

The Best Investment:

College, the Trades, and the Working Future

Abstract: In this paper, I argue that learning a skilled trade, as an alternative or as a supplement to a college education, will provide students the kind of education and subsequent employment that higher education has traditionally been believed to provide: fulfilling work that is beneficial to society and that yields a well-paying salary. Many students across the United States are graduating from college but are failing to find jobs that are intellectually fulfilling or well-paying, and harder still to find work that is both. Instead, the majority of students who choose to attend college do so out of a compulsion to avoid low-wage service work or work in the manual trades. This creates within schools a meritocratic system in which students stand out by way of their credentials in order to attend an elite college or university. After college, graduates often go on to work jobs they have little personal attachment to, or jobs that are well-paying but are intellectually stifling or provide little to no benevolent impact on larger society. Furthermore, shame is often cast down by college graduates onto workers in the service and trade sectors; difficult and repetitive labor for relatively low wages is what the college student fully intends to avoid by earning a college degree. Learning a skilled trade and becoming manually competent allows one to engage fully with the intellectual and material aspects of working in the world, and should be taken seriously as a supplement or as an alternative to enrolling in higher education.

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Students across the United States decide they want to attend college for many reasons: to nourish and enrich their minds; to meet and be social with intelligent people, with revelry and the desire to form close friendships; or to simply develop a more expansive and mature framework to see and participate in the world. Whatever the particular motivation, maybe the most shared belief is that a college education, especially at an elite institution, will allow the graduate to enter into the professional job market with career opportunities that would be unavailable otherwise. With a unique skillset, the graduate will eventually—if not within the first few years—secure a higher income than could be earned by working in either the service or trade sectors.

This shared notion contains two subtle assumptions: college graduates, as “knowledge workers,” have demonstrated that they possess a unique knowledge base that enables them to perform a skill-specific job; therefore, successfully applying that skillset entitles them to their salary. More importantly, by preparing themselves for well-paying knowledge work, students are also preparing to preclude themselves from a career in low-wage service work or from the toil and commitment of having to learn a manual trade.

Once we acknowledge that many students must take service jobs—in addition to tens of thousands of dollars in federal and private loans—to pay for their college education, then a curious tension sets in. The students who work in the service sector in order to subsidize their time studying and preparing for well-salaried careers as knowledge workers may create conflicting, internal definitions in terms of what *jobs* and *real jobs* look like. One may be fine with a *job* serving in a local restaurant in the summers between school years, but this is only until one graduates and then starts their *real job* in the “adult world.” College students internalize this

common misconception that a responsible graduate of a respected college or university should put their time working in the services behind them; after all, it is commonly believed, one does not go to college just to remain working in the low-wage service sector. This tension is compounded when students are taught that studying a particular discipline in college entitles them to that particular field of knowledge work, and that some jobs, namely the services and trades, are to be avoided.

Many graduates are finding jobs that are well-paying. Many of these jobs even have the appearance of being “real jobs.” Yet these jobs often provide a marginal contribution to society, or are intellectually stifling or disappointing. Graduates are then obliged to hold these jobs in order to continue paying off their student debt, and often even after the debt has been paid, students—now adults—may have a hard time finding the intellectually stimulating and fulfilling work they had hoped to find after graduation. Maybe it is here that graduates become habituated to what it really means to work in the world of adults: being paid good money to work a job one finds to be bereft of intellectual and possibly even social value; in another word, meaningless. Rather than continue to be known as a *real job*, as one author suggests, maybe we should call this line of work what it actually is: a *bullshit job*.

This leads us to ask an critically important question: do prospective students have any viable options of finding well-paying *and* meaningful work outside the college track? Contrary to much of contemporary advice, in terms of achieving professional prosperity and personal fulfillment, there is actually much credit to be given in favor learning a trade. My purpose here will be to argue in favor of learning a skilled trade, as an alternative or as a supplement to a college education, in order to provide an enriching learning experience as well as a means for achieving a high-paying job.

Presuming an understanding of the economic motive attracting students to universities first allows us to see how a meritocratic framework might develop in the modern university. A meritocracy, as Andrew Delbanco defines in his book *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be*, is “a name for those who get to the top because they are intelligent, hardworking, and ambitious.” Often favoring “high-achieving students from affluent families” far more than “students from poor families with comparable grades and test scores,” Delbanco argues that “to make matters worse over the past couple of decades, financial aid . . . has been allocated on the basis of so-called merit rather than need. . . . leaving deserving students from low-income families without the means to pay for college.” Not only has the ability to pay for a college education been designed to benefit the already well-off, but the ability to distinguish oneself both before and during college relies on students’ *credentials*, or their access to personal advantages and professional opportunities. Getting good grades, holding prominent volunteer positions, and receiving prestigious internships are only some of the credentials by which students demonstrate their merit and prove themselves to be worthy of their place within the university.

A meritocratic university system sustained by student credentialing reinforces both intellectual and social conformism. For current and prospective students, this entails latching onto the economic imperative—that college is the way to success in the professional market. Delbanco writes that in the face of a prevailing “sense of drift . . . before the financial crash, students were fleeing from ‘useless’ subjects such as literature or the arts, and flocking to ‘marketable’ subjects such as economics. Now, in the lingering aftermath of the financial crisis, the flight continues; many students are also wondering what, in fact, is useful for what.” Conforming to this imperative is what allows affluent students to retain their sense of worth and entitlement to their education, but it is also what stunts their intellectual and personal

development. Students inhibit their ability to enrich their minds when they categorically curtail their interests to those that are marketable to potential employers and delimit the possibilities of both meaningful and lucrative employment. But most importantly, the conformist axis upon which the meritocratic university system revolves is intended to show that students, and eventually graduates, are clearly distinguished from—and better off than—the working lives of those employed in the low-wage service sectors.

In her book *Nickel and Dimed*, Barbara Ehrenreich explores the economic plight and the living experience of America's working poor. Ehrenreich, who holds a PhD in biology and is self-described as middle-class, dedicated three months of her life to living as an undercover low-wage service worker—one month as a waitress in Florida, another as a maid in Maine, and once more as a Wal-Mart employee in Minnesota. The results are often gritty and pitiful, but Ehrenreich is quick to add a correction: “This is not a story of some death-defying ‘undercover’ adventure. Almost anyone could do what I did—look for jobs, work those jobs, try to make ends meet. In fact, millions of Americans do it every day, and with a lot less fanfare and dithering.” Not only is this approach to work the very antithesis of the college ethos, in which each student pays to spend four or more years developing a unique skillset that enables them with a degree of certainty to work a specific job, but the actual details of Ehrenreich's three months of “not getting by in America” are grueling enough to make explicitly clear that no one, especially college students, would choose this life for themselves.

One central focus of the book is directed toward pointing out popular misconceptions about the working poor. Particularly dangerous among them are those that might suggest that this pursuit is somehow “fun” for Ehrenreich: “This should be exhilarating, I tell myself . . . but in those first few days in Portland the anxieties of my actual social class take over. Educated

middle-class professionals never go careening half-cocked into the future, vulnerable to any surprise that might leap out at them. . . . We have always [believed] that our lives are, in a sense, pre-lived.” Not only is the shock of being knocked down a social class difficult to reckon with, but also is the realization that “there are no secret economies that nourish the poor; on the contrary, there are a host of special costs.” In a list that addresses Ehrenreich’s immediate and recurring difficulties in finding affordable housing, food, and health insurance, we gain a better understanding of the bare economic realities of the working poor:

If you can’t put up the two months’ rent you need to secure an apartment, you end up paying through the nose for a room by the week. If you have only a room, with a hot plate at best, you can’t save by cooking up huge lentil stews that can be frozen for the week ahead. You eat fast food or the hot dogs and Styrofoam cups of soup that can be microwaved in a convenience store. If you have no money for health insurance—and [her employer’s] niggardly plan kicks in only after three months—you go without routine care or prescription drugs and end up paying the price.

While a parody of this degree of economic depravity may exist in some college students’ dorm rooms or apartments, the working poor are not subsidized by scholarships, loans, or parental allowances. Additionally, the nature of their work—rather than panicking about the fate of a term paper or final exam—rests in actual contributions to society, with the grotesque result that those who perform the work are somehow held in lower regard: “Work is supposed to save you from being an ‘outcast,’ as Pete puts it, but what we do is an outcast’s work, invisible and even disgusting. Janitors, cleaning ladies, ditchdiggers, changers of adult diapers—these are the untouchables of a supposedly caste-free and democratic society.”

The shame that is attached to those in the low-wage service sector is utterly misplaced on people who provide an invaluable service to our society. The popular misconceptions that perpetuate this shame are enabled not just by the prevailing economic imperative driving

students to colleges in a desperate attempt to escape from the service sector, but largely because “the poor have disappeared from the culture at large, from its political rhetoric and intellectual endeavors as well as from its daily entertainment.” Recruiting middle-class students into the university, away from the working poor and from valuable contributions to society in the service sector, is yet another way that upwardly-mobile habits are upheld in our society and that conformism to meritocratic credentialing is maintained within the university.

Yet without skipping a beat, Ehrenreich notes that much of the plight that burdens service workers in the work-place is often brought onto them by the management roles to which middle-class workers aspire. “If I have kept [management] to the margins so far,” writes Ehrenreich, “it is because I still flinch to think that I spent all those weeks under the surveillance of men (and later women) whose job it was to monitor my behavior for signs of sloth, theft, drug abuse, or worse.” Management’s preferred domain, however, is the rigid control over how employees spend their time on the job. Ehrenreich shares a particularly absurd experience with management once she starts working at a Wal-Mart in Minnesota. After an interview, drug test, and orientation—although no formal offering or acceptance of a job, and certainly no discussion of pay—Ehrenreich is given the rules of the job by management, the most curious among them being “time theft”: “The old guy who is being hired as a people greeter wants to know, ‘What is time theft?’ Answer: Doing anything other than working during company time, anything at all. Theft of *our* time is not, however, an issue.” Once Ehrenreich begins working on the salesfloor, she sees her colleagues are especially pliant to this decree, and work to avoid it all costs: “I’m [talking to Melissa] when she suddenly dives behind the rack that separates the place where we’re standing . . . worried that I may have offended her somehow, I follow right behind. ‘Howard,’ she whispers. ‘Didn’t you see him come by? We’re not allowed to talk to each other,

you know.” Rather than continue to rail against her colleagues for being so compliant, “I am completely not noticing the context—two women of mature years, two very hard-working women, as it happens, dodging behind a clothing rack to avoid a twenty-six-year-old management twerp. That’s not even worth commenting on.”

The desperation in which two service workers are willing to go to avoid being caught “breaking the rules” set forth by management, who happens to be embodied by a much younger, more readily compliant conformist, is how Ehrenreich addresses the horror of having one’s life and dignity be servile to their employable hours: “Yes, I know that any day now I’m going to return to the variety and drama of my real, Barbara Ehrenreich life. . . . What you don’t necessarily realize when you start selling your time by the hour is that what you’re actually selling is your *life*.” Unfortunately, for the working poor who have no other life to return to, this is a perennial difficulty, and not, as Ehrenreich has shown, an easily escapable one.

The social conformism created by the economic imperative to attend college is bolstered by America’s treatment of the working poor; no one would want their son or daughter to go to a four-year college or university and aspire to the jobs detailed by Ehrenreich, yet those in the working poor who aspire for *their* son or daughter to attend college or university are often at a profound disadvantage. As mentioned before, popular wisdom suggests that one would break into the adult world and get a *real job*, as opposed to those found in the service sectors. Needless to say, many prominent universities each year graduate the doctors, lawyers, businessowners, and legislators of the next generation, itself an indispensable service to the American republic. But what sort of *real jobs* does everyone else pick up?

David Graeber, in his book *Bullshit Jobs*, addresses this subject in what is often a searing critique of the post-college workforce. To distinguish popular parlance from what Graeber

intends the term to mean, a *bullshit job* is “a form of employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence even though the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case.” Unsurprisingly, *bullshit jobs* map on fairly well to the notion of conformism within the university system: if one can gather enough of the proper meritocratic credentials, then whatever particular field one happened to study may have little or no bearing on gaining employment in a well-paid position. This is the case with Eric, one of Graeber’s many excellent case studies:

My first [bullshit job was] postgraduation, a dozen years ago. I was the first in my family to attend university, and due to a profound naivete about the purpose of higher education, I somehow expected that it would open up vistas of hitherto unforeseen opportunity.

Instead, it offered graduate training schemes at PricewaterhouseCoopers . . . I preferred to sit on the dole . . . to read French and Russian novels before the dole forced me out to attend an interview which, sadly, led to a job.

That job involved working for a large design firm as its “Interface Administrator.” The interface was a content management system—an intranet with a graphical user interface, basically—designed to enable this company’s work to be shared across its seven offices around the UK.

I should have realized that this was one partner’s idea that no one else actually wanted to implement. Why else would they be paying a twenty-one-year-old history graduate with no IT experience to do this?

Graeber puts the reality of this situation bluntly when assessing just how Eric’s job could have happened in the first place: “If the argument of the previous section is correct, one could perhaps conclude that Eric’s problem was just that he hadn’t been sufficiently prepared for the pointlessness of the modern workplace. He had passed through the old education system—some traces of it are left—designed to prepare students to actually *do* things.” To carry the point home, Graeber writes: “Eric might have been unusually ill-prepared to endure the meaninglessness of his first job . . . despite the fact that we are all trained, in one way or another, to assume that human beings should be perfectly delighted to find themselves in his situation of being paid good

money not to work.” One must wonder who would vilify service workers when their societal contributions enable an easier life for all of us. But one must also wonder at the notion of going to college to receive an education and to better one’s professional prospects, only to find oneself employed in a profession that pays good money to do either absolutely nothing or endlessly tedious work. This idea must only be able to survive in “the adult world,” the real world; the world of *bullshit jobs*.

While Graeber begins the book by outlining the five particular varieties of *bullshit jobs*, he glosses over what they all have in common until much later in the book: the sheer frustration workers feel at having their time wasted. “One might imagine,” he writes, “that leaving millions of well-educated young men and women without any real work responsibilities but with access to the internet [might] spark some sort of Renaissance. Nothing remotely along these lines has taken place.” Instead, what largely occupies the working lives of today’s young professionals are social media; or, as Graeber sees it, “[the] forms of electronic media that lends themselves to being produced and consumed while pretending to do something else.” Even attempts at transcending the ethos of *bullshit jobs* can either be underwhelming or incredibly taxing on our attention as well as our psyches: “Utilizing a bullshit job to pursue other projects isn’t easy. It requires ingenuity and determination to take time that’s been first flattened and homogenized . . . then broken randomly into often unpredictably large fragments, and use that time for projects requiring thought and creativity.” When the majority of one’s time is spent working at a jolted and infrequent pace and is unable to be immersed in the flow of one’s work; when one’s creative capacities are suppressed in favor of repetitive or tedious actions, somehow finding the time to do important, critical work outside of one’s full-time employment becomes increasingly difficult.

Hard enough as it is to merely act as if one was busy at work, Graeber describes these hopeful workers as “putting themselves in a position where they can use their time for anything more ambitious than cat memes. Not that there’s anything wrong with cat memes. . . . But one would like to think our youth are meant for greater things.” One would also like to think that we would encourage students to choose work with valuable contributions to society, whether or not in the form of service work, rather than follow the conformist logic of going to college in order to get a *bullshit job*. Nevertheless, here we are.

And here we will stay, within conditions of work that enable those fortunate enough to attend college and university to look down on service workers as a profession to be avoided at all costs, and to look up to those *bullshit jobs* that promise better than average pay without expecting hardly any meaningful work out of the employed. Given these are largely the forms of work that a conformist, meritocratic university system can sustain, it is little surprise that for now, as students and soon to be graduates, this is our lot. But this is only because few among us within the conformist framework have emboldened themselves to demonstrate another way of being and of working. To pursue work that is not only dignified but well-paying, not just socially valuable but cognitively enriching, and not a product of prevailing *bullshit* tendencies but rooted in a tradition with objective standards and goals, this *can* be our lot. This is the full-bodied and full-mind education that most colleges and universities have abandoned in favor of metrics less strenuous and less valuable. This is the education provided by learning a trade, an education that desperately needs to be revived.

As a champion of this approach, Matthew Crawford, in his book *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, argues for a renewed sense of personal involvement in our work: “The satisfactions of manifesting oneself concretely in the world through manual competence have been known to

make a man quiet and easy. They seem to relieve him of the felt need to offer chattering *interpretations* of himself to vindicate his worth.” The value of this worth is known especially to those in the service sector, who in every publicly serviceable act demonstrate their value: “Street-level work that disrupts the infrastructure (the sewer system below or the electrical grid above) brings our *shared* dependence into view. People may inhabit very different worlds even in the same city, according to their wealth or poverty. Yet we all live in the same physical reality, ultimately, and owe a common debt to the world.” But it is the *appearance* of this worth that is often most upsetting to the upper classes; Crawford notes that “the repairman’s presence may make the narcissist uncomfortable, then. The problem isn’t so much that he is dirty, or uncouth. Rather, he seems to pose a challenge to our self-understanding that is somehow fundamental. We’re not as free and independent as we thought.” What the white-collar worker confronts once he is unable to fix what he must call a specialist to do is his own incompetence, and the immediate reflection that what he spends his own day doing—given if it is not another form of service or trade work—is likely, largely, *bullshit*. The value of fixing something tangible is enough to speak for itself: “the building stands, the car now runs, the lights are on.” The trades need little else to validate their worth other than the fact that their abilities have been tested, and the worker has come out on top.

In contrast to the reasons why college students may look down on service workers, there is an additional anxiety that troubles prospective students in particular: “Today, in our schools, the manual trades are given little honor [given] the fear that acquiring a specific skill set means that one’s life is *determined*. In college, by contrast, many students don’t learn anything of particular application; college is the ticket to an *open* future.” Whereas students in college are paralyzed by the choice of being able to graduate prepared to do *anything*, prospective students

avoid the trades because they do not want to be “stuck” doing one thing for the rest of their life. While there is truth to the fact that mastering a skill make take many more years than are required of a college education, there are two reasons why learning a trade is ultimately more liberating than inhibiting.

When assessing the ability of the trades to survive the onslaught of services, *bullshit jobs*, and more importantly, automation, Crawford writes that along with services that can be delivered over the Internet, “jobs based on rules” are those that are the most threatened by automation. What shields the trades from this threat is largely how trade workers diagnose problems: “Knowing what *kind* of problem you have on hand means knowing what features of the situation can be ignored. Even the boundaries of what counts as ‘the situation’ can be ambiguous; making discriminations of pertinence cannot be achieved by the application of rules.” Secondly, because the trades train workers to diagnostically approach the entire system, rather than simply one or some of its parts, trade workers are less likely to be short-sighted by their experience with part of the work *process*, and instead focus on doing their *work*. Not only does this instill in the worker a greater sense of autonomy, but their pride, too, is demonstrated in their competence in handling and fixing the machine.

Having examined the social and economic repercussions of service work, *bullshit jobs*, and the trades, what ultimate advice can we give either to prospective or current college students? The answer, if we want our children to enjoy dignified, fulfilling, and cognitively-enriching work, is to learn a trade. While it is not necessary to preclude a college education for the sake of a trade, it would be wise, as Crawford advises, to pick one up during the summers: “You’re likely to be less damaged, and quite possibly better paid, as an independent tradesman. . . . To heed such advice would require a certain contrarian streak, as it entails rejecting a life

course mapped out by others as obligatory and inevitable.” The task is for us to be so emboldened as to actually put these words to practice.

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