

# *Unequal Classrooms: Online Higher Education and Non-Cognitive Skills*

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*Abstract: In this paper, I reflect on the changing role of higher education by focusing on the case of online education. I consider the promise of online education as a means to mitigate educational inequalities. Based on the available empirical evidence, I argue that this promise is unlikely to be fulfilled because online education is not well-suited to developing the social and emotional skills that are needed by students from low-income and minority backgrounds to achieve social mobility. I argue that this flexible, context dependent, and empirically grounded way of theorizing about the aims of higher education should lead us to revise the classical vision of the university's aims in light of its changing social, political, and economic role. The resulting proposal is sensitive to the university's new role without falling prey to coarse pragmatism. This approach delicately navigates the middle ground between idealism and pragmatism.*

Higher education has undergone profound demographic shifts in the past thirty years. While having a college degree has become essentially necessary to secure middle-class employment, its cost has continued to increase dramatically. More students are entering college but many see it as an expensive necessity to enter or stay in the middle class. It is not surprising then that online education is seen as an affordable solution to the demand for increased access to higher education. This is particularly true for low-income and minority students who have traditionally faced greater barriers to entry but are now entering higher education in greater numbers.

In this paper, I consider whether online education can live up to the promise of giving low-income and minority students an affordable alternative to a traditional college education that will enable them to enter the middle class. I rely on some recent empirical evidence to argue that replacing traditional college classrooms with large, cost-saving online courses has the potential to deprive low-income and minority students of education in the non-cognitive skills they need for social mobility. The term “non-cognitive” is used to refer to soft skills, character traits, and social and emotional competencies in order to contrast them with the cognitive skills, such as analytical intelligence, reading, and mathematical ability, that are often the focus of educational measures (Heckman, 2011). Social science research has shown the importance of these non-cognitive skills for a variety of educational and life outcomes. I suggest that the bricks-and-mortar college classroom is a place where minority and low-income students can develop the non-cognitive skills they need to enter the middle class. Online education is not particularly well-suited to the acquisition of these skills. I argue on this basis that online education is not poised to radically ease educational inequalities.

However, my argument against online education is not meant to offer support for traditional conceptions of the aims of higher education. I agree that the changing role that a college degree is playing in accessing economic opportunities should lead us to rethink these aims. The task of theorizing

about educational aims often falls on the shoulders of philosophers. However, as philosophers, our theorizing about the aims of education tends to happen at a distance from the social and economic conditions under which education is carried out. We often take ourselves to have dispensed with the bulk of the philosophical work once we have argued for a set of ideal educational aims that are timeless and universal, though we concede that further work needs to be done to implement them. The case of online education offers an example of how this philosophical methodology can lead us astray. Proceeding in this way can lead us to lose sight of how institutions of higher education can become complicit in deepening educational injustice by ignoring the changing and often unjust social and economic circumstances in which a university education is embedded. This paper is an example of an alternative, non-ideal philosophical methodology in which philosophical theorizing about the aims of education should be informed by our best social science regarding the social and economic conditions in which education is actually carried out. This method gives us ideals that are better suited to the particular historical, social, and economic context we currently face.

### **The Changing Face of Higher Education**

One of the most important shifts to have occurred in higher education in the United States is in the proportion of high school graduates going to college. The earliest records from 1869–1870 indicate that 1.3 percent of 18–24 year olds enrolled in an institution of higher education, most of them hoping to enter the clergy, research, or teaching. This figure did not reach 30 percent until the 1960s (Snyder, 1993). Recent data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2013) shows that 66.2 percent of recent high school graduates enrolled in an institution of higher education.

A second significant shift in higher education has occurred at the institutional level. Whereas at the beginning of the century roughly equal numbers of students enrolled in private and public schools, these days about two-thirds of full-time students pursuing a bachelor's degree attend public universities (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009, p. 10). According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2013), 45 percent of undergraduate students are attending community college. In short, more students are entering college, most of them are choosing public institutions, and many of them are going to community colleges.

Reasons for these shifts are not difficult to ascertain. The median wage for someone with a college degree is \$63,430, whereas someone with only a high school degree can expect to make \$34,180 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). The unemployment rate for those without a college degree is more than twice the unemployment rate for those with a college degree (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). On the other hand, college tuition has been rising dramatically. The cost of going to college has increased 1,120 percent over the past 35 years (Jamrisko & Kolet, 2012). Consequently, cash-strapped students are turning to public universities and community colleges to pursue their undergraduate education.

## The Traditional Aims of Higher Education

Philosophers have proposed a diverse set of traditional aims for higher education, but most of them are rooted in conceptions of the university that predate the demographic shift discussed in the previous section. As such, these aims reflect the idea of the university as an elite institution attended by those seeking further education for its own sake, not out of necessity. The paradigm liberal conception of the university is exemplified by philosopher John Stuart Mill's address at the University of St. Andrews in 1867. Mill argues that "universities are not intended to teach the knowledge required to fit men for some special mode of gaining their livelihood. Their object is not to make skillful lawyers, or physicians, or engineers, but capable and cultivated human beings" (2011, p. 186). He then goes on to explain how the different branches of what we now consider the liberal arts contribute to that goal.

A second paradigm is that of the university playing a political role. In *Democratic Education* (1999), Amy Gutmann argues that one primary aim of the university is to foster academic freedom in order to protect a democratic society from the threat of tyranny—an incubator for Socratic gadflies (p. 174). According to this conception, the university fulfills its political role by fostering intellectual exploration. Philosopher Elizabeth Anderson (2007) has also suggested that the university's role is political insofar as it functions as the gatekeeper to elite positions in society. Anderson, however, engages in non-ideal methodology by arguing that the realities of segregation and economic disadvantage should lead us to recognize that this political function of the university is best served when "more highly educated elites are genuinely responsive to everyone's interests" (p. 618). Universities achieve this by admitting and educating a diversity of students.

However, for the many students entering college out of necessity, these aims are not resonant. Of course, many students wish to emerge from college as capable and cultivated human beings, but given the increasing costs of higher education, they also wish to emerge fit to gain a livelihood and able to pay off student loans. Eighty-five percent of incoming college freshmen state that being able to get a better job was an important reason in deciding to attend college (Eagan et al., 2016). And though the critical and political function of the university is surely important, a majority of students are not spending thousands of dollars and years of study to keep the threat of tyranny at bay. Granted, the views espoused by these philosophers concern what the aims of education should be, not what students actually aim for or a description of how universities do function. Gutmann (1999), for example, does not think that a college education should be compulsory for a majority of students or that the university should be in the business of making up the educational deficiencies of primary and secondary education (pp. 172–174). But given that a majority of students are going to college, an argument that elevates the political role of the university as safeguarding academic freedom while ignoring the deficiencies in the K-12 education received by college students disregards the reality facing universities. Anderson is sensitive to how the realities of economic segregation and an increasingly diverse population should inform the university's mission. But given that most students are not attending elite universities, the view that she invokes of the university as a gatekeeper to elite positions is more reflective of its role thirty or fifty years ago than of the current state of higher education (Labaree, 2011). As I will argue, theories of the aims of higher education that ignore the changing role that universities play risk entrenching inequality.

## The Aim of Online Higher Education

In recent years, more students have been going online to meet their educational needs. In 2012, a third of all college students were taking at least one course online (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Interestingly, online higher educational institutions have been crafting their mission statements using ideas of equity, human rights, empowerment, affordability, and accessibility. Udacity, one of the providers of free massive online college courses, states: “Our mission is to bring accessible, affordable, engaging, and highly effective higher education to the world. We believe that higher education is a basic human right, and we seek to empower our students to advance their education and careers” (2016). Coursera, another prominent provider of free online college courses, makes a similar claim:

We envision a future where everyone has access to a world-class education that has so far been available to a select few. We aim to empower people with education that will improve their lives, the lives of their families, and the communities they live in. (2014)

These online institutions’ mission statements would seem to be more resonant with the reality confronting students who see college as necessary for social mobility and entry into middle-class employment. According to them, higher education should not be a privilege reserved for elites looking to further their education for its own sake, but rather a right accessible to all. Though these free providers do not offer accredited bachelor’s degrees, others, such as the much maligned University of Phoenix, charge tuition in exchange for a fully online degree. The fact is, however, that the rising cost of higher education at more traditional institutions is a barrier to entry for many students. This is why colleges and policy-makers are increasingly taking a look at online education as a possible solution to the pressure they are facing to increase access and lower costs. President Obama’s plan for higher education will tie student financial aid to how affordable a college is, with the hope that this will drive institutions that rely on such aid to drive costs down further. The plan suggests online education as a cost-saving strategy for cash-strapped colleges (Office of the Press Secretary, 2013).

A report authored by a group including former presidents of Tufts and Princeton elucidates the various reasons why expanding online education would allow universities to increase access while keeping costs down (Bacow, Bowen, Guthrie, Lack, & Long, 2012). The two biggest costs universities face in increasing access come from hiring additional instructors and finding classroom space. Traditional college teaching is limited in this way; additional students require additional instructors and additional classroom space. An online lecture costs a fixed amount but it can be accessed by hundreds, thousands, or millions with little additional cost. One instructor can teach as many students as the technology will allow and those students can take those courses from the comfort of their own home.

However, affordability is not the only reason for colleges to turn to online education as a way of making college more accessible to students who have traditionally faced other barriers to entry. Students who have families or full-time jobs often find it difficult to complete their degrees because classes at bricks-and-mortar colleges are generally scheduled during the day. Students from rural areas often have to commute long distances or move, at great expense, to be able to attend college. Both of these problems can be mitigated by offering courses online that are accessible at any time and from anywhere.

Even if students make it through the door, however, higher education institutions often face a retention problem, in particular for low-income and minority students (Tinto, 2004). Students can quickly get off track if they fail to get into courses they need to graduate, or because of the mounting debt they accumulate when they are forced to stay in college another semester to complete requirements. Online education enables these students to stay on track by enrolling in courses that might otherwise be full.

Finally, many advocates hold out the promise that online education can offer better instruction than traditional college classrooms. In traditional colleges, in particular at overcrowded public institutions, tired students often end up sitting passively, listening to a professor lecture at them. Online education courses are often more dynamic and entertaining, involving video and other multimedia aspects, and can require active interaction from the student in the form of quizzes and discussion boards (Bowen, Chingos, Lack, & Nygren, 2014). Furthermore, courses by the foremost experts in their fields at highly-selective institutions are now available for free through providers such as Coursera and Udacity. Consequently, the knowledge previously only available to a select few is now available to anyone with an internet connection.

The promise of online higher education is that it can meet increasing demand for college access while decreasing its cost, though, of course, this promise is contingent on high-quality internet access being more widespread than it is (National Telecommunications and Information Administration & Economics and Statistics Administration, 2013). Nonetheless, advocates of online education see their aim as providing accessible, affordable, and high-quality higher education to all. For low-income and minority students who have traditionally faced the greatest obstacles in accessing higher education, the underlying promise is that online higher education will serve the same role that expanded access to education has typically served—social mobility. Consequently, online education seems poised to ease the entrenchment of existing inequalities.

### **Can Online Education Fulfill Its Promise?**

In order to evaluate whether online education can expand access to affordable high-quality higher education and, in so doing, ease existing inequalities, we need to consider several questions. First, who are the students most likely to receive some or all of their education online? Second, are those students missing out on something important by getting a majority of their education online? And third, what potential effect might this have on the ability of these students to reap the socioeconomic benefits of higher education? I will argue that the answers to these questions should lead us to be skeptical that online education can fulfill its promise to ease existing inequalities. In most cases, online education does not impart fundamental non-cognitive skills low-income and minority students need for social mobility. Consequently, we have good reason to think it might not fulfill its promise. My argument here relies on recent empirical data on a very complex and rapidly evolving phenomenon. Therefore, it is unavoidably somewhat speculative. However, as I will argue, we can draw important lessons from looking at the empirical details of this case closely.

Given recent data on higher education, the institutions most likely to adopt online education appear to be those that serve many low-income and minority students. A recent report on trends in online education shows that 45 percent of students fully completing their education online attend a

public institution of higher education, while 35 percent attend a for-profit private institution, and only 20 percent attend a non-profit private institution (Clinefelter & Magda, 2013; Ginder & RTI International, 2014). The Georgetown Public Policy Center released a report showing that, though more African-American and Latino students are attending college, they are increasingly attending less-selective institutions such as open-access, community, and for-profit institutions of higher education (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). Similar patterns in enrollment can be seen with low-income students (Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001).

Academic preparedness does not fully account for this data. The Georgetown Report shows that even when we control for academic factors such as GPA and SAT scores, highly qualified minority and low-income students are more likely to attend less-selective colleges than their equally qualified white counterparts. This phenomenon, known as “undermatching,” is particularly pronounced when evaluated against income levels. Whereas only 27 percent of students from high-income families undermatch, students from the bottom quartile of the income distribution undermatch at a rate of 59 percent (Bowen et al., 2009). This matters because the institutions they attend often have fewer resources than their more selective counterparts (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). That is, low-income and minority students are most likely to end up in the institutions most worried about driving costs down. More research needs to be done on the race and socioeconomic status of students enrolling in online education. However, I think we have good reason, based on the data that is available, to worry that low-income and minority students are more likely to attend institutions of higher-education that will increasingly rely on online education to drive costs down. Furthermore, as I will suggest, low-income and minority students have the most to lose by relying on online higher education as a path to social mobility.<sup>1</sup>

What the promise of online education as a solution to the problems of educational inequality overlooks is that a bricks-and-mortar college education bestows not just cognitive skills and mathematical, historical, scientific knowledge, but also non-cognitive skills. If they pursue a majority of their education online, students may be missing out on developing, for example, the social and emotional abilities required to connect and talk to people from different backgrounds, the confidence needed to have an intellectually rigorous conversation with an intimidating adult, or the resoluteness to overcome one’s shyness and be able to articulate a position in front of a group of peers.

There is a body of research emerging that shows the importance of non-cognitive skills to expected educational outcomes, employment, earnings, and life satisfaction (Almlund, Duckworth, Heckman, & Kautz, 2011; Borghans, Duckworth, Heckman, & Ter Weel, 2008; Duckworth, Quinn, & Tsukayama, 2011; Duckworth & Seligman, 2005). The evidence suggests that non-cognitive skills are important for facilitating social mobility and eradicating the entrenchment of socioeconomic disadvantage. Tenacious, confident, and socially competent employees have an edge over equally cognitively talented employees who lack those skills (Heckman & Rubenstein, 2001). Part of what many students from disadvantaged backgrounds stand to learn in a bricks-and-mortar college is how to navigate the social world of the middle-class job market by practicing the non-cognitive skills that are valued in those contexts.

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<sup>1</sup> Of course there is great variation between members of minority groups in terms of socioeconomic opportunities, educational preparedness, and so on. I’m concerned here with students who grew up in socioeconomically and racially segregated communities.

It is very difficult for one to develop these skills fully online. In what follows, I focus on courses that are conducted fully online as they offer the most cost-saving benefit. I discuss hybrid or blended courses in the section after that. Though there is some evidence suggesting that attention can be taught online (Diamond & Lee, 2011), the high attrition rates in online courses suggest that online education presumes rather than promotes perseverance and self-discipline (Allen & Seaman, 2014; Diaz, 2002). The average online course enrolls 43,000 students, but only 6.5 percent of those complete the course (Jordan, 2014). Furthermore, it is the social and emotional skills with which one navigates social interactions that are most difficult to learn and develop online. It is true that online education has come a long way. Some proponents of online education point to the use of video conferencing and discussion boards as ways to promote social interaction and create learning communities (Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007). However, if online courses are to mimic the intimate learning communities found in college classrooms by fostering interactions between students and professors, it would significantly decrease the cost-saving promise of online education. At the very least, class sizes would have to be severely limited, additional instructors hired, and investments made in high-quality video-conferencing technology. An online course that only had fifteen students interacting with a professor, for example, would be likely to cost more than the same course in a bricks-and-mortar classroom since the technology would add to the cost of the traditional class. This course might be convenient for those who would find it difficult to attend a class in person, but it is unlikely to be an option that is cost-effective for the low-income students who have the most to lose by taking classes fully online. Furthermore, it is an open question whether the interactions in these mediums are as effective in transmitting social and emotional cues as face-to-face interactions (Bordia, 1997). Much of social and emotional learning involves noticing subtle behavioral cues and modifying one's behavior in response. Massive cost-effective online courses are unlikely to allow students to develop these skills.

Why do minority and low-income students have the most to lose by relying on online education and missing out on practicing these non-cognitive skills? The answer is that minority and low-income students are more likely to have parents who did not attend college and to attend schools that are racially, ethnically, and economically segregated. In the early 2000s, the average Latino and Black student went to a school in which a little over half of the students were low-income (i.e. eligible for free or reduced lunch); he or she now attends a school in which two-thirds of the students are low-income, twice as much as in the case of the average white student (Orfield, Bachmeier, James, & Eitle, 1997; Orfield, Kucsera, & Siegel-Hawley, 2012). Consequently, these students have fewer and fewer opportunities during their K-12 schooling to interact with members of the largely white middle class and pick up the non-cognitive skills, in particular the social and emotional skills, they need to succeed in middle-class job markets.<sup>2</sup>

It is important not to misunderstand my argument here. Children from disadvantaged communities do *not* lack social and emotional skills; rather, the social and emotional skills they tend to acquire are those that are appropriate to their communities.<sup>3</sup> Children of middle-class families learn how to navigate middle-class social relationships and institutions. Children from socioeconomically and

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<sup>2</sup> For a fascinating study that compares the college experience of low-income students who attended private school and those who did not, see Jack (2015a).

<sup>3</sup> Though I follow the empirical literature here in using the term “skills,” I think “non-cognitive dispositions” is a more appropriate term. I take skills to be dispositions that are inherently seen as useful, but I think their usefulness is highly dependent on context. In other work, I use the term “non-cognitive disposition” to mark this contrast.

racially segregated communities often do not. The claim, made by Bourdieu among others, is that there are unconscious norms of behaviour that are rewarded and expected in middle-class settings that are not taught to some children who do not grow up in the middle class (Bourdieu, 1986, 1987). The differences in these skills are often small and their impact can be imperceptible; for instance, variations in when and how to make eye contact. However, they can also have a significant impact, such as when students are taught to be extremely deferent when speaking to authority figures (Jack, 2015b; Lareau, 2003). Therefore, what I am suggesting is that without a college education many low-income students will not have the skills they need to gain their livelihood.

To sum up, online education is increasingly adopted by institutions of higher education, such as for-profit and public colleges, that attract many low-income and minority students. Students who get their education online limit their opportunities to acquire the non-cognitive skills, in particular the social and emotional skills, that one can acquire in a bricks-and-mortar classroom by interacting with professors and other students. These skills are valued by middle-class job markets and are important for social mobility. Students from low-income families and minority students are already at a disadvantage in acquiring these skills before college because they are more likely to attend K-12 schools that are racially, ethnically, and economically segregated. Consequently, if these students increasingly receive a higher education lacking in the non-cognitive education that students at selective, better-funded institutions receive, the disadvantage that those students already face at the K-12 level will be further entrenched at the level of higher education. Students from low-income families, who already have to overcome daunting odds to attend college, might find it harder to acquire an undergraduate education that enables them to attain middle-class employment. Consequently, the promise that online education will ease existing inequalities in access, providing all with a quality education that will enable social mobility, is unlikely to be fulfilled.

### **Fostering Social and Emotional Skills in Higher Education**

I have suggested that online education is limited in its ability to foster the non-cognitive skills low-income and minority students need in order for higher education to be a path to social mobility. I have suggested that bricks-and-mortar institutions of higher education can do this, but I have not defended this claim. I turn now to doing so. Three conditions have to be met in order for institutions of higher education to be able to foster the development of non-cognitive skills. First, these institutions have to be sufficiently racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse. Second, it must be possible for students to acquire non-cognitive skills in the classroom. And third, students must be given plenty of opportunities to practice the development of social and emotional skills through intimate face-to-face interactions outside of the classroom as well. It is very difficult for cost-effective online education to fulfill these last two conditions. Regrettably, in some cases, bricks-and-mortar institutions of higher education also fail to fulfill these conditions but they can and, as I will argue, they should.

Racial diversity has increased in colleges since the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>4</sup> Currently, higher educational institutions are more socioeconomically and racially diverse than most other educational institutions. Data on socioeconomic diversity is harder to come by since colleges and universities are

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<sup>4</sup> There are some worries that this trend appears to be stalling. See Hinrichs (2012).



required to report on the gender and race of their students but not on their income. However, one good proxy we have is the number of Pell Grant recipients that a school enrolls, since a large number of Pell Grant recipients tend to come from low-income families. Though many Pell Grant recipients attend community colleges, as a whole they attend a diversity of institutions (Office of Postsecondary Education, 2012). Furthermore, a survey of the US News College Rankings shows that very few colleges have a proportion of Pell Grant recipients comparable to the proportion of low-income students in economically segregated K-12 schools (US News & World Report, 2014). For low-income and minority students who make it into college, it is likely to be the first place where they will be part of a community with students and professors from a diversity of socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds. It is here that many will first encounter and learn to deploy the social and emotional skills favored in educational institutions and middle-class workplaces.

Some might be skeptical that these skills can be learned at school by the time students are teenagers. However, Anthony Jack's (2014, 2015a, 2015b) recent ethnographic work compares the college experience of low-income, minority students who attended private high schools through scholarship programs—the “Privileged Poor”—with that of students from similar economic backgrounds who attended public high schools—the “Doubly Disadvantaged.” His research suggests that at least some non-cognitive skills can be learned in school by teenagers. The Privileged Poor report being much more at ease navigating the social and relational aspects of college than the Doubly Disadvantaged. They appear to have learned how to do so while at their private high schools.

However, being on a diverse campus isn't sufficient to develop these social and emotional skills; students must also interact with students with other backgrounds. In a landmark study on students' experiences of diversity in higher education, a study that was a linchpin for the amicus brief filed by the University of Michigan in defense of its affirmative action program, Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, and Gurin (2002) find that “the actual experiences students have with diversity consistently and meaningfully affect important learning and democracy outcomes of a college education” (p. 358). This study shows that informal student interactions were as important as experiences of diversity in the classroom. Bricks-and-mortar universities can cultivate more of these interactions.

One way to cultivate informal student interactions is by fostering student engagement with other students, faculty, and administrators outside of the classroom. Students participate in extracurricular activities with students from a diversity of backgrounds, go to office hours, interact with staff in figuring out their financial aid packages and registration, and, for those in residential colleges, negotiate how to share a space with roommates. University administrators can cultivate these informal interactions by investing in student clubs and student centres, hosting casual faculty-student gatherings, and making aid available that enables low-income students to live on campus. However, given that data shows that 57 percent of all students and 62 percent of students from low-income families live at home or with relatives while enrolled in college (Sallie Mae & Ipsos Public Affairs, 2013), we should be mindful that students who live at home during college have fewer opportunities to pick up these skills outside of the classroom. Consequently, it is important that faculty and administrators cultivate these interactions in the classroom as well.

Professors can encourage students to engage in face-to-face discussions with each other, work together on group projects, and participate in a shared intellectual community. For example, in my classroom, I expect all of my students to practice defending a position in front of their peers. For many students, this is a terrifying experience because they are not used to doing this in front of strangers,

who often come from different backgrounds, and in front of a professor, who they might find intimidating. But when students join the workforce, they will be judged and evaluated not only by their CVs, their ability to write cogent memos, or their technical proficiency, but also by their ability to clearly articulate a position to others and demonstrate confidence and competence in an interview. The best way for students to learn to do so is to practice those skills in front of a group of people who will resemble those they will find in interviews and workplaces. Classroom discussion, however, is not enough. We can't just hope that students will learn to read the overt and subtle ways in which people from different backgrounds interact and expect others to present themselves; we need to make these norms explicit to our students and emphasize the ways in which these skills will be ones they need to navigate management positions, boardroom meetings, product presentations, faculty meetings, and so on. This requires that professors become much more sensitive teachers, not just scholars.

A cost-effective online education can teach very many things but it is not a promising space for students to practice and develop the non-cognitive skills they need to navigate many aspects of having a successful career in the middle-class. However, bricks-and-mortar classrooms can also fail in this respect. Practicing those skills requires that the instructor be mindful of giving students opportunities to do so and that educational institutions offer opportunities for the necessary interactions to take place outside of the classroom as well. Consequently, my argument isn't only an argument against online education but against the passive style of pedagogy practiced in many college classrooms. Some online courses are probably better than the worst college classrooms in this respect, but many of them are merely a technologically sophisticated version of the large lecture course. Large lecture classrooms can be as much of a barrier to social and emotional learning as online classrooms. Therefore, my argument should be seen as a plea for students to spend more time in smaller face-to-face interactions with a diverse group of peers and professors.

Online tools could have a place in fulfilling this aim. For example, hybrid courses, in which students listen to lectures online and then meet in small discussion sections, might be able to provide the best of both worlds if they allow for more time spent in intimate face-to-face classroom environments. Blended courses in which students are encouraged to participate in internships, for example, might offer students a rich immersive training in the skills that are valuable in the job market while transmitting knowledge online. However, in adopting hybrid courses, schools must tread with caution in order to make sure that they are not exacerbating the educational gap by lowering the amount of quality time that low-income and minority students spend in the classroom. If we are going to support intimate college classrooms for those students who need them most, then we will have to invest in our public higher education system and those investments should go towards fostering intimate classroom environments.

One might, rightly, worry that I'm advocating a form of indoctrination into middle-class norms. The first response to this charge is that teaching the social and emotional skills necessary to enter the middle class need not always come at the expense of losing the social and emotional skills needed to navigate a student's home community, though there is an undeniable tension. In other work, I have suggested that cultural code-switching—switching between different modes of interaction depending on the context—can mitigate some of the potential damage done to the student's capacity to engage with their home community (Morton, 2013). Students should not be taught that forms of social and emotional interaction favored by middle-class employers are better, rather that they are useful to navigate a particular context. However, in some cases a student's capacity to continue to engage with

their home community might be unavoidably damaged by learning these new forms of social and emotional interaction. This is a challenge that, when leveled against K-12 institutions that engage in teaching non-cognitive skills, deserves a much more extended discussion than I can offer here (see Morton, 2011). When public education aims to shape children's character, many tricky issues arise concerning parental and state authority that do not arise in the case of adult education. In higher education, adult students are choosing to take this risk by enrolling in college with the hope of gaining middle-class employment upon completion. Though we ought to worry about the ways in which culture, class, and race exclude some of our students from employment that they are otherwise qualified for, we also have an obligation to give our students the tools they need for the social mobility that many of them are seeking when entering college.

Finally, one might worry that if all that college did was make students ready to enter the job market, then a middle-class etiquette course might better fit the bill. However, if colleges are sensitive to the tricky role they play in enabling social mobility, then social and emotional education for the middle-class isn't all that a college education ought to do. Providing an education aimed at equipping students to enter the workforce is an important way in which colleges can mitigate some of the educational injustices students face at the K-12 level, but colleges can also mitigate these injustices by giving students the skills and knowledge they need to change those conditions. Students who are being ill-served by the current political, social, and economic system should learn to critically examine and understand how the system is failing to serve them. Without this knowledge, students are less likely to advocate for a change in the background conditions of injustice that put them in positions of disadvantage. Therefore, students need to be educated with the academic tools—the social sciences, philosophy, and many of the liberal arts—they need to understand their own disadvantage. If we were to simply acculturate those students into the middle-class without helping them understand the unfairness of their position, universities risk adding insult to injury. This would seem to take us back to the view of the university as Socratic gadfly, but by reflecting on the changing demographics of the student body, the changing role of the university, and the failures of integration in K-12 schools, we reach a different conception of the political role of the university. Universities ought to give low-income and minority students the knowledge they need to understand and theorize their disadvantage because K-12 educational institutions are failing them. The justification here is non-ideal, context-dependent, and not based solely on an *a priori* view of what the university ought to be.

### **Reformulating the Mission of Higher Education**

I have argued that we should be skeptical of the role that massive online courses can play in mitigating inequality in education. An important part of the education that students receive in college is social and emotional. These skills are particularly important for low-income and minority students who might not have encountered middle-class peers until they arrive in college. By completing a majority of their education online, these students will be missing out on an important set of skills that they need for social mobility. However, I agree with advocates of online education that we need to rethink the aims of higher education given the changing social and economic role that a college degree plays in our society. The case of online education, therefore, provides just one concrete example of an alternative methodology for theorizing about the aims of education.

The traditional approach to theorizing about the aims of higher education is to develop a universal and timeless ideal of what the university ought to be. This approach often ignores the social and economic context that shapes the role the university plays. The traditional liberal aims for higher education, for example, were forged at a time in which few students earned a college degree. If higher education had remained an institution reserved for a small elite interested in intellectual cultivation, and if a college degree was not necessary for middle-class employment, then we would not have to reevaluate the classical conception of the university. Universities could be doing an excellent job of educating cultivated human beings who are ready to be Socratic gadflies by offering courses in philosophy, literature, and history online. I have argued that, given the changing role of the university, proceeding in the same way means that such institutions risk entrenching inequalities in education that we already see at the K-12 level. However, bricks-and-mortar universities are also susceptible to this danger when they fail to give students from low-income and minority communities the social and emotional education they need to navigate the world of middle-class institutions. The problem with theorizing about the aims of higher education while ignoring the changing social and political landscape in which the university is embedded is that we fail to notice the role that universities already play in entrenching inequality. Therefore, to develop an aim for our universities, we need to be clear-eyed about how these institutions actually function in our society and the ways in which that function has changed.

A second approach to theorizing about the aims of higher education is to completely eschew any idealization in favor of a thoroughly pragmatic view of a university education as vocational training. The problem with this approach is that we risk ending up with a coarse pragmatism that easily becomes complicit in unjust social, political, and market forces that put some students at a disadvantage. As we have seen, it is unjust social and political factors such as socioeconomic inequality, residential segregation, and inadequate, segregated K-12 schooling that put the university in the position to either mitigate or further perpetuate injustice. If universities focus on training low-income and minority students to confront the challenges they encounter in entering the middle-class global job market by making them competitive in the marketplace, they would be helping those students on a path towards upward mobility. But simply accepting the injustices of that marketplace would undermine a central mission that the university is also uniquely positioned to play—helping students to develop a critical understanding of those unjust social, political, and economic factors in order to develop better alternatives and agitate for them. I agree with Gutmann (1999) and Anderson (2007) that universities can play a crucial political role. However, given that many more students are entering university, this role has extended beyond the one they envisioned to encompass the education of many more citizens than ever before.

The third approach, which I favor, brings these two strands of theorizing together. According to this approach, we should understand the social, economic, and political conditions under which an educational institution operates in order to craft educational aims that are sensitive to the conditions our students face before and after college. However, we should not forget that the university is also a place where future citizens are being educated. If we are to mitigate unjust educational inequalities, citizens need to be able to understand their society, conceive of alternatives, and have the tools to enact social change. Gutmann writes that “[h]igher education should not be necessary for inculcating basic democratic virtues, such as toleration, truth-telling, and a predisposition to nonviolence” (1999, p. 173). I agree, but what we need from citizens in a society that systematically disenfranchises large sectors of

the population might be more than these minimal democratic virtues. In particular, citizens who are being disadvantaged by very complex institutional and social systems are unlikely to be able to have the tools to understand and advocate for themselves without a college education. What we need are citizens who are equipped with an understanding of how the system fails them and their communities so that they are better advocates for themselves in elections and in public discourse. The university should equip students to access the opportunities they need to have a good life given the unjust conditions they will face, but it should also give those students the tools they need to change those conditions for the better. In order to do so, the university has to toe a delicate line between pragmatism and idealism.

Educational institutions are embedded in continually changing social and economic contexts and so the aims of education are a moving target. The approach I favor is flexible, context-dependent, and empirically grounded. For example, should the labour market move away from valuing social and emotional skills by moving most of the well-compensated labor online and conducting interviews online, then there might be little need for the kind of social and emotional education I'm advocating here. In this kind of tech utopia, the education students would need in order to access opportunities would be different and, consequently, an online education might truly equalize opportunities. Alternatively, K-12 schools could dramatically improve and become much more integrated. In that utopian scenario, students might be able to pick up the necessary skills at the K-12 level, leaving colleges free to pursue other aims. The point is that theorizing about the aims of education cannot ignore potentially important social, economic, and political changes that impinge on the role that higher education plays in society.

As a college education becomes increasingly necessary to access or stay in the middle class, the role of the university in society will change. Instead of being gatekeepers to elite positions of economic and political power, colleges now serve to provide access to middle-class job opportunities. Some colleges will still see their role as educating the elite, much like private schools, but many more colleges will be serving the community at large. I don't think we should bemoan the loss of the traditional model of higher education aimed at academic and intellectual pursuits for their own sakes. Doing so would lead us to ignore the opportunities we have. Despite increasing socioeconomic segregation, institutions of higher education are, in comparison with K-12 schools, much less segregated along socioeconomic, ethnic, and racial lines. It is in colleges that we can most readily foster integrated classrooms in which students learn to interact and work together. However, students should also be given the tools to understand and theorize their disadvantage. Therefore, the political role of the university needs to be expanded. These two goals—preparing students to succeed in the unjust world they will encounter and empowering them to change it—are not antithetical to the intellectual aims of a college education. Students who learn to work together, to listen to each other, to put forward proposals and defend them, and to understand the non-ideal conditions they face will be better off intellectually and better prepared to face the challenges they will confront in entering the middle class. However, if those who teach in the academy are to really fulfill these aims, they will have to rethink many of the vestiges of the pedagogical model that harken back to those days in which the university played a very different role.

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