

# Class, Race, and the Discourse of “College for All”

## A Response to “Schooling for Democracy”

Ronald David Glass and Kysa Nygreen

---

### ABSTRACT

We critique the “college for all” discourse by unveiling its relationship to the politics of education, the broader economic and political contexts, and the class and race structures embedded in society and schooling, including higher education. We analyze the current and future labor markets to demonstrate the ways that the “college for all” discourse overstates the need for math and science knowledge and skills within the workforce, and we analyze the debt burdens associated with college attendance and completion to demonstrate that the promised benefits of “college for all” are often illusory for low-income, racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse students. Thus, we argue that “college for all”—just like “no child left behind” and the “race to the top”—functions as an ideological velvet to soften education policy talk, talk that actually carries big sticks that punish the very students proclaimed to be the beneficiaries of the proposed changes in schooling. The results of schooling practices articulated by the “college for all” discourse are (a) the reinforcement of material barriers to the stated aims of educational access and equity, and (b) the fortification of the class and race status quo. We examine the ways that the transformation of schooling must be linked to the establishment of just social, economic, and political institutions, and to the formation of a citizenry prepared to engage in the struggles for these institutions.

**I**N “SCHOOLING FOR Democracy,” Nel Noddings opens her defense against “losing what might be called the Whitmanesque vision of democracy—a democracy that respects every form of honest work, includes people from every economic and social class, and cultivates a deep understanding of interdependence” with this question: Should all children go to college? (2011, p. 1). Noddings intends to criticize the current dominant discourse about the aims of public schooling and to foster a reconsideration of its liberal foundations.

We interrogate Noddings’s question and standards for democracy to clarify their limits and to elaborate a more critical perspective. We interpret the “college for all” discourse by unveiling its relationship to the class and race structures at work in schooling, including higher education, and by situating our critique within a different vision of democracy and an alternative conception of citizenship. US policy talk encompasses many variants of the “college for all” discourse (our February 2011 Google search of the phrase identified more than one million links); we concentrate on the main framework of the national debate and some of its backstage realities (Smith, Miller-Kahn, Heinecke, & Jarvis, 2004). Similarly, we recognize that “college for all” blurs crucially important distinctions among the levels, types, and quality of colleges and

their outcomes; we always use the phrase with scare quotes to reinforce our contention that it is precisely this blurring of distinctions that is a key in the ideological force of the discourse.

We proceed in several steps. First, we review the core of Noddings’s argument and approach to the issues, sketching our extension of some of her views and critique of others. Second, we uncover the class and race dimensions of “college for all” and

---

RON GLASS is an associate professor of philosophy of education and director of the Center for Collaborative Research for an Equitable California at the University of California. He is the coeditor, with Pia Lindquist Wong, of *Prioritizing Urban Children, Teachers, and Schools Through Professional Development Schools* (State University of New York Press, 2009).

KYSA NYGREEN is an assistant professor of education at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. She is working on an ethnographic book about youth identity, agency, and social justice pedagogy in the context of “last chance” high school. She is a recipient of the Council on Anthropology and Education’s Early Career Presidential Fellowship.

position these in relation to current and future labor markets and in relation to current actual outcomes of postsecondary schooling. Finally, we outline what can be done in light of the critical analysis we present. Throughout our discussion, we demonstrate a contrasting notion of educational philosophy and challenge the public discourse about the aims of schooling in a democratic society.

### **Noddings's Argument**

After asking her core question and declaring her vision of democracy—one that is respectful of all work, inclusive of all classes, and recognizing of interdependence—Noddings argues that the only sensible answer to the opening question is no, not all children should go to college. Since current policy and practice neither acknowledge this obvious truth nor embrace Noddings's seemingly reasonable vision, her argument is meant to spur corrective action. She develops her position by tracing several 20th-century debates within liberalism about what is required of public schooling if its graduates are to become good citizens and workers (leaving aside other possible fundamental aims of schooling).

Noddings notes the slowly forged consensus that a democracy requires equal schooling at least through high school; this consensus accommodated disagreements about just what *equal* meant and entailed, even while high school *completion* became the pervasive norm. Disputes concerning *completion of what* (exactly) and *for what* (exactly) were resolved largely through various forms of tracking—differentiated programs of instruction and schooling outcomes, that is, academic/college-prep, vocational/industrial, and commercial. Noddings agrees that comprehensive high schools must respond to the actual diversity among student capacities, interests, and skills, and among occupations; she argues that some form of tracking is necessary, and thus, *equal* schooling cannot entail the *same* curriculum (the academic, college-bound track in more or less rigorous stratifications) for all students. Further, Noddings argues that such a differentiated curriculum need not entail, at least conceptually, an unequal or unjust education, even for racially and economically disadvantaged students.

Noddings traces our society's hierarchical ordering of studies and jobs to classic origins. Ancient thinkers ascribed greater value to pursuits of intrinsic rather than instrumental worth, culling aesthetic and ethical reasons to support their hierarchy that made intellectual work superior to manual work. These frameworks indeed persist, and Noddings counters their "confusion over the intellectual" with another branch of the liberal tradition, siding with John Dewey and Mike Rose, and even calling upon more radical thinkers such as Paulo Freire and Myles Horton. She defends the position that "no subject is inherently more intellectual than another.... If we identify the intellectual with thinking, the algebra taught in schools is not inherently more intellectual than cooking or motorcycle repair" (p. 2).

Turning to the economic concerns used to justify the "college for all" discourse and the purported wage premium a college education provides, Noddings explores several counterpoints. She notes that not all college graduates can expect higher lifetime earnings, and some take many years to move ahead of their less

credentialed peers. She questions the degree to which our economy depends on the number of college graduates produced, noting "prosperous European countries" where "high-quality vocational education and training are deemed essential" (p. 4). With education and job training shared among government, employers, and unions, work and active citizenship can be more closely integrated. These models can be translated to the US context, Noddings believes, based on an agreement that "we need to educate people well for the work they do" (p. 4). She urges that we imagine preparing youths to discern their own callings rather than simply training them for occupations, and thus we can come closer to her Whitmanesque vision of democratic schooling.

If schooling is to reach toward democratic equal opportunity, Noddings is convinced that it cannot be grounded in inert forms of knowledge, enslaved to false notions of intellectual work that inappropriately valorize mathematics and science without conveying their core attribute, critical thinking. Democratic schools, she argues, must recognize, respect, and appreciate difference and, above all, demonstrate genuine care and concern for the human beings who learn and teach in them. With a focus on guidance of the young toward maturity, rather than on subject matters and occupations, schools might become the "incubators of democracy" that so many have hoped they might be (p. 5).

### **What Is the Question? Which Is the Vision of Democracy?**

There is much to praise in Noddings's argument; she mines many rich veins of liberal thought and offers solidly grounded responses to some central tenets of the dominant discourse of "college for all," calling it toward a more reasoned and compassionate form of schooling that honors the uniqueness of each youth. But it seems to us that her own analysis and discussion continue to obscure, just as does the dominant discourse she condemns, the most important mechanisms at work. We begin by questioning Noddings's foundational question, since a more critical point of departure links these mechanisms in a more revelatory way to broader social, economic, and political structures, and also enables a more robust counter-strategy to be developed.

Since no is the obvious and only rational answer to Noddings's opening question—"Should all children go to college?"—we seek our understanding of schooling and democracy in the unveiling of different questions: Why and how has "college for all" become the dominant aim of public schooling in the United States (even though it is clear that not all children can or should go to college)? What results from this goal's requirements and logics in relation to the formation of a democratic society? To what extent do these effects reinforce (and, in part, produce) the historically embedded ideological structures of class and race (neither of which is addressed as such by Noddings)? The answers to these questions bring out the fundamental inequities obscured by the dominant discourse and school practices, as well as by liberal criticisms of the sort proffered by Noddings, and they also point toward a fundamentally different kind of response if schools are to serve democratic purposes.

Similarly, while we agree wholly with the first of Noddings's three Whitmanesque standards for democracy—respect for all

forms of honest work—and with her refusal of the evaluative hierarchy separating intellectual and manual work and workers, we do not believe the problem lies in confusions about the nature of intellectual activity or intrinsic and instrumental values. Instead, we ask: Since many people from all walks of life have long extolled the aesthetic, moral, and intellectual value of all forms of honest work, how and why have the ancient philosophical positions persisted? How will the answers to these questions recast the dominant logics of today and indicate more effective forms of engagement so as to overcome them? We suggest that it is not coincidental that classical philosophers elaborated a view that gave succor and sustenance to the ruling class, as it continues to do. In other words, forms of work are saturated with class and status markers that materialize unearned privileges (or undeserved disadvantages) and moral stature (or moral approbation), and this saturation is not secondary to but constitutive of social, economic, and political relationships. Since history shows that concerted struggle by the disadvantaged and demeaned is necessary to alter these valuations and privileges, both philosophic critique and democratic schooling practices can only achieve their aims if they help prepare the relevant populations for these very struggles. Further, we might also ask: Do the “college for all” discourse and associated school practices actually *require class*, *require race*, to exist as they do? If buried within these dominant ideological logics are the ranking and sorting mechanisms of the foundational myth of individual meritocratic achievement—a (if not *the*) primordial reason for public schooling within capitalist societies—what might this tell us about the limits of any reform that leaves the “grammar of schooling” intact (Tyack & Cuban, 1995)? We detect a related point in Noddings’s discussion of some European countries’ differentiation of vocational and university education: she passes in silence over how these schooling systems leave their country’s core social, economic, and political inequities intact, despite their inclusive partnerships among employers, unions, and governments, and despite their recognition of the value of diverse occupations.

Continuing this line of reasoning, we notice that Noddings’s second Whitmanesque standard—that a democracy “includes people from every economic and social class” (p. 1)—accepts as given the economic and social class structure and calls only for inclusion. This position assumes that economic and social classes can be somehow separated from the inequitable valuations, power, and social and political relations that make them what they are. We believe that economic and social classes, even at the conceptual level, necessarily bear the marks and dynamics of injustice. This is not to suggest that individual members of antagonistic economic and social classes cannot live and work in solidarity across these divides; rather, we want to emphasize that the very existence of these classes as classes is only possible in terms of conflicting interests and differential valuations and power. We therefore think democratic schooling should strive not toward class inclusiveness, but toward the abolition of classes as such and the formation of equitable social, economic, and political institutions that truly treat all forms of honest work with equal respect. In this regard, we might note that Walt Whitman, though a known abolitionist in

regard to slavery, is reported to have feared the abolitionist movement; the fear of that kind of struggle for change haunts liberal views, and perhaps a similar reservation lies beneath the position advanced by Noddings.

As our questions and critiques of Noddings’s question and vision indicate, we believe that a philosophical analysis of “college for all” must follow a more materialist line of inquiry if it is to provide the kind of insight that can ground transformative changes in school policies and practices. In the sections that follow, we continue to pursue just such a line.

### **Deconstructing the Discourse of “College for All”**

A broad bipartisan public discourse about the purpose and potential of schooling in a dynamically changing globalized economy has become codified in the aim of “college for all.” This discourse—articulating the world as it *is*; as it *has been*; and as it *might, could, or should become* (Fairclough, 2001)—echoes and synthesizes disparate strands in educational thought and politics. It has achieved near taken-for-granted status within education policy, practice, and research worlds. It reiterates familiar representations of schooling’s role in economic progress and competitiveness but also incorporates two other powerful discursive strands: calls for greater equity and for opportunities for upward social mobility. The “college for all” discourse portrays a future in which equity, excellence, and international competitiveness are interwoven into a compelling narrative of progress—both individual and collective. This framing enticingly binds social and economic classes together in a seamless prosperous future in which everyone is better off than he or she otherwise would be.

“College for all” emerged as an organizing framework for 21st-century public schooling following the Reagan administration’s 1983 *Nation at Risk* call to educational arms, which situated schooling as the lever to move workforce preparation to the front in the era’s rapidly globalizing economic competition. Unlike the rhetoric of the movement for standards, testing, and accountability that was galvanized by the alleged “rising tide of mediocrity” engulfing the nation’s schools, “college for all” resonated with the deeply egalitarian and democratic aspirations for public schooling that have attracted a broad base of the citizenry since the time of Horace Mann. This enabled the conservative movement to position itself as a champion of improved schooling for the poor—without giving ground on its strategic aims of restructuring the curriculum to meet the needs of global capitalism and of privatizing public schooling through vouchers, charters, and other market-based mechanisms. Conservatives argued that high standards and high expectations for *all* students demanded the preparation of every able and willing student to enter postsecondary schooling, and that the global marketplace demanded that US students be pushed to ever higher levels of literacy and numeracy. These college-going skills for *all* students (future workers) were supposedly necessary to maintain the country’s scientific and technological advantages, which fuel its profit engines.

Youths who succeeded in their rigorous K–12 preparation would have the opportunity to attend college, and success there would gain them access to good jobs that drew upon their advanced

literacy and numeracy skills; this vision was meant to motivate students to study hard and persist to graduation. Even previously left behind low-income, racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse (LI/RCLD) students would gain entrance into the middle class and the global economy. This schooling trajectory toward rewarding employment was meant to parallel a political trajectory toward a form of citizenship that would renew and strengthen democratic traditions and institutions; well-educated and well-employed citizens could look forward to reduced social, economic, and political inequalities. More pointedly, the claim was made that reducing the test-score and college-attendance gaps among classes and races would enable more LI/RCLD students to enjoy the educational and employment privileges of the middle class that had long eluded them (as if their own efforts were the sole driver of their achievement), thus finally realizing the utopian promise of public schooling. For conservatives, “college for all” not only justifies their calls for tougher standards and testing and more accountability, it fulfills their pursuit of goodness by not leaving any child behind.

Though it emanated from conservative intellectual and political centers, this discourse soon was given voice by a strikingly wide array of politicians, educators, commentators, and activists. Moderates, liberals, and progressives found themselves in a difficult position; they could not deny the shameful outcomes in schools in low-income neighborhoods, the importance of clear standards and high expectations, and that major changes were needed to provide meaningful economic opportunities for the students in those neighborhoods. Embracing the goals seemed to leave them little room to challenge either the means for attaining the goals or the underlying logics that defined them. For liberals and progressives, then and now, “college for all” appeals to the long-standing struggle for higher expectations and more rigorous curricula for LI/RCLD students to insure their greater educational and economic access; moreover, this discourse appears to hold the ground being lost to the voter initiatives and court actions that are rolling back the gains of the civil rights movement and affirmative action policies.

However, a deeper analysis reveals that “college for all” unites social actors across the political spectrum only by incorporating liberal ideals of equity into the logic of neoliberalism (the primacy of individual self-interest, markets, and profits), and by representing the global changes driven by advanced capitalism as inevitable facts that require individuals to adjust to them, rather than as contested realities open to alternative interpretations and futures (Burbules & Torres, 2000; Lipman, 2004). The conservative agenda becomes reinforced and the liberal agenda becomes another dream deferred for LI/RCLD students; “college for all” provides an ideological velvet to soften the education policy talk that actually carries big sticks that punish the very students proclaimed to be the beneficiaries of the changes in policy and practice. These changes reinforce material barriers to public schooling’s stated aims of access and equity, and misrepresent the nature of the future workforce. Perhaps the most pernicious consequence of the logics of schooling and neoliberalism is that students are induced to accept their standardized testing performance and academic rank

as measures of their personal worth and their right to participate in the shaping of society.

History shows that, despite vastly expanded access to postsecondary schooling for the working class (following the WWII GI Bill) and people of color (following *Brown v. Board of Education*, the civil rights movement, and the passage of affirmative action legislation), the basic economic, social, and political divisions and inequities among classes and races remain structurally dominant, even within the college-going population itself. Such disjunctures between the “college for all” narrative and the material realities of the persistent educational and economic inequalities that maintain and harden the status quo (Carnoy, 1994) mean that the “college for all” discourse hides and reinforces the very mechanisms producing the results it claims to be remedying. For example, more young people from all three major racial and ethnic groups attend and graduate from college today than ever before, and the proportions are expected to continue rising, yet racial disparities remain and widen, and income inequality continues to grow (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010). Additionally, the college participation rate of low-income students (whose families earn less than \$25,000 per year) remains 32% behind high-income students (whose families earn more than \$75,000 per year)—just as it was 30 years earlier (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2001).

Thus, existing patterns of class and race inequality, as measured by level of educational attainment, remain firmly intact even as more and more students from all social groups are attending college. It is important to note that these figures only measure attendance rates at public and private four-year institutions, but they do not disaggregate by level of college selectivity and prestige, and thus they obscure other stratified disparities. In fact, at the more elite universities, despite significantly expanded financial aid, the percentage of students from families in the bottom quartile of national family income is only about 3% (Fischer, 2006).<sup>1</sup> At the same time, students from the top income quartile in elite colleges have risen to constitute half of the enrollment (Bowen et al., 2005). Moreover, the consistent growth in college-going rates across all social groups has done little to stem the larger national trend of increasing wealth and income inequality. In recent years, overall wages have continued to fall even as profits and productivity have grown to new heights, and the United States remains the most unequal society in the developed world despite having one of the largest proportions of young adults who attend at least some college (Mishel, Bernstein, & Allegretto, 2006).

## Centering Class and Race in the Discussion of “College for All”

### REALITY OF THE LABOR MARKET

In earlier eras, LI/RCLD students were tracked into vocational programs and steered toward blue-collar jobs in a variety of skilled trades.<sup>2</sup> Today, many of these pathways into middle-income jobs are vanishing, and a college degree is increasingly necessary (but not sufficient) to obtain middle-income, full-time, stable employment.<sup>3</sup>

On average, college graduates earn nearly double the wages of high school graduates (Bergman, 2005), and this gap has grown

since 1980 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). Yet a closer examination reveals that some of the promised advantages may be illusory, since the averages conceal important exceptions within different groups, and the college wage premium is bolstered by the earnings of a concentrated few at the top of the income spectrum (Mishel et al., 2006). In fact, there is greater income inequality *within* the college-educated group than *between* college-educated and non-college-educated workers (Katz & Autor, 2005), and one out of six college graduates earns less than the average wage of high school graduates (Lafer, 2002). This makes clear that not all colleges uniformly deliver earnings benefits, but this crucially important reality is completely eclipsed in the “college for all” discourse that conflates all colleges. Moreover, the average earnings of college graduates fell by 5.4% between 2000 and 2004 (Hennessy-Fiske, 2006); this was the first time in thirty years that college-educated workers’ earnings fell at all, and their earnings continued to fall again in 2005 (Dube & Graham-Squire, 2006). Thus, while a college degree offers one possible route to upward social mobility (among a dwindling number of alternative options), the “college for all” ideology promotes a mistaken over-optimism about the power of college to provide mobility for LI/RCLD students in general.

It is also worth noting that the US Department of Labor estimates that only about 30% of new jobs created in the next ten years will require a college degree (Hecker, 2005), roughly the percentage of the population currently completing college. Although this new-jobs figure has been contested (Tyler, Murnane, & Levy, 1995), there is substantial evidence that the widely assumed need for more college graduates is overstated and does not reflect the needs expressed by employers (Anyon, 2005; Grubb & Lazerson, 2004; Handel, 2005; Lafer, 2002; Mishel et al., 2006; Rosenbaum, 2001). A review of six recent studies by federal agencies and independent scholars found that the largest number of jobs will not particularly require the advanced skills allegedly acquired in college, even when college completion is prominent within a specific sector of the work force (Hacker, 2011). The ten occupations with the greatest growth in the 2008–2018 period will be in the following sectors: food preparers and servers, customer service representatives, long-haul truck drivers, nursing aides and orderlies, receptionists, security guards, construction laborers, landscapers and groundskeepers, home health aides, and licensed practical nurses. Yet in 2006, in a strong economy quite unlike the present one, “the Bureau of Labor Statistics found that 17% of bartenders had completed college, as had 32% of massage therapists and 26% of fashion models” and another study predicted that 22% of floral designers and 18% of fast-food cooks in 2018 will have at least a bachelor’s degree (Hacker, 2011, p. 41).

Further analysis of the labor market demonstrates that the need for knowledge and skills in mathematics is overemphasized. Astonishingly, a survey of high-tech employers found that they do not place mathematical knowledge in the top-ten skills they deem most important; even among recruited engineering and computer science students, few need more than eighth-grade mathematics in their jobs (Hacker, 2011, p. 40). It turns out that employers are looking for workers with good character, and assume that they can

teach workers necessary skills. The fact is that the growth of high-skill jobs in high-tech industries does not amount to a large absolute number of jobs, and even now the US science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) workforce “amounts to less than a third” of the workers who already hold at least one STEM degree (Hacker, 2011, p. 40).

#### DEBT LOAD

These labor market realities are an even greater concern when we consider the alarming debt burden that LI/RCLD students acquire while pursuing their college educations and the often mythic wage and job premium promised in the “college for all” discourse. In the last decade, the cost of higher education has increased faster than the rate of inflation and the median income (Aud, et al., 2010).<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, federal Pell grants (the primary form of government financial aid that students do not need to pay back) have failed to keep pace: the purchasing power of the maximum Pell grant fell from 84% of tuition costs in 1975 to 39% in 2002 (King & Bannon, 2002). Consequently, more students are depending on loans and borrowing in greater amounts (Wirt, et al., 2004b). Today approximately two-thirds of college graduates have some student loan debt, and those most likely to carry debt are students who are also low-income, African American, and/or Latina/o (King & Bannon, 2002).<sup>5</sup> While many carry relatively minor student debt, those most in need of the college wage premium actually graduate with the most debt: further, over half of African American (55%) and Latina/o (58%) borrowers carry “unmanageable” student debt, defined by the loan industry as monthly payments that exceed 8% of monthly income before taxes (King & Bannon, 2002). These figures include nearly half of African American and one-third of Latina/o college graduates who carry unmanageable student debt, and their economic condition is further exacerbated by the fact that they earn less than White college graduates (King & Bannon, 2002).

The impact of rising tuitions and debt burdens needs to be contextualized within three additional observations. First, LI/RCLD students are more likely to borrow, and to borrow in greater amounts, than their higher-income peers, while at the same time they are less likely to get help from their families to pay off their loans and often have financial responsibilities to their families while in school and after graduating (Choy & Li, 2005; King & Bannon, 2002). Thus, the figures actually underestimate their true student debt “burden.” Second, although college is more expensive for everyone, changes to the structure of financial aid since the 1990s have actually benefited students from high-income families (Wirt, et al., 2004b).<sup>6</sup> Further, the growth in merit-based aid (which reinforce the advantages possessed by upper-income students) has exceeded the growth in need-based grants (which benefit lower-income students), even though upper-income families are the only group for whom rising annual income is actually outpacing the rise in college tuition (Fitzgerald, 2003). Third, our analysis undercounts for the many LI/RCLD students who borrow but never graduate. If we consider the proportions of LI/RCLD graduates with “unmanageable” student debt in conjunction with the college persistence rates for these same groups, we can begin to see the true scale of the problem. For example, of students who entered

four-year postsecondary institutions in 2004 with a bachelor's degree goal, just 50.5% had graduated by 2009, with substantially lower proportions for LI/RCLD students: 40.8% for low-income students (those whose families earned less than \$32,000 in 2002); 34.8% for African Americans; 36.1% for Latina/os; and only 36.4% for first-generation college students, which may be the most accurate indicator of social class from these choices (Radford, Berkner, Wheelless, & Shepherd, 2010). One study of the debt burden of postsecondary "noncompleters," those students who had not graduated five years after enrolling in a four-year postsecondary institution, reports that 19% carried student debt, and their monthly payments averaged 8.6% of their salary, an "unmanageable" level (US Department of Education, 1999). This study did not break the figures down by race, ethnicity, or class. Given the patterns in borrowing and college completion rates that we have summarized above, we can expect that a disproportionate number of young adults carrying heavy student debts without a college degree are likely to be low-income and/or African American or Latina/o. These disturbing patterns are omitted in the "college for all" discourse.

### What Should Be Done?

Given the analyses that center class and race in the "college for all" discourse, what should be done? We find ourselves in strong agreement with Noddings's calls to place individualized counseling at the core of schooling,<sup>7</sup> and to make respect and support for differences pillars of a lifelong learning approach.

But much more is needed for an adequate strategic response. The images of "getting ahead" and "moving up" exert powerful influences on LI/RCLD students, as well as on their teachers, who must work to create "exceptions"—students who beat the odds and make it to college after all (Bettie, 2003; Nygreen, forthcoming). Some exceptional students do emerge and their "success" is publicly celebrated—within symbolic frames reiterating the emblematic Horatio Alger myth of American individualism, the virtue of personal effort and the promise of schooling's meritocracy. Again passed over in silence are all of those inevitable *non*exceptions for whom the dominant discourse offers no compelling purpose of schooling, even at schools where college is factually out of reach for nearly every student. Caught up in the meritocratic myth, such students are likely to blame themselves, not social structures, for their lack of success and upward mobility (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Fine, 1991; Nygreen, forthcoming). These foundational myths of public schooling and the student self-understandings induced by them are reinforced by the "college for all" discourse, and they are potent elements in the legitimation of the dominant class and race orders of the status quo.

Thus, when we consider what is to be done in the current discursive context, we need not only to reconstruct the curricula and operations of schooling but also to deconstruct the myths that have long captured the public imagination. This means naming and studying the classed and raced realities of schools and society so that effective transformative interventions can be acted upon through engaged citizenship. Certainly effective individual counseling must support the full development of youths as people,

citizens, and workers, but, in addition, it must unveil both the ideological framing of forms of labor and the structural inequities in the labor market. Another primary task must be to reveal the ranking and sorting mechanisms of K–12 and postsecondary schooling. These mechanisms operate to obscure the structural dis/advantages bestowed by class and race in the delivery and outcomes of schooling at all levels, and therefore simultaneously reinforce and legitimate the class and racial status quo.

At the same time, we must build compelling counter-narratives that articulate conceptions of schooling for the common good and personal well-being and that embrace a broader set of aims for schooling and a deeper understanding of what matters most in living healthy, fulfilled, productive lives. If we define the purpose of education as improving the life chances and quality of life for all students—including those most marginalized within existing social structures—then schooling must aim to facilitate collective, and not only individual, agency. While each and every young person should be encouraged and prepared to develop her or his academic and intellectual skills to their highest capacity, the transformation of the material conditions of class and race inequities has not been, and cannot be, achieved through gains that accrue to individuals alone; history demonstrates that the lives of LI/RCLD students as a group have been altered little by expanding access to postsecondary education. Even for many individuals, as we have argued, the gains have often been illusory. Schooling in general and "college for all" in particular do not address the fundamental structural issues related to the nature of global capitalism, which requires many minimally educated, unskilled workers; nor do they address the fundamental structural issues related to the class and race hierarchies that shape the social, cultural, and political realms. The individual pursuit of educational credentials as a response to falling wages, the loss of manufacturing jobs and other avenues to middle-income careers, and the demands of certain leading sectors of the economy cannot substitute for the collective organization for political and economic changes that can secure for workers an equitable share of the enormous profits they generate. Similarly, the ascension of individual, talented LI/RCLD students to positions of leadership in politics, science, the arts and entertainment, and the economy cannot substitute for the collective efforts necessary to end the privileges of class and race and enable truly equal opportunities for all.

Within schools themselves, it should be possible to make changes in the near term that move significantly toward the honoring of all forms of honest work that Noddings and we agree is needed. The overemphasis on STEM curricula, and the demand that all students be measured almost singly in relation to their performance on tests associated with those curricula, can be abandoned, and the full range of curricular and career options can be reinvigorated. Authentic forms of assessment in relation to student-chosen academic and career goals can be developed, and students can pursue their life choices without being demeaned or reduced to "nobodies" without value to the school or community (Glass, 2009). Schools can become nodes in broader associations of public and private organizations, using the full social and cultural resources of cities and towns; schools also can establish work-linked and apprenticeship-learning

opportunities along the lines of a number of advanced industrial European countries and provide students with ways to become engaged in meaningful productive work.<sup>9</sup> Employers in the United States are already spending over \$400 billion annually on formal and informal education in the workplace (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2011), so making these changes need not require more funds but rather only the coordination of the learning opportunities.

In sum, recognizing the way in which the “college for all” discourse maintains and reinforces long-standing class- and race-based structural inequities, and recognizing that this discourse is articulated with powerful economic and political interests opposed to true equity of opportunity, there is no choice but to pursue the reconstruction of schools as part of a larger project of social, cultural, economic, and political reconstruction. The democratic project for schools is integral to the democratic project for civil society and governance, so schools must actively enable LI/RCLD students to be citizens prepared for the intense struggles necessary to overcome the structural inequities limiting their lives.

We do not have the lyric voice of Whitman to close our analysis, but we have an arresting vision to counter the currently fashionable “race to the top” permutation of the “college for all” discourse. We need to ask: Why a race, which always has winners and losers? Why the rush to the top, where only one or few can stand, necessarily with the many on the bottom? Perhaps recalling a different race to the top will provide a cautionary pause, so we can reconsider where we are going and whether we want to race at all. In the Nazi gas chambers, the dominant among the doomed would rush to the locked doors, seeking an escape from the steadily rising deadly poison, and there they pushed, shoved, hit, and clawed their way to the top of the pile of bodies, smashing beneath them the old and infirm, the children, and any who kept them from being the last to take a breath, the winners of that particular race to the top. We need to recall that in some races, all are losers, wherever in the hierarchy they end up. Schools and the current dominant discourses of schooling surely continue to leave at the bottom the majority of LI/RCLD students, and even those who make it to the top may still have a sealed doom. We seek a different vision, one of mutual beneficence, of solidarity in the meeting of human needs, not greeds. We seek others to join in a struggle to end the race to the top in favor of the building of a just society whose institutions serve the common good and enable each of us to realize her or his fullest potential.

## Notes

1. The sample was the “top 146 colleges” as reported in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Further, only 3% of students at 19 highly selective colleges and leading state universities are the first to attend college from a low-income family (Bowen, Kurzweil, & Tobin, 2005).
2. Such systems of so-called ability tracking have been, and remain, wrought with class and race bias (see Oakes, 1985). We do not wish to romanticize or advocate for a return to such classist and racist vocational tracking systems.

3. Economic shifts associated with globalization and the post-industrial economy include: The decline of the manufacturing sector (deindustrialization); the weakening of labor unions; the reduction in the purchasing power of wages; the growing polarization of income distribution between the top and bottom ends of the labor market; the increasing use of part-time, temporary, and contingent labor; and the job growth in retail and service-sector work that tends to be nonunion and poorly paid. Together, these changes have weakened or eliminated many of the pathways through which some non-college-educated workers previously obtained full-time, middle-income, and stable working-class employment (Tannock, 2003).

4. For example: Between 1981 and 2000, average college tuition doubled while median family income grew only by 27% (NCES .ed.gov/das/epubs/2002174).

5. Low-income is defined as students from families earning less than \$20,000/year in 2002; King & Bannon (2002) found that 71% of low-income students, 84% of African American students, and 66% of Latina/o students graduated with educational debt.

6. These changes include increased loan limits, extended eligibility for subsidized loans to middle- and high-income students, and the introduction of unsubsidized loans regardless of income.

7. Without question, the current approach to counseling is woefully inadequate, with often 500:1 ratios in high schools and 1000:1 ratios in community colleges (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2011, p. 26). This reflects another structural disadvantage for LI/RCLD students who may lack the social and cultural capital to get such support outside of formal school settings.

8. As we noted earlier in discussing Noddings’ invocation of such programs, they should be developed in conjunction with focused efforts to deconstruct class and race hierarchies.

## References

- Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance. (2001). *Access denied: Restoring the nation's commitment to equal educational opportunity*. Washington, DC: Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance.
- Anyon, J. (2005). *Radical possibilities: Public policy, urban education, and a new social movement*. New York: Routledge.
- Aud, S., Fox, M., and KewalRamani, A. (2010). *Status and trends in the education of racial and ethnic groups (NCES 2010-015), Indicators 23-24*. In US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (Ed.). Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.
- Aud, S., Hussar, W., Planty, M., Snyder, T., Bianco, K., Fox, M., . . . Drake, L. (2010). *The Condition of Education 2010 (NCES 2010-028), Indicator 47, Price of Attending an Undergraduate Institution*. National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC.
- Bergman, M. (2005). *College degree nearly doubles annual earnings, Census Bureau reports*. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/education/004214.html>
- Bettie, J. (2003). *Women without class: girls, race, and identity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bowen, W., Kurzweil, M., & Tobin, E. (2005). *Equity and excellence in American higher education*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Brint, S., & Karabel, J. (1989). *The diverted dream: Community colleges and the promise of educational opportunity, 1900-1985*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Burbules, N. C., & Torres, C. A. (Eds.). (2000). *Globalization and education: Critical perspectives*. New York: Routledge.
- Carnoy, M. (1994). *Faded dreams: The politics and economics of race in America*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Choy, S. P., & Li, X. (2005). *Debt burden: A comparison of 1992–93 and 1999–2000 bachelor's degree recipients a year after graduating*. Washington, DC: Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, US Government Printing Office. (No. NCES 2005–170)
- Dube, A., & Graham-Squire, D. (2006). *Where have all the wages gone? Jobs and wages in 2006*. Berkeley: University of California, Berkeley, Center for Labor Research and Education.
- Fairclough, N. (2001). *Analysing discourse: Textual analysis for social research*. New York: Routledge.
- Fine, M. (1991). *Framing dropouts*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Fischer, K. (2006, May 12). Elite colleges lag in serving the needy: The institutions with the most money do a poor job of reaching the students with the least. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 52(36), A1.
- Fitzgerald, B. K. (2003). The opportunity for a college education: Real promise or hollow rhetoric? *About Campus*, 8(5), 3–10.
- Glass, R. D. (2009). Education and the ethics of democratic citizenship. In S. Verducci, M. Katz, & G. Biesta (Eds.), *Education, democracy, and the moral life* (pp. 9–30). Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer Verlag Publishers.
- Grubb, N., & Lazerson, M. (2004). *The education gospel*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Hacker, A. (2011, February 24). Where will we find the jobs? *New York Review of Books*, 39–41.
- Handel, M. (2005). *Worker skills and job requirements: Is there a mismatch?* Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute.
- Harvard Graduate School of Education. (2011, February 1). *Pathways to prosperity: Meeting the challenge of preparing young Americans for the 21st century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Graduate School of Education.
- Hecker, D. E. (2005, November). Occupational employment projections to 2014. *Monthly Labor Review*, 128(11), 25–44.
- Hennessy-Fiske, M. (2006, July 24). That raise might take 4 years to earn as well. *Los Angeles Times*, p. A1.
- King, T., & Bannon, E. (2002). *The burden of borrowing: A report on the rising rates of student loan debt*. Boston: Public Interest Research Group.
- Lafer, G. (2002). *The job training charade*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Lipman, P. (2004). *High stakes education: Inequality, globalization, and urban school reform*. New York: Routledge.
- Mishel, L., Bernstein, J., & Allegretto, S. (2006). *The state of working America 2006/2007*. Ithaca, NY: ILR Press.
- Noddings, N. (2011). Schooling for democracy. *Democracy & Education* 19(1). Retrieved from <http://democracyeducationaljournal.org/home>
- Nygreen, K. (forthcoming). *These kids: Identity, agency, and social justice at a last chance high school*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Oakes, J. (1985). *Keeping track: How schools structure inequality*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Radford, A. W., Berkner, L., Wheelless, S. C., & Shepherd, B. (2010). *Persistence and attainment of 2003–04 beginning postsecondary students: After 6 years (NCES 2011-151)* [Table 6]. In US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (Ed.). Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch>
- Rosenbaum, J. (2001). *Beyond college for all: Career paths for the forgotten half*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Smith, M. L., Miller-Kahn, L., Heinecke, W., & Jarvis, P. F. (2004). *Political spectacle and the fate of American schools*. New York: Routledge.
- Tannock, S. (2003). Why do working youth work where they do? In S. L. Radt & L. R. Berger (Eds.), *Young workers in the post-industrial city of North America and Europe* (pp. 285–303). London: Brill.
- Tyack, D., & Cuban, L. (1995). *Tinkering toward utopia: A century of public school reform*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Tyler, J., Murnane, R., & Levy, F. (1995, December). Are more college graduates really taking “high school” jobs? *Monthly Labor Review*, 118(12), 18–27.
- US Department of Education. (1999). *College for all? Is there too much emphasis on getting a 4-year college degree?* Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office. Retrieved from <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/CollegeForAll/noncompleters.html>
- US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2010). The condition of education 2010 (NCES 2010–028), table A-17-1. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=77>
- Wirt, J., Choy, S., Rooney, P., Provasnik, S., & Robin, R. (2004a). *The condition of education 2004* (NCES 2004-077), Indicator 19, *Trends in Undergraduate Persistence and Completion*. In US Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics (Ed.). Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office.
- Wirt, J., Choy, S., Rooney, P., Provasnik, S., Sen, A., and Tobin, R. (2004b). *The condition of education 2004* (NCES 2004-077), Indicator 38, *Debt Burden of College Graduates*. In US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (Ed.). Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office.