Why Education Is Not an Economic Panacea

By John Marsh | AUGUST 28, 2011

Each May, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign holds its commencement. So many students graduate from this flagship state university, and so many families wish to attend the ceremonies, that not even the campus’s basketball arena, Assembly Hall, which seats more than 16,000, can accommodate everyone. To handle the crowds, the university has two separate ceremonies, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. At both, students gamely don caps and gowns; proud parents drive down from the suburbs of Chicago and snap digital picture after digital picture; a B-list intellectual, political, or cultural icon offers graduating seniors some warmed-over wisdom; and students march down the aisles to the strains of "Pomp and Circumstance."

As deadly boring as these commencements can be, they can also be quite charming. They celebrate a definitive moment in a young person’s life, and they remind the community of the purpose and value of higher education.

Even though I taught some of those Illinois students who collected their diplomas on graduation day, I rarely attended those official ceremonies. Not because I feared being bored (or charmed) to death, but because across town, in a shabby multipurpose room of a branch library in Champaign-Urbana’s only dodgy neighborhood, another sort of graduation ceremony was usually under way.

In the fall of 2005, I began to organize a class in the humanities for low-income adults in the community. The idea was simple. Faculty from the University of Illinois would offer night classes in their areas of expertise (literature, philosophy, art history, U.S. history, writing) for anyone in the community who was between the ages of 18 and 45 and lived at 150 percent of the poverty level of income or lower. (Although you would not know it if you stuck to campus and its adjacent neighborhoods, Champaign-Urbana had a significant population of poor people.) Students who completed the nine-month course would receive six hours of college credit, which they could then transfer to other institutions of higher learning. Everything would be free: tuition, books, even child care at a nearby community center. We named it after a similar program in Chicago, the Odyssey Project.

Classes met at night, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, in the same shabby multipurpose room that hosted our graduation. We sat around banquet tables. Although there were exceptions, most of the people who enrolled in Odyssey were women, usually in their 30s or 40s, a majority of them minority (African-American or Latino). Most of the women were mothers. Most had jobs. One or two had two jobs.

Those with two jobs did not last long. But then again, few people lasted long.

In signing up for the class, students signed on to a whirlwind introduction to the humanities. On any given night, they might have read—or skimmed, or not have read—and discussed Plato’s "Allegory of the Cave," a Shakespeare sonnet, or the text of the 14th Amendment to the Constitution. Or students would sit in a darkened room and learn to distinguish Italian Renaissance from Impressionist paintings. Or they would learn how to make arguments about what they had read or studied: how to write a thesis statement, what counted as evidence, how to anticipate opposition to the argument they made.

Our first graduation took place in the spring of 2007. By comparison with the University of Illinois graduation ceremonies, ours, like the room itself, seemed a little threadbare. Earlier in the day, my spouse, a professor at the university whom I had enlisted to teach the philosophy course, helped me set up a podium and some stained chairs in neat rows. She stood at the door handing out a crudely
designed program I had made on my computer. As graduates and their families filed in, I tried not to think about all the problems the course faced. We had started the year with close to 30 students. Within the first few weeks, we lost a dozen people. Over the next few months, we lost another half-dozen.

By the time May rolled around, our graduating class consisted of some 12 people, about half of whom had regularly attended classes, completed the assigned work, and thus deserved to graduate. The same gradual erosion of students from the class, occasionally worse, occurred year after year. On the first night of class in early September, I would put out 25 or 30 chairs. As the year proceeded, I would have to unfold fewer and fewer tables and drag out fewer and fewer chairs. For every student who made it, two or three would not. Needless to say, one graduation ceremony almost always sufficed—sometimes it seemed like one too many.

But if I wanted the program to continue, in the hope that it would eventually succeed—and I did—I needed to keep up appearances, and that meant handing out diplomas to as many bodies as I could muster.

While I am sure he had other, more sincere motives, one of the reasons the chancellor of the University of Illinois had supported the program is that for a pittance, really, it would bring in extraordinarily good publicity.

And to the untrained eye, the class and the first graduation ceremony seemed like a success. Our valedictorian, a brilliant young African-American woman who had been chosen by her fellow students to represent the class, gave a moving speech, thanking each of the professors individually for their time and describing, in a marvelously pithy nutshell, what she had learned from each. Our official commencement speaker, a provost from the university, thoughtfully congratulated the families of graduates, who deserved to be honored, she urged, for muddling through while the graduates, most of them women, and most of them mothers, had played a kind of reverse hooky from their homes to attend school at night.

After the speeches, I handed out diplomas, shook each graduate's hand, and, feeling better about the whole thing, comforted myself with the half-truth that even if the program had failed for most of our students, it had succeeded for some, and that if it worked for just one, it must have been worth doing.

After the ceremony, as graduates and their families enjoyed the sodas and deli trays my spouse and I had picked up for the reception, I spoke with the local media, which had turned out for the event. (The chancellor's investment had paid off.) Cutbacks must have hit the local news channel, though, because the cameraman who asked to interview me also turned out to be the interviewer. As he was setting up his camera, we chatted about the program, and he confessed that he and his wife talked about "this"—education—a lot. He praised the program and what I had done. "If only people could get an education," he added, "we wouldn't have all these problems." The interview began before I could ask what he meant by "all these problems," but I didn't need to ask. He meant what everyone means by "all these problems" when they come to neighborhoods like the one we found ourselves in that day: unemployment, crime, teenage pregnancy, single motherhood, and, as an embodiment of all those, poverty.

At which point, it hit me, as it had Victor Frankenstein: I had created a monster. I had started the class with the hope that it would give poor adults a chance to start or—for those who had dropped out—to return to the world of higher education. But I never believed that it would solve "all these problems." Our graduating class represented a fraction of a fraction of the poor in Champaign County, and it was not even clear that the education they received in the program would help them all that much. Few had actually thrived in the course, and even fewer had any concrete plans about what to do after it was finished.

Yet to most people, as it had to the cameraman, an education like the one offered by the Odyssey Project would mean a solution to every social ill one could imagine. I had given false hopes to students but, even worse, false comfort to the community.

You could not blame the cameraman for thinking that education would solve the problems, especially if those problems were poverty and its less visible but no less pernicious cousin, economic inequality. Indeed, he and his wife had impeccable company in their faith in education as diagnosis and cure. A few months before our first graduation, for example, President George W. Bush surprised journalists and observers by acknowledging the growing economic inequality in the United States. "The fact is that income inequality is real," Bush told an audience of Wall Street business executives. "It's been rising for more than 25 years." He added: "The reason is
clear. We have an economy that increasingly rewards education and skills because of that education." As *The Washington Post* noted in its coverage of the speech, "Bush's remarks were an unremarkable statement of what many economists accept as common wisdom."

That common wisdom consists not just of the fact that income inequality is real and rising—Bush is right, it is—but that income inequality results primarily from differences in education. Whereas someone with only a high-school diploma could once earn a middle-class living by, say, working in a factory, those days, or so the thinking goes, are over. In the new, postindustrial knowledge economy, the job market rewards those with an education and punishes those without one.

Remarkably, this faith in the power of education to make or break lives traverses the political spectrum. Indeed, a surprising consensus has grown up in the United States around the belief that what causes poverty and economic inequality is lack of education, and that what will fix those ills is more and better education. Crucially, the conventional wisdom explains not just why some people get ahead, but also justifies why some people are left behind. And though they may agree on little else, liberals, conservatives, and cameramen can nevertheless agree on this.

One could quote many authorities—and any number of ordinary people—who hold such views about the economic power of education. And these people are not wrong. Those who have advanced degrees earn more than those who have bachelor’s degrees, who in turn earn more than those who have high-school degrees, on down the line. And the returns on education, as economists put it, have increased in recent years. In short, education pays, and pays more than ever. If so, it must seem as if the best way to get ahead is to get an education. Unsurprisingly, then, nothing dominates our thinking about poverty and economic inequality so much as the belief that education (or lack of it) causes these problems, and thus that education (and more of it) will fix them.

During the period when I started the Odyssey Project, part of me must have believed this conventional wisdom. After all, my prosperity was owed directly to education. I was born into a family that occasionally drifted near and once or twice fell below the poverty line. But I graduated from college, earned a Ph.D., eventually found a tenure-track job in academe, and now make more money than I ever imagined possible. (Let me hasten to assure you that this owes more to my limited imagination than it does to my high salary.) If education had worked for me, I told myself, shouldn’t it work for others, too? Moreover, if it had worked for me, shouldn’t everyone have a chance—or, for some of the people I sought to enroll in the Odyssey Project, a second chance—to make it work for them?

You did not need to look any further for answers to these questions than to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, which was one of the first land-grant colleges. Their mission, according to the Morrill Act of 1862, which founded public higher education in the United States, was "to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life." Although these land-grant institutions have changed quite a bit since 1862, and the terminology now feels dated, they still count promoting the education of the industrial classes—those previously excluded from higher education who nevertheless seek to improve their lives through it—among their many missions.

More so, arguably, than the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign itself—which now enrolls mostly well-to-do teenagers from the suburbs of Chicago—the Odyssey Project would embody these ideals of public higher education. If a college degree is what it takes to earn a decent living in the United States today, then everyone ought to have the opportunity to go to or go back to college. That is why I started the Odyssey Project. And that is what made rooting for it so easy, on the occasion of our first graduation ceremony, with our graduates and their families in their best clothes, also snapping digital picture after digital picture.

The interview with the local television news, however, changed my life. Although I continued to direct the Odyssey Project and to teach classes in it (usually literature or writing), from then on I had my doubts. These doubts only intensified as I watched Odyssey students drift away as the academic year wore on, victims of various crises, other claims on their time, or, less dramatically, the realization that the humanities and higher education left them cold. My doubts, I should add, were not about whether education should serve the industrial classes, the poor and low-income, but whether it really does, whether it is capable of doing so, and what good would come of it if it could. Even if every Odyssey student who enrolled in the fall graduated in the spring, and even if every
Odyssey student who graduated in the spring enrolled in a real college that fall, I began to ask myself, would we be appreciably closer to solving the twin problems of poverty and economic inequality in the United States? Or forget about the United States. What about Champaign County?

To put it bluntly, can we teach our way out of poverty and economic inequality, as so many people in and out of power so fervently hope? Reluctantly, I have concluded that education bears far too much of the burden of our hopes for economic justice, and, moreover, that we ask education to accomplish things it simply cannot do.

While this thesis—that education alone will not change things—has occasionally surfaced, few writers have given it the extended treatment it requires. I know, because when I began to have my doubts about the Odyssey Project, I went looking for answers to my questions and had to look hard for anyone else even asking them. When did the belief in education as an economic panacea arise? Why? More empirically, is it true? If not, why has it proved so attractive? Why do so many people, especially those in power, so urgently want to believe it? And how has it influenced what teachers and students do or imagine what they do? Finally, if it is not true that education will solve poverty and inequality, what might?

Within the last few years, a number of critics have begun to challenge our unexamined faith in "college for all," as one economist has put it. Unlike those critics, mostly conservatives, I do not argue that too many students are going to college (Charles Murray), that the United States has overinvested in higher education (Richard Vedder), that more young people should enter the trades rather than attend college (Murray, Vedder, and Matthew B. Crawford), or that since college teaches "few useful job skills," a degree, as the economist Bryan Caplan puts it, merely signals "to employers that graduates are smart, hardworking, and conformist" (Murray, Vedder, Crawford, and others too numerous to mention). Nor, as other critics have begun to argue, do I believe that a college degree has ceased to offer a good return on a young person's investment of time and money. As nearly every economist and journalist who has studied this manufactured controversy has shown, college continues to pay off. Even those like me foolish enough to major in English or some other supposedly irrelevant humanities or fine-arts discipline still earn, on average, more than those with only a high-school degree, and more than enough to offset the costs of tuition and forgone earnings needed to earn a degree. Indeed, today the starting salary for someone with a degree in English ($37,800) is higher than the average income of all those, including older and experienced workers, with only a high-school degree ($32,000).

Yet we find ourselves in an unusual position. The advice we would offer every halfway intelligent young person with a pulse—go to college—is not, I argue, counsel we can offer a whole generation of young people, let alone adults like those who might have enrolled in the Odyssey Project. An is ("Education pays") is not an ought ("Everyone ought to get an education). Some people may escape poverty and low incomes through education, but a problem arises when education becomes the only escape route from those conditions—because that road will very quickly become bottlenecked. As the political scientist Gordon Lafer has written, "It is appropriate for every parent to hope that their child becomes a professional; but it is not appropriate for federal policy makers to hope that every American becomes one." As Bryan Caplan has also put it, "Going to college is a lot like standing up at a concert to see better. Selfishly speaking, it works, but from a social point of view, we shouldn't encourage it."

Unlike others who argue this point, however, my concern is not with the inefficiencies that come from everyone standing up to see better but, rather, with the injustices that result. That is, my concern is with those who cannot stand up, those who, because of lack of ability, lack of interest, or other barriers to entry, do not or cannot earn a college degree. Insisting that they really should is neither a wise nor a particularly humane solution to the problem those workers will encounter in the labor market.

Nor is it a particularly feasible one. The U.S. economy, despite claims to the contrary, will continue to produce more jobs that do not require a college degree than jobs that do. A college degree will not make those jobs pay any more than the pittance they currently do. As some of my colleagues from graduate school could confirm, a Ph.D. working as a bartender earns bartender wages, not a professor's salary. What will make those bartending and other jobs outside the professions pay something closer to a living wage—if not a living wage itself—constitutes, to my mind, one of the major public-policy challenges of the 21st century. Education, however, is not the answer.
In terms of educational and economic policy, we may have even put the cart in front of the horse. As it stands, we seek to decrease inequality and poverty by improving educational enrollment, performance, and attainment. A good deal of evidence, however, suggests that we should do just the opposite. Only by first decreasing inequality and poverty might we then improve educational outcomes.

To be quite honest, though I recognize the incongruity of a professor, of all people, confessing this, I care less about educational outcomes than I do about economic ones. I admit that background may play a part in this attitude. As I have said, during one or two rough patches, our family dropped into the ranks of the poor. From what I remember, which is more than I would like, I still cannot decide what was worst about it. Was it the persistent feelings of inferiority? Or the terrifying sense of insecurity? Either way, I am convinced that poverty and economic insecurity are ruinous, wicked. No one, least of all children, should have to suffer that fate. Yet over the last 30 years, more and more do. Next to this fact, education, while I have committed my life to it, matters far less than it otherwise would.

In any event, we need to cultivate a new modesty regarding education: to stop believing that it is a magic potion for the poor or for anyone else. Only after we’ve cleared the deck of those mistaken beliefs can we embark on a serious effort to fix the problems.

I do not regret starting the Odyssey Project, or the better part of my life that it occupied for the five years I remained involved with it. I met some extraordinary individuals. I came to know the community I lived in better than most academics do. I had some fascinating discussions with students whom I would not have otherwise had the chance to teach. Reading *Native Son* with people who grew up on the South Side of Chicago or who still have family there is a different, and in many ways more rewarding, experience than reading it with students who have spent their lives avoiding those neighborhoods.

So too is reading *A Doll’s House* with women who have had husbands or boyfriends far more patronizing, and occasionally far more violent, than Torvald Helmer. Despite my doubts, too, the program did work as intended for a few—too few, but still, a few—people.

My association with the Odyssey Project also gave me a better, though by no means thorough, understanding of the lives of the poor and low-income people who struggle to make ends meet, who struggle to be in two places at once. People who are one crisis away—a job loss, an illness, a missed rent check—from having their lives upended, and people for whom more often than not that crisis comes. People of stunning intelligence, and people completely unprepared to benefit from whatever educational opportunities they might encounter. More than anything, though, my association with the Odyssey Project taught me that programs like it are neither necessary nor sufficient responses to the problems of poverty and economic inequality in the United States.

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