

The U.S.: The Land of the Free or a Country of Losers?

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1. The Question

According to a report by the Bureau of Labor Statistics 67% of American workers don't like their jobs, and 41% of them are not employed in the fields for which they studied in school.¹

According to my own observations, there has been a considerable change in attitude and service mindedness of American workers between the late 1970s when I lived here for the first time, and now in the late 1990s. There seem to be a lot more disenchanted and disillusioned people around now than there were 20 years ago, even though the economy is booming.

Could there be a connection between these two statements? Make dissatisfied people bad workers, bad service providers? I think so and I would like to explore this connection a little more in depth. What groups of population does the current American educational scene produce?

2. Winners

Let's start with the minority of people where what they go to school for and what they do for a living happily coincide.

2.1. The Professionals

Medical doctors, engineers, ministers, college professors, and to a certain extent lawyers

¹ Report quoted from a leaflet of a testing company in Austin

are among those who are part of the upper third of people whose income has increased throughout the last couple of decades.² In all these cases, the academic path to reach one of these professions is well defined. Those who pursue it to the end are well prepared to enter the ranks of the respective professionals. And in the case of medical doctors, for example, it is important to notice that they actually do very high level apprenticeships where the combination of knowledge with marketable (and indispensable) skills are part of the education.

Some teachers can be counted amongst the winners since their education is also well connected to what's expected from them. The fact that they are badly paid, however, like all those lawyers that are not lucky enough to really make it, makes it necessary for most of them to have second and third jobs. And that, of course, is a big disillusionment again. I have met a lot of teachers that don't consider themselves to be winners.

² "Between 1979 and 1988, real family income for the poorest fifth of our people declined by 4.5 percent while that of the richest fifth increased by 14 percent.", Ray Marshall and Marc Tucker: *Thinking for a Living: Education and the Wealth of Nations*, Basic Books, 1992, page xv

2.2. Tech Prep/School-to-Work Students

A second group of winners are those who are lucky enough to be enrolled in a high school that has abolished the General Track of studies. A school that forces them to make a cluster decision and a career plan in their freshman year, and take classes and acquire skills in an occupational field, rather than making a distinction between 'college bound' and 'non college bound'. If they even are lucky enough to be enrolled in tech prep style programs where some high school classes are articulated and lead to community college credits and, therefore, continue their education in a technically oriented program in a community college and finish it with an Associate's degree in combination with related skills in the field, they may well be the big winners of tomorrow.

2.3. The Computer Freaks

A third group of winners are those who focus on computer skills and either with the help of or in spite of the schools acquire highly marketable computer skills. Since these are already in high demand and this demand will be dramatically increasing worldwide, they don't have to be afraid of being unemployed and they will always earn a good living, more than enough to achieve the American Dream.

2.4. Skilled Apprentices

Those few hundred thousand who actually secure one of the very rare skilled apprenticeship positions in the

US³ are fortunate to actually not only learn an occupation in high demand but also make a good living:

Statistic of Average Monthly Gross Salary 1994⁴

1.	Professional Degree	\$4264
2.	Doctor's Degree	\$4251
3.	Master's Degree	\$3536
4.	Skilled Apprenticeship	\$3467
5.	Bachelor's Degree	\$2778
6.	Associate's Degree	\$2180
7.	Some College	\$1915
8.	High School Graduate	\$1725
9.	High School Drop-out	\$1265

2.5. Some High School Drop-outs

The fifth and final group of winners, at least in my view, are some high school drop-outs (while I certainly don't want to promote this option!). Since their formal education has not been completed, they consider all their professional successes very positive occurrences and are happy about them. And because they don't spend too much time in educational institutions, they have more time to learn marketable skills on the job. Since employers tend to value skills and work experience higher than formal educational diplomas, this may prove a winner.

³“Unfortunately the availability of registered apprenticeship programs varies dramatically across the United States. As a result, this option for school-to-career programs may not be available in all communities. Where they do exist, they are one of the best roads to high skill/high wage work.”, Kenneth C. Gray, Edwin L. Herr, *Other Ways to Win: Creating Alternatives for High School Graduates*, Corwin Press, Inc., 1995, page 141

⁴ Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Average Monthly Gross Salary 1994*, 1994

3. Losers

And now the losers; they outnumber the winners by the millions. Let's start at the top.

3.1. The People with Degrees

There's the sizable group of people who have spent a lot of time and money to achieve graduate degrees and actually are bachelors, masters and doctors. Since the fields in which they studied, however, don't have jobs for them, they are either unemployed, underemployed, or doing a job that is way below what their education was intended for⁵. The fact that most of them face debts in the form of loans that they had to get in order to pay for their education, doesn't add to their happiness in life. A lot of them actually go back to community colleges after a while to work towards an Associate's degree in a field where they can find a job that pays well and has some long-term perspective.

A substantial subgroup of this category are people with the so called 'liberal arts degrees'. While this kind of education is fantastic for the development of the personality and adds tremendously to a person's value as a member of society, it doesn't carry any marketable skills other than the ability to learn. The fact that a lot of people actually enroll in liberal arts programs in order to postpone their occupational decision doesn't add to it's marketability with employers either. Employers tend to like mature individuals that have made up their minds

⁵ see Kristina Shelly, "The Future of Jobs for College Graduates," *Monthly Labor Review*, July 1992, pp.13-19

in regard of an occupational career.

3.2. The College Drop-outs

A second very huge group of losers are those who enroll in one of the over 3000 colleges only to realize after a fairly short while that they were badly prepared for this adventure in their initial twelve years of schooling. Some of these drop out shortly after they start.⁶ Some take remedial classes which lengthen their stay in college and increases their debt load without getting them closer to reaching the necessary number of credits to get a degree. And others just stop their college adventure when either a job opportunity opens (many times only for a very short while) or family responsibilities make it impossible to go to school. I am always astonished when I see statistics that label somebody who drops out of college "some college" (see above) and somebody who drops out of high school "drop-out". What's the difference? In both cases the individual that has to make this decision is hurt in the process. It is bad for your self esteem not to be able to finish something that seemed manageable in the first place.

3.3. The High School Graduates

A third large group of losers are those high school graduates who would like to go on to college but either don't have the money or are not accepted by any of the schools they would like to go to. Since a high school

⁶ see Kenneth Gray, "The Baccalaureate Game: 2. Graduation Rates" in PHI DELTA KAPPAN, p.530

diploma doesn't really have any marketable value at all in modern age America, these people are probably the worst off because they are competing in a labor market with a lot of people with more education and higher degrees. Most of the time they will end up in low paying entry level jobs with no career possibilities and no benefits at all, many of which are in the service industry (bank tellers, sales associates, restaurant and hospitality jobs, etc.). But how do you render a good service - maybe even with a smile - when you're not happy at all?

3.4. The Nowhere Bound

The fourth noteworthy group of losers are those high school students that are being labeled "not college material" or "at risk" and are, therefore, either in the general track of studies or in some kind of dead end vocational program, totally out of touch with the world of work and the demands of the labor market - often in perfect harmony with the school timetable and the teacher's and students' preferences, however. They are often referred to as *'those kids with those teachers in that building'*. The U.S. system that supposedly avoids tracking by all means, creates a huge group of students that don't feel too good about what they are doing in school. The fact that in 1992 84% of all U.S. high school seniors indicated that they planned to get at least a four-year college degree, and 33% had already decided to go on to graduate school ⁷ shows the fact that in

⁷ National Center for Education Statistics, *Statistics in Brief* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, NCES 93-473, November 1993), p.3

the face of being labeled a loser, students tend to overestimate their academic potential tremendously.

3.5. The High School Drop-outs

And, finally, the fifth substantial group of losers are those students that decide, for whatever reasons, that staying in high school is not for them and drop out. There are several subgroups in this category. There are the unwed mothers that have to get a job to raise their child or children. There are the gang members that figure they can make more money by dealing drugs than they could ever achieve with a formal education. And there are those who figure that the easiest way to make money is to take it from somebody else - either by force or not, and either with a deadly outcome or not. The number of high school drop-outs in U.S. jails is dramatically high. And then there is the group that I mentioned under the winners; those who make it in the world of work - mainly because they can do just that: WORK! I was lucky enough to meet a couple of them that are wearing the 'drop-out label' with pride and are successful. But they are a very small minority.

4. What's the result?

The US educational system creates a lot of losers; as a matter of fact, they outnumber the winners by far. But thinking to be a loser doesn't particularly help to do a good job in any employment. Nor is it a good outlook in life. And feeling that one's knowledge is heavily underused doesn't

contribute to a professional smile when rendering a service to a paying customer. As doesn't the fact that one income will never be enough to raise a family, for many two and three incomes are not enough!

I sometimes wonder: do the people who make it mandatory for everybody to have a high school diploma and put the pressure on students to even achieve a college degree take into account that the economy does not really honor these scholastic efforts? That today's college degree doesn't entitle one to the same privileges anymore than it did twenty years ago? And are those people actually thinking that all jobs - doctors, lawyers, carpenters, hairdressers, bankers etc. - actually do need the same high school diploma?

I read that in France nearly seven out of every ten young people pass the exam leading to higher education, and that the government is aiming to bring the figure to 80%.⁸ It will be one of my first projects when we are back in Europe, to find out what this means. Is this exam comparable to the American high school diploma? Are students supposed to take it and then actually to go on to higher education or do most of them start some kind of occupational education (e.g. Apprenticeships) afterwards like many of their counterparts in Germany do? Does the French government imply that this exam is the basis for almost all jobs in France, including bakers,

⁸ Swiss REVIEW, #. 5/96 (17.10.1996), Editorial: Pierre-André Tschanz, page 3

builders, carpenters, doctors, welders, bankers, salespeople etc.? And, if that's the case, do they inform the public accordingly so that the illusions of the people actually earning this diploma are not to be automatically part of the upper class? And are those people in France happy that pass the exam and do not end up in upper level jobs?

fact that to become part of the middle-class one does not necessarily have to have a degree but marketable skills and the ability to continuously learn new ones.

5. What needs to happen

I believe that it is time in this country to stop the 'Baccalaureate Game', as Professor Kenneth Gray calls it!⁹ To bring the '**Baccalaureate Craze**', as I would like to call it, to a shrieking halt! I agree with those who promote high schools that are arranged around or focused on occupational clusters and where all students have to make a cluster decision in their freshman year. And where the general track of studies is abolished. Like those supported by the Southern Regional Education Board's *High Schools That Work* program, for example. And I agree with those who support tech-prep style school-to-work programs that lead a majority of students into two year Associate degree programs at community colleges that have a clear focus on the actual and the future needs of the labor market. Like those sponsored by the National School-to-Work Office. And I agree with those students, parents and teachers who understand the

⁹ Kenneth Gray, *The Baccalaureate Game/Is It Right for All Teens?*, PHI DELTA KAPAN, p.528-534