharing a common *Weltanschauung* – or world view – which was not held by members of the working class.

If someone has a high income but no advanced education (i.e., no ‘educated’ vision of the nature of life and the world in which we live), they are much less likely to be social peers of those who do have a university education and perspective of life. At first, this difference in *Weltanschauung* between members of my age cohort who attended college and those who stayed behind – taking well-paying jobs at places like General Electric or General Motors – was not readily apparent. The earnings of those who entered the blue-collar workforce were often considerably higher than the salaries of teachers and certain other professions which required a college degree. This was in large part due to the fact that the U.S. had a virtual monopoly on manufacturing capacity in the first 15-25 years following the war. Unions were strong, wages were high, and benefits were very good. But as industry in Japan and Europe rebuilt and recovered, they were in a position to challenge the U.S. dominance which lasted, roughly, until the late 1960s or early 1970s. As the leverage of American unions waned in the last quarter of the twentieth century, blue-collar workers who had been able to live comfortably began a downward slide.

As early as the Civil Rights movement and, later, the Viet Nam war protests, the disparity in values (resulting from differences in *Weltanschauung*) within my age cohort became dramatically apparent. Spiro Agnew’s reference to college youth of that era as “effete snobs” was part of the Nixon campaign’s efforts to woo blue-collar Democrats into the Republican column during the election. And it worked! During this period, we also became accustomed to witnessing confrontation on the streets of our cities between hard hats and hippies. Thus, the wave of students heading to campus in the first decades following the war laid the foundation for a division which bedevils our country in the present day. The resentment of President Obama among certain segments of society today reflect a latent racism in many cases, but in most cases there is, I suspect, a sense that he is the apotheosis of the university class in terms of his world view, values, and virtues. To many in the traditional middle class, he is the outsider, the embodiment of all that threatens their traditional family values.

Of course, Eddie and I were blissfully unaware of this in September of 1958. What is clear in retrospect is that we were the first generation of middle class Americans which headed off to college in large numbers in response to a new set of expectations rather than to pursue training for one of the traditional aforementioned professions. This latter point raised something of a problem, however. The fact that many of my generation ventured off to college with no clear course of study in mind meant that choosing a major was a bit of a challenge. My impression is that many of my generation simply did what I did, namely, we chose a major which sounded interesting. In my case, this was History. I had no idea what I would do with a degree in History, of course. (I certainly had no intent of teaching.) This did vaguely bother me during my freshman year, but I happened to meet a graduate student from Germany who was studying for his doctorate in History. When I asked him what his plans were he told me that he was training for the Foreign Service. That sounded like a great idea to me and so I forged ahead in my studies with the vague idea that I would probably take a job in some executive capacity at one of our major European embassies. I was disabused of my adolescent occupational fantasies by my second year on campus, but by then it was too late to turn back – and besides, I had already sold my soul to the Psychology department (and the National Science Foundation) for the proverbial 30 pieces of silver. The point of interest for my education is not the major/majors with which I graduated. Rather what proved so educational for me were my roommate's major and the tactics he used to pursue his objective.

Although Ed was not one to talk much about academic aspirations, he was bright enough and endowed with a rather wry wit. As he was somewhat reserved by nature, it was easy enough to miss these qualities of his personality. What impressed me most about him, though, was his apparently single-minded dedication to the consumption of alcohol. He was by no means an alcoholic or anything like that, but he was quite clearly a member of that fraternity of college males whose first priority was to enjoy their time on campus. As his personal reserve apparently kept him from carousing with like-minded co-eds on campus, this meant his focus was going out drinking with his buddies. During his first semester on campus this meant going out on Friday nights – to return during the early hours of Saturday. Over the course of the school year, this behavior expanded to the point that by the Spring semester it was not uncommon for him to take his leave of the dorm on Friday afternoon and not to return until late on Sunday. Obviously, this didn't leave Ed with a lot of time for schoolwork. (In fact, I have no memories at all of him burning the midnight oil on class preparation – or even the 8 pm oil, for that matter!) What I do remember quite distinctly is that he came back from class one Spring afternoon about as upset as I had ever seen him. Naturally, I asked him what was wrong. It seems that he had had a writing assignment in which he was to turn in a short story and he had just gotten it back with a grade of C- attached. Trying to calm him down a little bit, I said, "Eddie, you and I both know that you spent little, if any time, writing that short story!" "You're absolutely correct," he replied. "I didn't have time to do that assignment, so I turned in a story by Ernest Hemingway!" The fact that Hemingway had gotten a C- was mind-boggling to Ed, and what was so enraging to him was that he could not go into his instructor's office to complain about the grade

he had been given. As he saw it, he was the victim of a grave injustice. I've never forgotten that incident. In itself, it had no educational significance for me, but it led me to reflect on what my roommate and others like him were doing at college, and I had something of an epiphany. Whereas I had come to IU to get an education, many were there, basically, seeking nothing more than a diploma in the course of having a good time.

Ed may not have been particularly interested in getting an education, but he was a very canny consumer when it came to expenditure of time and energy in pursuit of a diploma. He arrived on campus with the idea of majoring in English, but upon discovering that an English major was expected to meet the requirements for a liberal arts degree, which included 18 credits of a foreign language and 15 credits of math and science, he decided to become a Journalism major instead. During the time that I was at school, there were essentially four options for students like Ed. One could major in Journalism, Business, Physical Education or Education. This is not to contend that everyone majoring in those subjects at that time was trying to avoid subjects that would require a great deal of work. In fact, there were many students – mostly male – who really had no interest in doing anything other than going into business and earning a respectable living. Nevertheless, there were a significant number of people, I am fairly certain, who were simply looking for the easiest way of getting by. (If this is true, there is reason to suspect that the proportion of people going into education in the 1960s and 1970s who were not particularly interested in teaching significantly increased from pre-war levels.) In any event, subsequent to my personal epiphany, I've found it useful to think of higher education as an industry. Universities may be construed as diploma mills, if you will. Naturally, no one in the higher education business wants you to think of them in that light, but for students or consumers such as Eddie, that's essentially what it comes down to.

Traditionally, of course, earning a diploma entailed showing evidence of being educated in one academic discipline or another. Stated somewhat differently, the cost of a diploma involves the expenditure of money and effort. And it is through the expenditure of effort that we normally acquire a formal education. Consider, now, developments which have occurred in the higher education industry since the post-war boom with respect to demand for diplomas: To begin with, the enrollment of campuses increased dramatically. At IU, for example, there were 14,000 students on the Bloomington campus when I arrived in 1958. There were 28,000 there when I left in 1967. There are over 42,000 students there now. Clearly, the growth curve in the 45 years since 1967 is not what it was in the nine years following the 1957-58 school year. The dramatic increase in enrollment in the early years following the war led to a ramping up of production capacity. This entailed the building of dormitories and classrooms as well as the hiring of more faculty members. In order to pay for this, universities were now dependent upon continuing to operate at their expanded capacities. For a time, that was no problem, but as we all know the baby boom was followed by the baby bust, as birth rates declined dramatically. By the 1990s, the 18-24 age demographic was significantly less than what it was in the

glory years of the 1960s and 1970s – even considering that the percentage of 18-24-year-olds attending college had increased somewhat.

Now if the auto industry, for instance, has over capacity and too many new cars sitting on dealer lots, what typically happens? The answer is rather simple and straightforward: The third shift is laid off and the price of the product on the car lots is discounted. The problem with the higher education industry is that the third shift most likely is tenured and is, thus, very difficult to lay off. As far as the price of diplomas is concerned, the monetary cost has continued to escalate over the years as the cost of labor – a major component in education – has a built in escalator as seniority increases. As we all are aware, student debt is increasing at an alarming rate – which tends to reduce the demand for diplomas. One rather recent response has been the promotion of on-line classes. (Some of you may have read Arthur Brooks' op-ed piece in Friday's New York Times touting what he termed "the 10 K BA".) Discussing the pros and cons of such a tactic – pioneered, of course, by for-profit outfits such as the University of Phoenix – would constitute another essay in itself and won't be discussed further here.

Another way of cutting the cost of a diploma, however, is to require less effort of the students, themselves. My experience during the 26 years I taught at the university is that college students are very efficient consumers. They know which courses require little effort and which do not. I used to tell students enrolled in my intro classes that I expected them to put in two hours of study for each hour of lecture. For someone taking a normal load of 16 credit hours, that would add up to 48 hours a week, on average. For a three-credit course such as Psychology 101, that meant they were expected to put in about six hours a week. It takes no talent whatsoever to give tests which are much too demanding. Consequently, I always asked students who were doing poorly how many hours a week they were studying for the class. I didn't keep formal records of their responses, but in general they were studying about one hour per week. One rather bright student came in to see me after doing poorly on a test. He was getting a D in the class and wanted to drop the course. I signed his release form and then asked him how much time he had been spending. When he told me about one hour a week, I reminded him of the course expectation. His response was that he was putting in an average of one half hour per week for his other courses and was on the honor roll, so he didn't see why putting in twice that amount for Psych 101 should be only earning him a D.

Now, that sort of information is rather scary. If that is true at most schools around the country – and I believe it is – it means that diplomas are being awarded on a discounted basis. If less effort is required, less of an education is being attained – meaning that diplomas are gradually becoming worth less than they once were in terms of their educational value. Before long, a four-year degree may well be worthless and students seeking to become more marketable will have to get an advanced degree to gain some separation from the crowd. This has been happening for several decades already and the process of requiring less effort to attain a particular degree in order to attract customers is rather commonplace, I suspect.

(One egregious case-in-point is the marketing of MBA degrees. Weekend programs are commonplace and, of themselves, do not necessarily imply a lower standard is in place. Some do and some do not would be my guess. But in addition to awarding a degree in return for a discounted effort, one may also attract enrollment by discounting the educational preparation and intellectual credentials required for admission and/or success.)

Allow me to provide a quick example. A high school student I knew back in the late '60s wanted to attend Butler University to attain a degree in pharmacology. His academic credentials were not strong enough to be admitted to that program, so he decided to attend Indiana Central (which presumably would accept almost anyone) with the idea of taking the basic science, math, and English classes. His idea was that once the folks at Butler saw how well he did, they would in effect give him a back door admission. Sadly, his grades at Indiana Central were not particularly stellar. He majored in psychology, of all things, and graduated with a C+/B- average. During his four years with us, he did make the football team as a third string linebacker and was elected his senior class president. I might add that he also ended up marrying the daughter of the Chair of the English Department. So his life was not a complete failure! He still longed to attend Butler, however, so he applied for – and was granted admission to – Butler's graduate program in counseling. As he was married at this point, he was working 40 hours a week. Nevertheless, he carried a full academic load and graduated in two years with straight A's. Not content with a simple master's degree, he applied for admission to the doctoral counseling program at Purdue's School of Child Development and Family Life –a collaborative undertaking of the Counseling and Home Economics departments. He was admitted and once again carried a full academic load. As he was commuting to West Lafayette from Indianapolis 3-5 days a week, he did cut back to working 20 hours per week. Once again, he was an A student. I wish I could report to you that he got his doctorate from Purdue and is now employing three pharmacists from Butler. Alas, after a year or two of study, he dropped out of the program. Why, you ask? Because he discovered there was no market for that degree. He could have hung out his shingle, but no insurance company would reimburse policy holders for his billing. The buck may not have stopped on his desk, but the point here is that someone who could not gain admission to Butler's pharmacy program could graduate with distinction from the graduate program in counseling and could have gotten a doctorate from Purdue, all while working 20 hours per week and spending another 6-12 hours per week commuting.

So, is there a larger point to all of this? Well, yes, as a matter of fact, there is. We have, until now, focused on the effective pricing of diplomas. Much more could be said – including a discussion of grade inflation at mid- and low-rung schools and the effect that has had on the elite schools around the country. (As they don't want graduates from mid-rank schools to apply for graduate programs sporting higher GPAs than their own graduates, elite schools give nearly everyone A's with a sprinkling of B's. A few years ago, Princeton discovered that 80 percent of its undergrads quali-

fied for the Dean's List. There is, in effect, an academic equivalent of Gresham's Law.)

Before we turn our attention from the issue of higher education, mention must be made of the function of a diploma, not just its price or cost. And here, too, my education on education was provided by another young undergraduate. Actually, at the time he taught me an important lesson on the function of a diploma, he had graduated and was in his second year of employment. This young man, Rick, was a senior psychology major at Indiana Central during my first year of teaching. He was enrolled in a class on research methods which was required for graduation. Now I should tell you that I had just spent six years in graduate school doing research on learning and memory and I loved it. Furthermore, it never occurred to me that anyone else would not love it. On top of that, I was clueless as a teacher. The sum and substance were that my expectation of the interest and effort that my students would show considerably exceeded theirs. In my defense, I should point out that of the 40 majors in the department, at least 32 were males. Further, the sole faculty member in the department prior to my arrival was a woman in her early 60s. (She was on sabbatical at the time.) Finally, I later discovered that all the guys were accustomed to calling her 'Mom'. I probably don't have to tell you that they didn't call me 'Dad'. Not even 'Bro'! The net result was that there were senior psych majors who failed the class and would not have graduated if the academic dean had not prevailed on me to allow certain of these hapless souls to do some remedial work in order to get a passing grade. I mention all of this to suggest that there was a general sense of panic in the class by midterm and that many, if not most, were sweating blood during the latter half of the semester - all of which by saying, Rick was not one of them. He was bright, good-looking, and reasonably polished for a 22-year-old. He was also as lazy as sin and customarily spent his weekends at IU, partying with his girlfriend. He could have gotten an A easily if he had chosen to exert himself. He didn't choose to do so and settled for a comfortable, gentlemanly C.

So what's the point? The point is that Rick turned up late one Friday afternoon about two years later seeking to visit good old Mom. Everyone else had left by that time so when I heard a knocking on the office door across the hall, I looked out and there was Rick. He was dressed in a very expensive suit and sported the sort of haircut one wouldn't likely get from one of the boys at the corner barbershop. He smiled when I greeted him and asked what he wanted. I told him that his beloved mentor had taken a position at St. Francis College in Fort Wayne. (I didn't mention that when she came back from her sabbatical and found the number of majors had dropped from 40 to 24, she apparently concluded there was little future for her at Indiana Central.) Now Rick was too polite and polished to just blow me off, so when I invited him to come into my office and tell what he was doing, he obliged. When prompted, he informed that he was working as an executive for the Penn Central Railroad. He was 15 years younger than anyone else at his pay grade and had the responsibility of purchasing locomotives for a five state area. I was duly impressed but couldn't understand how a baccalaureate degree in psychology could result in a position such as the one he had. He told me that upon graduation he had married and

had taken a position with Penn Central as an entry-grade, blue-collar employee. After six months he said that he was promoted to the status of engineer. At that point of his story, I interrupted – saying that from my understanding, it took years to reach that level in the company. He smiled and told me that his father-in-law was the president of the local union. In any event, after another six months working as an engineer, Rick was offered a white-collar position purchasing locomotives for the company. I was impressed, but I couldn't help but ask whether his psychology degree had helped him in any way, given the nature of his duties. He assured me that it did. When I replied, "C'mon, Rick. Cut the crap," he smiled and said, "Well, not really."

So what was the point of spending four years in college? Why didn't he just marry the girl and get started on his railroad career? Of course, his girlfriend may not have married him if he hadn't gone to college and the company certainly wouldn't have offered him an administrative position. When I asked him what value, if any, his college experience had in contributing toward his career with Penn Central, he told me that it taught him how to work under pressure, to meet deadlines, and to write reports.

I never forgot that answer. It really gave me an entirely different perspective of the function of a college education or the earning of a diploma. Essentially what that diploma tells prospective employers is that here is a person who over the course of four years has had roughly 32 bosses (four classes x eight semesters), was able to figure out what each one wanted, and was able to deliver the goods – presumably by meeting deadlines, writing reports, and working under pressure. There is probably some reason to believe that the prospective employee has a certain level of people skills as well.

Now, if that is true, and if one accepts that there has been a secular decline in the cost of a college diploma in terms of the effort required, what are the implications? Well, primarily, we might conclude that the effectiveness of a college degree in separating the wheat from the chaff is significantly diminished. We are facing, in other words, a significant quality assurance problem – one, by the way, which may be of critical importance in terms of the primary and secondary teachers entering the profession. Anecdotal evidence on this matter occurred the other day when I spoke with a woman who is in her early 90s. She had worked for approximately 40 years as the chief administrative assistant in the superintendent's office of a large school district in Indiana. She had served seven superintendents before retiring at age 72. Her observation: There was a marked decline in the dedication and work ethic of young teachers coming into the school district from the late '60s onward.

Obviously, this may be true of our society in general after the wave of prosperity and economic growth our nation has enjoyed since the latter half of the twentieth century, but this observation provides a bridge to an educational topic of much greater interest to me – and, I suspect, to you – namely the apparent crisis involving our primary and secondary educational systems. I have spent the majority of my

allotted time this evening trying to view our higher educational system in terms of a quasi-micro-economic perspective. This is one way of trying to interpret what is happening at the primary/secondary level of public school education as well as at the university level. Interestingly, most of our discussion of problems involving public education uses the language of a free market ideology and business management but not the a more systematic analysis re supply, demand, and pricing of the educational product.

In the few minutes that I have left, allow me to make a few observations: First, the function of our public school system has traditionally been to provide two fairly distinct products. The most commonly recognized of these are the so-called 3 R's. The conventional wisdom is that reading, writing, and arithmetic were adequate cognitive skills for an economy which until relatively recently was based primarily on manufacturing of a semi-skilled, manual nature. Workers typically sat or stood before machines and did essentially the same limited task over and over all day long. For that, the 3 R's were perfectly adequate. The notion today is that we cannot compete with the cheap semi-skilled labor force in lesser-developed countries and, therefore, need a work force educated to work on more complex tasks – often with a team of other workers and usually involving computers.

But our traditional public educational system had a second function every bit as important as instruction in the cognitive skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic. That function had more to do with character training and involved inculcating all students with that combination of values, virtues, and vision which essentially provided the framework for what we might term the myth of America. (Those of you familiar with Howard Zinn's work know that this American mythology is no longer accepted blindly as it once was. Nevertheless, public education in the first half of the last century certainly served the function of facilitating the melting pot by which various ethnic identities were blended into a common American identity.) That rather simple, if not simplistic, view of America no longer has much currency today, undercut as it is by the work of Zinn and others – as well as by the fallibilities shown by civic and religious authorities during the last 50-60 years and by the calling into question the rather exclusive teaching of classics which largely ignored the contributions of women and people of color.

If we understand that from an Aristotelian perspective the function of our traditional educational system is what he would term its final cause, we can look at the critiques that have been leveled at public education and note that they are primarily leveled at the organizing blueprint or formal cause of our system [It is a monopoly and is ineffective in large part due to an absence of accountability and the necessity of competing for students.] and what Aristotle would term the efficient cause of public education in America [primarily the teachers and to a certain extent school administrators]. Notably absent from discussion of the problems of public education in America is the material cause [the students, themselves, their parents, and the community/culture in which they are living].

What is rather remarkable is that the free marketeers who maintain our problems would largely be addressed if we simply allowed for more competition seem largely oblivious to the large-scale study of charter schools in America being conducted in an ongoing basis by Stanford University which indicates that on the whole charters do not produce better results than standard public schools. Even more fundamental, no one seems to take note of the fact that other advanced countries whose students test much better than ours in math and science, for example, do not take a market-driven approach to education. In most cases, their educational systems are much more centrally controlled and monopolistic than our own.

With respect to critiques of teachers (and teachers' unions), there is much room for improvement. If time allowed, we could go into that in much more detail. My suspicion, however, is that there are some political axes being ground in all of the emphasis placed on the deficiencies of teachers and that we are largely shooting the messengers rather than taking a serious look at what is probably the single most important factor in educational performance, namely the condition of the family situation in which students are living. It's rather amazing, isn't it, how smart and competent the teachers in affluent, stable communities are and how dumb, lazy, and incompetent those teachers in those poor, urban communities are? As long as we continue to approach the problem of public education from the rather politicized perspective that has largely been taken to date, I fear that we will not make the profound, long-lasting changes that are needed to provide all children with the educational experience they need to achieve their human potential. And, in fact, there is some reason to believe that the toxic blend of arrogance and ignorance which fuels the zeal of many so-called reformers is driving some of the best teachers out of the profession and is diverting class time from genuine educational instruction to instruction on test-taking techniques. If that is, in fact, true, the zeal with which certain politicians and business leaders are pursuing current reform efforts will in all likelihood lead to a worse situation in public elementary and secondary education rather than an improvement. George Bernard Shaw's well-known aphorism, "Those who can, do; those who can't teach," seems to characterize the attitude taken by many in the so-called reform effort. Whereas Shaw's apparent ignorance of teaching could at least provoke laughter, my fear is that our present response to a very real crisis in education will prove to be no laughing matter.