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Question of Values: Are We Learning for Earning—or for Living?

By Jim Haas

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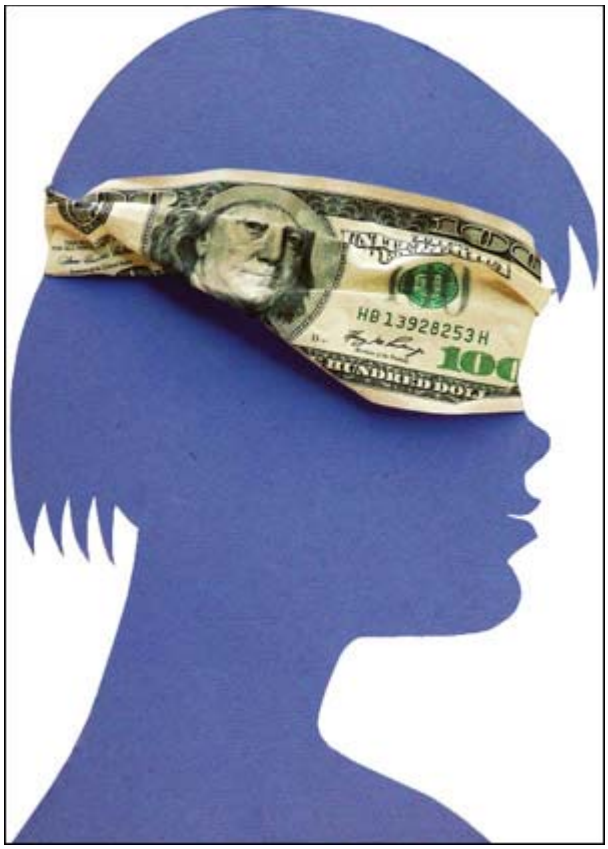
Oscar Wilde defined a cynic as one who "knows the price of everything and the value of nothing." Judging by the frequency of items in the popular media equating education with earnings, and the scarcity of media coverage speaking to other purposes of formal learning, we may be well on our way to becoming a nation of cynics. Worse, we may be endangering the effectiveness of representative government and condemning young people to less satisfactory lives than they might otherwise have.

Writing in the business pages of the July 27, 2010, *New York Times*, columnist David Leonhardt **described** a new study by Raj Chetty and other Harvard economists applauding the value of good kindergarten teachers to their students' lifetime earnings. The economists calculated the earnings of one class in the study having a highly effective teacher to be $320,000 more than a control group of students having less effective teachers. Leonhardt cited "a long line of economic research" concluding that education makes a difference in earning power and stable employment. (To his credit, Leonhardt did mention other benefits of education, including "social gains" such as better health and less crime.)

In a similar spirit of economic pre-eminence, a writer for MSN.com's Money section defends the cost of a college degree as an investment leading to 60 percent greater lifetime earnings than a high school graduate can expect-an additional million dollars. Hardly a day goes by without some media source listing the 10 or 20 highest-paying careers (and sometimes the lowest-paying, invariably including teaching) and the schooling needed to pursue them.

All this emphasis on learning for earning is well and good, and surely understandable in the continuing aftermath of the Great Recession. Helping students acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to earn a living and contribute to the general welfare is a fundamental purpose of schooling and an obvious justification for society's investment. But it isn't the sole purpose or the only justification.

The late historian Paul Gagnon, viewing schools through the lens of democracy, suggested three aims: preparing young people for (1) work, (2) citizenship, and (3) private culture. Within this framework, schools empower citizens to participate in the economy, to serve the community and have an informed voice in public decisions, and to enjoy a rich personal life



—Susan Sanford

nourished by the freedom to choose from all that the human experience has to offer. Gagnon also emphasized that, in a democracy, government-supported schools, at least, have the obligation to offer a first-class program of studies to every student. There are no second-class citizens, so there can be no second-class schooling-no mere training for worker-bees; no Delta indoctrinations from the Brave New World.

In a totalitarian society, schools indoctrinate; in a democratic society, they illuminate-or should. In the Western tradition, illumination is the purpose of the liberal arts and sciences as the common core of learning for those who would govern themselves. Vartan Gregorian, the master educator and president of the **Carnegie Corporation of New York**, has spoken of liberal education as "the soul of democracy," saying that "at its best, liberal education prepares [students] to appreciate the difference between making a living and actually living; to cultivate more than a passing familiarity with ethics, history, science, and culture; and to perceive the tragic chasm between the world as it is and the world as it could and ought to be." Making the world a better place is, or ought to be, the most cherished function of any school in a democracy. Economic prosperity is surely a part of this, but not the only part.

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Regarding citizenship, it helps to know that the underlying principles of self-rule in the United States came from the 18th century Enlightenment. Rousseau wrote in *The Social Contract* of two kinds of public opinion: the "general will," where each citizen sees the community's welfare as identical with his own and therefore supports what is good for the community; and the "will of all," which is just the expression of selfish private preferences. His foundation for a good society was liberal education intended to broaden citizens' perspectives and sharpen their reasoning to make rational government possible. This has long been seen as one of the essential purposes of American schooling. Is it still, or have we allowed informed citizenship, described by Thomas Jefferson as "informed discretion," to fade in favor of our quest to earn?

Ours has been called the Information Age for the instant ease with which we can access data. It is also the Misinformation Age, for the equally quick and easy access to inaccurate, misleading, and biased "data" and poorly informed opinion. Helping students learn how to distinguish truth from falsehood, how to judge the credibility of sources, how to reason rigorously, how to make ethical choices, and how to deal with the ambiguities that

characterize human affairs is vital to our success as a nation. Not surprisingly, these very abilities are needed-and much valued-by employers.

Also valued are graduates with solid backgrounds in mathematics and the sciences, for careers typically touted as among the most lucrative. Often overlooked, though, is the need for *every* citizen to have more than a passing understanding of the nature of scientific thinking and of the present state and future prospects of scientific and technical developments. Many of the major issues of our time-energy, nuclear weaponry, biomedical technology, global sustainability, and more-demand a scientifically literate citizenry. With national policies in the hands of voters, accepting anything less is to court danger and even disaster.

Equally necessary is for graduates to be at home in the wider world; to be acquainted with the breadth and diversity of human history; to be at least aware of the principles and issues that drive civilizations; to have a grasp of the literature, arts, and ideas of other peoples. Much is made of the "global economy," and rightly so; much more could be made of global citizenship, to the benefit of all.

Surely schools can deliver more than one message. In addition to "get a job," we might add "get a life." A rich, full life where informed citizenship isn't an afterthought, and where widely shared prosperity is one value among many.

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