False Promises?

Go to College, Get a Job

The true way to nurse patriotism . . . is to inspire our people with confidence, by giving them proper training, that they are equal to their mission and that failure is impossible.

—Hon. Justin S. Morrill, *Speech to the House of Representatives*, Washington D.C., June 6, 1862

In order for our citizens to be able to seize the opportunities of a new era, they’re going to have to have skills that can be only learned through a post-secondary education. . . . We’re living in a global economy. And we’ve got to stay competitive as we head into the 21st century, and the best way to stay competitive is to make sure people have access to good education.


We’ve got to make sure that more Americans of all ages are getting the skills that they need to access the jobs that are out there right now. But more than ever, a college degree is the surest path to a stable, middle-class life.


In the nineteenth century, U.S. political discourse that linked higher education with the economy found fertile soil in a young country eager to grow and spread its influence. Colleges in the United States initially emerged to address the classical and moral educational needs of young clergy and sons of the elite, but the purpose of a college education and certainly the discourse that has influenced our understanding of higher education in the nineteenth and twentieth
centuries became with each decade more tightly connected with the economy. As described in chapter 2, the historically interconnected relationship between colleges and the economy, industry, and science has indelibly shaped the instrumentalist discourse and cultural logics that many people in the United States draw upon to conceptualize and discuss the purpose of college.

Sociologists studying education have long identified the correlation between social status and educational systems, noting the role that educational systems relentlessly play in perpetuating rather than alleviating social inequalities. In recent years, several researchers have specifically focused on the college experience, exploring the various means by which colleges and universities, both within and between elite and state institutions, often exacerbate existing social inequalities (see for example Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Goldrick-Rab 2016; Mullen 2010; Stuber 2011). Much of this research similarly finds that students’ social class significantly shapes their higher educational expectations, opportunities, and experiences. Students coming from families with a history of collegiate success or socioeconomic privilege, which are most often linked, are generally less pressured to imagine the outcome of their education in terms of specific jobs or potential incomes. Instead, these students rely on their families’ social networks or the prestige of the universities from which they receive their degrees to facilitate connections upon graduation that will increase their likelihood of obtaining desirable, high-income jobs. On the other hand, students coming from families in which they are the first to attend college or who do not possess extensive socioeconomic resources are understandably much more concerned with how their education will improve their opportunities for obtaining a job and experiencing upward social mobility.

Given these findings, it is not surprising that most of the student parents in this study not only talk about their education in relation to the jobs they hope to obtain but also select majors in applied programs—such as social work, education, or criminology—that will lead to very specific jobs that are perceived as better than the jobs they currently hold. Unlike many liberal arts programs, which offer a curriculum that provides a broad-based education in the humanities and social sciences, applied programs are more practicum-based and tend to address the defined needs of a specific sector of the economy. Applied programs are widely offered at most state colleges and universities, where all of these student parents were enrolled. Even those student parents in this study who are practical explorers or self-reflective learners and are majoring in traditional liberal arts programs—English, history, and psychology—are for the most part planning to enter into job-specific secondary teaching or counseling programs subsequent to receiving their baccalaureate degrees.

Whether or not our current system of higher education is successful is under question as academics, politicians, and students themselves evaluate the current state of higher education in the United States. As described in chapter 2,
the success of a postsecondary institution is frequently measured in terms of retention rates and job placement. Although these factors are certainly important in evaluating the effectiveness of a college or university, my findings in chapters 4 and 5 reveal additional expectations for and unintended effects of going to college for these student parents. The practical explorers and self-reflective learners are further interested in acquiring social and cultural capital, serving as an educational role model to their children, growing intellectually, and feeling respected and emotionally empowered. And some of these mothers and fathers unexpectedly find that as their labor in the domestic and caregiving spheres shifts—in part a result of academic demands and schedules—so does their and their families’ conceptualizations of motherhood and fatherhood, which creates the potential for developing more egalitarian understandings of doing gender and parenting.

These student parents’ stories reveal that traditional metrics for evaluating educational success are narrow at best. The kinds of perceived benefits cited by practical explorers and self-reflective learners are rarely if ever documented by public colleges or universities or national accrediting agencies. And both Republican and Democratic politicians focus nearly exclusively on cultural logics that emphasize the relationship between higher education and the economy. That said, the job outcome expectations of job seekers and all of these student parents should be scrutinized, particularly given the rising costs of tuition and students’ increasing reliance on loans to pay for their degrees. As will be revealed in this chapter, accurately measuring the success of our system of higher education involves looking at more than the traditional measures of institutional retention rates and job placement.

In the pages that follow, I describe the job and educational histories of three older students, a job seeker, a practical explorer, and a self-reflective learner. These student parents’ educational and work trajectories, particularly those of older student parents, reveal a complex interplay of additional factors that influence retention rates, job placement, and economic upward mobility. Although these students’ dispositions regarding the purpose of higher education vary, these three students are similar in that they have moved in and out of higher education over the years with varying levels of economic success. An examination of their educational and job histories reveals some of the limitations of current measures of institutional success that focus on employment and demonstrates that a correlation between education and economic opportunity is far from neat or direct.

**Allie: Job Seeker**

Allie, a thirty-eight-year-old mother of two, expresses a refrain that was oft repeated by the job seekers in this study: “If you want to escape low-wage labor,
you must earn a college degree.” Allie bluntly proclaims, “As I tell my children, if you go to school and get a degree, you can make more money, and you can do and get the things that you want. If you don’t go to school, you’re going to work at a $7.00 an hour job, and then you won’t get or do what you want to do or be where you want to be.” Even in an era marked by high levels of college graduate unemployment, job seekers in particular strongly believe that having a college degree continues to be their best defense against the low-wage labor trap. Importantly, just over 60 percent of these job seekers already have associate’s degrees or certifications for professions such as cosmetology and dental assisting. Allie clearly believes that a college education is necessary to not only survive in the twenty-first-century economy but also have the freedom to “do what you want to do or be where you want to be.” Allie possesses a two-year degree and is now back in school because she has found that her prior education has not provided her with access to jobs that will provide long-term career success.

Allie began her college journey over fifteen years earlier at a satellite campus of the state’s flagship university. She had aspirations of becoming a college professor teaching English but soon realized that she was not ready nor willing to continue with her education at that time. Allie confesses, “I went because I thought I had to. I didn’t want to. I was burnt out from going to school for thirteen years. It was boring.” Subsequently, she dropped out of the flagship university and took on various office jobs before returning to a local community college to pursue her degree in early childhood education.

Four years later, she eventually earned her associate’s degree and then worked in a day care center until her first child was born. Upon taking the time to examine their household budget, she left the center because she and her husband determined that they would be better off if she quit her job rather than pay for someone else to care for their newborn son so that she could work. As she reflects back on that time, she shares, I had some long-term personal goals of wanting to be a good mother and getting a background for that. And then I thought I would have my own business of child care and I thought that would make good money at that time. And then I actually went into just being a caregiver in a day care center, and it doesn’t make any money. And it doesn’t cover child care bills. . . . It didn’t make sense to put my baby in child care for forty or forty-five hours a week for me to bring home eighty dollars. So, I decided that’s not what I want to do. . . . I took time off to be a parent because it was cheaper.

Financially, it made more sense for Allie to stay at home—the extra eighty dollars a month, after deducting child care from her paychecks, simply wasn’t worth it.

The one educational regret that Allie now holds is that she in the past pursued a job-specific degree that will never produce the income needed to sustain
a decent standard of living. Although plenty of jobs exist in early child care education, and her degree provided her with a step up in regard to her employability in that field, Allie found that she earned little more than minimum wage, which left her with an income that barely covered her own child care costs. When I ask her what she would change about her educational past if she had the chance, she states that she wishes that she had explored more degree options and careers before selecting a major:

ALLIE: I wouldn’t have done early childhood education. I probably would have researched jobs more thoroughly or careers more thoroughly. And it would have been nice to know that you could go into college on a general—I don’t know what it’s called . . .

FIONA: General education? Or liberal arts education?

ALLIE: Right. Like for the first year or two. And then when you find out what’s out there, then focus in and concentrate on that. ‘Cause then I wasted four years in college. Not really, but, in terms of work, there’s no money in it.

Upon completing her associate’s degree, Allie applied to a local regional public university to continue with her degree but withdrew before the beginning of the semester when she found out that she was pregnant. Ten years later, she returned to that same university and is now majoring in criminal justice, a degree that she finds interesting in content yet practical in regard to the kinds of jobs that she might be able to attain upon graduation. Although she is primarily concerned about the job prospects of her chosen major, Allie is similar to many of the older students in that she is also motivated by a desire to “finish” what she started almost two decades ago.

When I later ask her to describe what makes a student successful, she describes some of her younger peers in ways that are reminiscent of her former student self:

Young people today don’t take it seriously. . . . Students need to understand that when you go to school, it’s for your future. And I don’t think they look that far ahead. That they’re just there for today to do the work, to get out as soon as they can for the day, to be with their friends, party, you know. . . . If they had to pay for their classes themselves, I think they would take it more seriously and understand. I’m paying for this. It’s benefiting me to do this because I’m going to take it with me when I graduate so that I can do something good in the workforce. . . . I just want them to have a respect for school, really. I think they go just to get it done. And I just don’t think that way. . . . It’s a privilege, really, to me.

Later in our conversation, she identifies some of the characteristics that she believes makes her different from these younger students and from her younger
student self. She continues, “I know that if I don’t do well, in the future . . . I won’t be able to prove myself at work. Because if I just float through school, how am I going to apply that in the workforce? So I better get it right now, so I don’t have to mess up later. So, I’m just a go-getter. I’m ambitious and I want to do the best I can.” Allie is excited by her studies in criminology and the prospect of going on to graduate school and working in forensics. After fifteen years of stops and starts, she again has concrete job goals and sees the relevance of her present coursework in regard to her future occupation.

**Sam: Practical Explorer**

Another student, Sam, a forty-two-year-old father studying to be a physical therapist, is back in school because he is ready for yet another career change. Before the birth of his four children, who at the time of our interview ranged in age from seven to eleven, Sam received certification from a heating, ventilation, air conditioning, and refrigeration (HVACR) program at a local for-profit institute. The twelve-month program at the for-profit institute was equal in cost to four years at the local state university for an in-state resident. Despite its expense, Sam chose the short-term applied program, hoping that the skills acquired would provide him with access to a job that would provide a stable income. He ended up not using much of the knowledge procured from his year-long program when he began working as a machine operator in a metal fabricating factory. Later, when the factory where he worked turned its attention to the production of circuit boards, Sam enrolled in an electrical technician program offered by his employer to develop skills in this new area of interest and demand. But then the company went bankrupt and folded.

Sam is now working as a custodian at a school, a job that provides a middle-class income and lifestyle but that, like his former factory jobs, is physically demanding. It is possible that his relatively expensive HVACR certification helped him to land his current position in facilities, but he is now ready to leave this job. At the time of our interview, Sam was studying at a local community college to become a physical therapist, a job that will continue to guarantee his middle-class income but will be less taxing physically. He has suffered from several health issues recently—three knee surgeries and a pinched nerve—so he knows he needs a job that requires less physical labor. Because of these injuries, he has regularly visited physical therapists in recent years and finds their jobs to be interesting, a fact that was validated when he took a job inventory test at the middle school where he works and “physical therapist” emerged as one of the listed career choices that matched his personality assessment.

I ask Sam what he believes to be the purpose of college, and he launches into a somewhat rambling discussion that ultimately reveals his contradictory
feelings about the topic. He takes seriously accounts shared over the years by several of his colleagues who have college diplomas but describe them as “useless” and not at all necessary for their jobs. When I ask him to clarify, he maintains, “One thing I don’t like about the program is there’s a lot of classes that I have to take that I’m like, Well where does this—where is this relevant? Where does it actually fit in?” Although Sam is critical of college curriculums that require classes that are “just not necessary,” he also believes that his being in school is both testing his endurance and stretching his intellectual capabilities. He reflects, “What I learned in psychology is our brains definitely change, keep learning, keep absorbing education, and if we don’t, we, we bottom out. We just forget everything we ever learned, and I just didn’t want to wind up fifty years old going, ‘Uh-huh?’ [laughs]. So I’m always interested in education. I push my kids to do the best that they can as far as their education. I sit down and do their homework with them. And I throw my homework at them and see if they can do it” [laughs]. He continues by sharing that he has friends and family members who have never gone to college and he notes that their “mentality is slowly declining” and that “they only know their environment.”

Additionally, Sam is committed to completing his physical therapy program because he aspires to the status that such an accomplishment represents in the larger social sphere. Sam summarizes his current perspective when he confesses, “Coming from where I came from, growing up in the projects, it was almost guaranteed that you weren’t going to have an interest in education. You weren’t going to go to college. You weren’t going to get established in anything. And I’m just one of those statistics that have been proven wrong.” Sam is rightfully proud of his accomplishments. He has a comfortable job that provides a stable middle-class income but is now seeking a position that is more intellectually and less physically challenging and a college degree that will communicate to others that he is not a “statistic.” He sees himself as living evidence that college graduates can emerge from the “projects” and achieve the American Dream.

Joy: Self-Reflective Learner

Like Allie, Joy worked in early childhood education, but, unlike Allie, she has earned not only a bachelor’s degree in human development but also a master’s degree in early childhood education. She earned the master’s degree after she had started working in a child care center and before she had children. Joy is additionally certified as a massage therapist and occasionally teaches classes at a local massage therapy school to supplement her family’s income.

Joy values her past educational experiences but has found that those degrees and certifications have not guaranteed her access to jobs with high incomes. Joy laments,
I mean I read on these graphs, you know, a high school education will get you this amount through your lifetime. Add a master's to that, and it goes to here [she raises her hand in the air]. Well, I've got a master's already, and it's in early childhood education, and that field did not net very much money at all. I was doing incredibly important work and the janitor in the building made more money than me! Because of the gender inequality with the— that NOW position statement, women make what? Seventy-five cents to the dollar! There you go. I've been in traditionally female occupations and so the financial compensation is not there.

Joy highlights structural inequities reflected in the pay differentials between feminized and masculinized occupations. Not only that, she perceptively notes that the higher pay of many masculinized occupations persists despite the higher educational qualifications necessary to attain leadership jobs in early childhood education, an occupation dominated by women.

Like Sam, Joy can afford to attend school because her household income is stable as a result of her husband's job as a lawyer. However, because her husband is self-employed and health care costs have increased significantly over the years, she is seeking a job in the public sector that will provide additional household stability in regard to their health care. These factors shaped her decision to pursue a master's degree in counseling with the hope that she can obtain a job in a school that offers the health care and retirement benefits that will improve her family's fiscal situation.

Importantly, Joy now feels that she has the “time and energy” available to pursue her degree in educational counseling and work full time: “As a mother, that meant by the time I had three kids, I wanted to just put my energy into them. And so I focused on them, and when my time and energy opened up a little bit, I took it into working at the massage therapy school and now, when my youngest is in high school and he'll be gone all day until four every day, and my other two will be away at college, then my sort of scope opens and I can focus on a full-time job.” Joy was able to return to school previously to earn her certification in massage therapy because family members were able to step up and assist with child care. Her husband's aunt watched Joy's infant son when she began taking classes, and then her mother-in-law watched the children when she began working part time as a massage therapist. Now that her youngest child is thirteen years old, child care is less of an issue, and she feels comfortable and ready to return to college to pursue her master's degree in counseling.

As described in chapter 4, Joy is a student who loves learning and being a student. In clarifying just what makes a student successful, she explains,

The students who really reflect on what they're learning, recognize its value for them in their life, really take a personal interest in their learning, get the most out of it, it seems to me. Very clear. . . . People who really
take the learning and want to make it their own are so much deeper and so much richer than people who just regurgitate the material they need to in order to pass. So I think personal interest is what makes it successful for a student. Because those people, I think, are the most content with what they're learning and feeling the most fulfilled by what they're learning.

Throughout the course of her interview, Joy reiterates the value of learning and focuses on the value of being a positive student role model to her children and encouraging them to appreciate the “enriching” opportunities that all education can provide.

Unlike Allie, however, who blames herself for making poor educational choices, Joy finds value in all of her past educational experiences and instead points blame at an economic system that undervalues the work of feminized occupations. Joy has acquired a sophisticated means of analyzing and articulating her educational and career history that links her individual experiences with larger social inequalities. Joy fully recognizes that her personal experiences are shaped by gendered career tracks and institutions that contribute to the creation of gendered social inequalities. She has earned not one but two degrees that facilitated her entry into fields that are socially valuable and where jobs are ample but financial remuneration, particularly the health and retirement benefits, is insufficient.

**Gender, Credentials, and Social Mobility**

All of these student parents’ experiences reveal distinct trajectories that reflect the value of higher education in larger social and economic spheres. Allie’s and Joy’s experiences bring to light the ways degree programs that focus on specific skills do not always promise economic success and social mobility, particularly in highly feminized degree programs like early childhood education. Although Allie found plenty of employment opportunities upon graduating, she acquired only limited skills and knowledge in her two-year program. The skills that she acquired prepared her for caregiving work, which, although abundant in opportunity, provides very little in terms of compensation.

Joy is particularly frustrated that her postgraduate degree provides her with a sense of educational accomplishment, yet is not providing her with access to an adequate income despite the social importance of the work. For Allie and Joy, there exists a disjuncture between educational attainment, income, and social mobility. In a feminized occupation such as early childhood education, even a graduate degree rarely provides access to high-income jobs. On the other hand, Sam has been able to succeed economically, attaining a middle-class income with his factory and custodial jobs. Although he has rarely used the knowledge gained from his experience in a relatively expensive certification program at a
local for-profit college, he has succeeded in finding and obtaining jobs that provide a middle-class income in two different masculinized fields.

Researchers have long noted the disparate economic returns for students graduating from distinctively feminized or masculinized programs and entering into male- or female-dominated occupations (Charles and Grusky 2004; England 1982, 2010; England and Li 2006; Jacobs 1996). Although women have outnumbered men receiving college degrees since the mid-1980s, women's average incomes remain significantly lower than men's in part because traditionally female-dominated occupations, such as nursing, child care, and teaching, are on average compensated less than traditionally male-dominated occupations, such as construction, computer information technology, and engineering. England (2010) notes that although women have been steadily moving into many traditionally male-dominated programs and professions—including business, medicine, and law—men have not countered by moving into traditionally female-dominated professions. Further, such movement is very much class defined, with middle- and upper-class women more likely to move into male-dominated fields than are working class women. England in part explains this class difference among women as being a result of opportunity—that is, middle- and upper-class women have no other means of social mobility and so feel pressed to move into male-dominated fields in order to advance economically, whereas working-class women can move into higher-status women-dominated occupations, such as nursing or teaching. Collectively this research reveals how gender and culture are firmly entrenched in perpetuating income inequalities.

For all three of these students, the actual relationship between education, skills, degrees, jobs, and income is far from straightforward, a fact belied by cultural logics and political rhetoric that reductively promotes education as a solution to poverty and unemployment. And as was highlighted in chapter 4, an alternative logic regarding the relationship between education and social status emerges—Sam, in particular, is highly cognizant of the cultural value of earning a degree and, like most practical explorers, is motivated by a desire not only to gain skills but also to gain status and respect in his family and community. He admits, “I push my kids to do the best that they can as far as their education,” and he accomplishes this in part by role modeling as a student parent, demonstrating that he is adamant about not being a “statistic.”

To deepen our understanding of the differences reflected in these students’ education and job trajectories, I turn to the work of sociologists and educational researchers who have long been critical of unidimensional framings and cultural logics connecting education, job skills, and the economy. Their arguments and theories help us to understand the diverse social functions of contemporary colleges and universities, functions that are rarely if ever mentioned in public debates regarding the future of higher education. Nonetheless, evidence of these rarely articulated functions permeates these students’ stories, emerging
as common threads weaving together elements of these narratives. Only then can we understand why these student parents and we continue to believe in the power of education to alter their future opportunities.

**It’s the Economy: The Credentialing Function**

In the latter part of the twentieth century, Ivar Berg (1971) and Randall Collins (1979) were but two scholars offering critical perspectives in response to the emergence of an expansive system of public colleges and universities. Specifically, Berg and Collins sought to expose colleges’ legitimizing functions in the economy as those institutions became increasingly influential. As described in chapter 2, these scholars rejected economists’ “human capital” theories that primarily conceive of education as an investment in one’s future occupation, focusing on “output” and higher earnings. Berg (1971), in *Education and Jobs*, and Collins (1979), in *The Credential Society*, instead contend that the human capitalists’ central claim that colleges and universities are providing students with technical knowledge and skills for jobs is for the most part a social fiction. That is, the skills and knowledge one needs for most jobs in the contemporary economy could, and often are, much more efficiently taught in the workplace itself.

Collins and Berg argue that in lieu of providing job skills and training, colleges and universities serve a credentialing function, signaling to the larger community, including potential employers, degree-holders’ positions within the educational and, hence, social hierarchy. The degree itself and the general cultural competence that various degrees are presumed to reflect is of much more relevance than any supposed job skills acquired while in school. In the end, this credentialing function feeds a system fundamentally based on status hierarchies, creating competition and social inequality between the credentialed and the lesser credentialed or noncredentialed.

Within this “contest mobility” system (Collins 1979), students primarily strive to attain the next degree level, at the highest-prestige institution, with fewer and fewer students moving up the degree ladder at each level. Collins further contends that from an institutional perspective, because the degree level is more important than the actual program content, the educational curriculum in all higher-education institutions and programs is likely to become similar in general content over time. Unlike in a country such as Germany, where students remain on a single educational track beginning at age thirteen or fourteen, directing them to either vocational or academic studies, students in the United States can ostensibly move between institutions and tracks, changing their college or program based on the openings and opportunities available (Brint 2017). As a result, even professional and technical colleges in the United States offer a core general education curriculum that promises to provide students with the knowledge necessary to access the next level of degree available.
In sum, within a system of higher education like that which has developed in the United States, the particular program in which one enrolls or the specific curriculum of an institution is often less important than the prestige of the institution and the level of degree an individual attains. Certainly, some educational programs are more skills or knowledge based, and specific training may be required for entry and success, particularly as an individual moves up the degree ladder. Medical students will have to acquire basic knowledge in anatomy, senior-level engineering students will have to survive physics, and elementary school student teachers will have to learn classroom management skills so that they can become credentialed. However, the U.S. system of higher education is structured in such a way that movement between programs is eminently possible—a student possessing a bachelor’s degree in English may certainly apply to medical school, and a student with a bachelor’s degree in philosophy can gain entry into a master’s in a social work program. Although admissions committees may express preferences for certain degrees from particular institutions and some fundamental courses may be required for entry into more technical programs, ultimately the universal basic criterion is that students are credentialed at the lower level before they are allowed to move a level higher.

Ostensibly, the flexibility reflected in the U.S. credentialing system of higher education allows for students’ growth, change, and upward social mobility in an economy that is ever evolving as a result of technological advances. But is the educational system as open and flexible as it appears and is it providing for socioeconomic opportunity?

Most of the student parents participating in this study tend to articulate their perspectives regarding the purpose of education using the rhetoric of human capital theories and credentialing. They discuss the specific skills that they hoped to acquire and generally accept the idea that a college degree is necessary for their career and attaining advantageous jobs. As I argued earlier in the chapter, discourse that equates education with job preparation is readily available for appropriation. Therefore, it is unsurprising that students like Allie and Sam attempt to articulate their motivations for pursuing their degrees by turning to talk of job skills and human capital. Even when some of Sam’s colleagues talk about the “uselessness” of the knowledge acquired from attending college and their degrees, Sam is convinced that the degree that he is pursuing is worthwhile. Sam is committed to his education and values the prospect of earning a credential that will allow him to work as a physical therapist. Further, like many fellow practical explorers, he is eager to achieve the social status of being a college graduate and joining the college “club.”

However, this credentialing system when understood in the context of human capital theories that focus on individuals and their choices masks some troublesome facts about higher education in the contemporary economy. One, because the number and proportion of high-status positions in any economy is
finite, it is simply not possible for every credentialed individual to attain a politically or economically elite position. In 1979, Collins contended that as the system of higher education expanded, both access increased and the number of credentialed individuals grew. Suddenly jobs that historically had not required a college degree could now limit the pool of applicants to those possessing at least a few years of postsecondary education. Such was the case when Collins was writing in the depressed economy of the late 1970s, and with income inequality growing over the past four decades, such is the case today (see for example Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Mullen 2010; Stuber 2011). Contemporary economists have determined that due to the growing bifurcation of the job market into high-paying and low-paying positions, those graduates who do not land high-status positions are increasingly likely to end up needing a degree to obtain low-paying, service-sector jobs as middle-paying, white-collar jobs slowly disappear (Autor and Dorn 2013).

We see these effects playing out in Allie’s and Joy’s cases described earlier—their jobs in child care that in prior years required only a high school degree now require additional credentials in many states. In Connecticut, legislation passed in 2011 mandates that by 2020 all lead teachers working in early childhood education classrooms in centers that receive any form of state funding must possess a bachelor’s degree. The intent of these changes is to ensure an educated workforce is teaching our youngest children, thereby providing a high-quality early education experience. As a means of steadily working toward that 100 percent goal, by 2017, half of all lead teachers were expected to possess a bachelor’s degree (Connecticut Office of Early Childhood 2017). Although most centers reached this goal, corresponding wage increases were not required nor evident in this feminized field that is already marked by low pay (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council 2015). In other words, educational expectations have increased but wages have remained relatively stagnant for many jobs at the lowest end of the pay scale.

Another consequence of such a credentialing system, along with popular discourse and cultural logics that emphasize human capital, is that they together mask failures of the economy and job market by directing attention to individual choices and achievements. Failures of the economy are instead perceived as failures of individuals who lack educational preparation. As alluded to earlier in this chapter and outlined in chapter 2, U.S. and global economies have changed dramatically over the course of the past century. Contemporary economists have noted that job growth is occurring in the highest- and lowest-paid fields, whereas jobs in the middle, both in the blue- and white-collar sectors, are being replaced by computerization and outsourcing (Autor and Dorn 2013; Autor, Katz, and Kearney 2006). Many jobs that previously provided middle-class wages that were defined by “routine tasks,” such as organizing or manipulating objects or information, have been replaced by technology. Factory workers and bookkeepers are
but two examples of the types of jobs that have decreased in number in the United States due to a combination of sourcing out their labor to other countries or replacing or dramatically changing their labor with technology (Autor and Dorn 2013). In sum, many middle-income jobs are disappearing. Although the net returns in regard to job opportunities and income cannot be guaranteed, employers, politicians, and higher-education institutions themselves nonetheless promote education as the primary means by which an individual can stem the tide of underemployment or unemployment. It is simply easier to assign responsibility or blame to individuals and their educational choices than to censure and alter the course of an entire economic system.

We need only look back at the case of Sam to see how these trends and forces can play out in a person’s life. Sam’s experiences clearly reveal the mismatch between the skills he acquired from his expensive twelve-month program and the jobs he eventually took on throughout his career. It’s not clear that Sam’s certification is paying off in quite the way that many human capital theorists might predict or that he expected. The skills that he needed to succeed as a machine operator and school custodian were primarily acquired on the job and not in the classroom of the costly, for-profit technical institute that he attended. This is not to say that the certification he received was of no value; he likely obtained transferable skills—for example, general problem-solving, basic writing, technical, or management skills—that will benefit him in any career that he pursues. And most importantly he has that paper, that degree. If we are to accept Collins’s claim regarding the credentialing function of education, we would also conclude that Sam’s certification is primarily valuable not because of the skills he acquired but because of the status that certification imparts when Sam competes for access to jobs. Compared to individuals lacking any sort of degree or certification, his HVACR certification may confer an advantage.

Although Sam is fortunate to have been able to sustain a solidly middle-class lifestyle—he describes his two-car garage and pool as personal accomplishments symbolizing his economic success—his career trajectory reveals the difficulty of maintaining that success, particularly at a historical moment when factories in the United States are more likely to close their doors than open them and many middle-class white- and blue-collar jobs are disappearing due to advances in technology. The degree that he is now pursuing will provide him with access to a white-collar job that requires interpersonal rather than routinized manual skills, a job that he hopes will provide not only a middle-class income but also increased job stability. Physical therapists can’t be outsourced overseas in quite the same way as factory workers.

In becoming a physical therapist, however, Sam will forgo the stability that his current union provides in regard to health and retirement benefits. Bivens et al. (2014) argue that men’s declining wages since the late 1970s are in part a result of the declining real value of the federal minimum wage and diminished
bargaining power of unions across the United States. Even though the U.S. economy has steadily grown, inequality has increased between the nation's highest and lowest earners, and men's wages have declined significantly. Between 1979 and 2013, productivity grew by 64.9 percent yet median wages grew by only 0.2 percent annually for the same time period, with much of that growth going to the top 5 percent of workers and the bottom 70 percent experiencing either flat or falling wages (Bivens et al. 2014). Sam hopes that should he end up working in a hospital, his income and benefits will remain competitive with his current collectively bargained salary and benefits. He is entering into a steadily growing field—the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics (2018b) predicts 28 percent growth in the need for physical therapists between 2016 and 2026. With this associate's degree, Sam will certainly be able to obtain a job that is less physically demanding than his current position as a public school maintenance worker, but it is far from clear whether or not his salary and benefits package will improve as he will not likely be unionized.

Sam, unlike Allie and Joy, has undoubtedly benefited from the higher pay that defines many masculinized occupations (Charles and Grusky 2004; Padavic and Reskin 2002). The number of pink-collar jobs in child care, for example, has steadily increased over the years (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics 2018b), but as Allie's and Joy's experiences reveal, college degrees in this field of study do not neatly translate into economic success. For Allie and Joy, there is no mismatch between the skills acquired in school and the skills that they needed in their jobs—in their case, human capital theorists' arguments provide only limited understanding of the complex gendered institutional dynamics that shape economic opportunity. The skills that they acquired in school are necessary, but the feminized jobs that they were prepared for in college do not provide an income and benefits necessary to acquire middle-class status. In 2017, the median annual income for child care workers in the United States was $22,290, well below the poverty threshold for a family of four (U.S. Census Bureau 2018; U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics 2018b). In 2017, the median annual income for child care workers in Connecticut was $26,000, and many of those workers, like child care workers across the nation, are not unionized and often make so little as to qualify for public support programs that provide cash or food assistance (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics 2018a; Whitebook, Phillips, and Howes 2014). The jobs that they have been prepared for in school simply do not provide the income necessary for economic stability much less social mobility.

In all these cases—Sam’s, Allie’s, and Joy’s—the parents' job opportunities and experiences were shaped by many more factors than merely their educational achievements. When their jobs failed to provide an adequate income or simply disappeared, education alone could not ameliorate their job situations. All three of these student parents believe that continuing to further their
education will alleviate some of the difficulties that they have experienced in the job market thus far. The statistics seem to bear this out, and that is the message promoted all around them that they have come to accept as true, even though their past experiences reveal the relationship between education, skills, and jobs to be far from simple or direct.

Implications of Starting Over

Another key takeaway from a close examination of these three students’ life stories is how frequently students move in and out of institutions of higher education. They share stories of needing a break from school or of having children, expectedly or sometimes unexpectedly, and deciding to forgo higher education to focus instead on family and paid work. Some chose the military or pursued certifications in vocations such as cosmetology or business travel. Others went straight to four-year colleges and ended up dropping out for one reason or another. And others went on to community colleges and sought associate’s degrees in disciplines including early childhood education, liberal studies, or computer information systems. Most of them completed degrees or certifications at each step along the way, but some left without any terminal degree and often with some debt.

The model of education envisioned by Truman’s President’s Commission on Higher Education, which allows for free community college with the opportunity to transfer to a four-year regional university, would actually work for many of these student parents. We see that with Sam and Allie, who have decided to build on their prior education to address their new occupational goals. We also see that the credentialing system is working for Joy, in that she too is building on prior credentials to attain her occupational goal of working as a middle school counselor. Having that undergraduate degree under her belt is helping Joy to move forward more quickly than if she had never received that credential.

However, Allie and Sam both spent time and money taking classes that are not necessary given their current career goals. As stated earlier, Sam could have paid for a four-year college degree at a public university for the money he spent on his HVACR certification at a local for-profit postsecondary institution. And when Allie transferred to a four-year public university, many of the credits earned at the flagship university she attended fifteen years ago and for her associate’s degree in early childhood education did not transfer. The transfer and articulation relationships between these three public systems—the flagship university, the public regional universities, and the community colleges—were not streamlined at the time Allie chose to return for her most recent degree. As a result, she took and paid for many classes over the course of the past fifteen years that she believes were “not necessary” for her current criminology degree. Now, some of those classes may indeed be unnecessary and part of an outdated curriculum.
But some of those “not necessary” classes may have nonetheless imparted soft skills, like communication or collaboration, or knowledge that may not be directly related to her criminology degree but that provides her with a deeper understanding about history, human behavior, or world cultures. All of that said, Allie has not been prohibited from changing her career direction and is able to apply some of those past classes to her new program of study. Although, she believes that the process of transferring classes could be improved, Allie is ultimately benefiting from the flexibility afforded by a system of higher education that allows for program change over an extended period of time.

Advertisements for credentialing programs in higher education, particularly for-profit institutions, often target older adults, encouraging them to take control of their future and return to school to improve their skills and marketability. Because many of those programs are expensive and often result in students’ incurring relatively high levels of debt, as compared to their public counterparts, and because some of those programs are unaccredited, researchers and legislators have argued quite forcefully for increased federal monitoring of predatory, for-profit institutions.  

In response to such calls, the U.S. Department of Education (2015b) under the Obama administration implemented regulations requiring for-profit and certificate-granting postsecondary institutions to publicly report retention, student loan debt, and job placement information. As noted in the analysis earlier in this chapter, retention and job placement statistics are certainly imperfect measures to assess the U.S. educational system’s success as a whole, but this information at least provides some transparency regarding students’ potential debt to income ratios for individual institutions. Additionally, in 2016 the Obama administration finalized regulations that broadened the legal rights of students who had acquired school loan debt from for-profit colleges that had intentionally misled or defrauded them (U.S. Department of Education 2016).

In 2017, the Department of Education (2017b) under Betsy DeVos began to walk back these two sets of regulatory changes, delaying the requirement for for-profit institutions to report retention and gainful employment statistics and “pausing” the implementation of the borrower defense regulations designed to protect students from predatory for-profit institutions. In 2018, DeVos announced that the Department of Education will begin the process of eliminating the requirement that only for-profit institutions report retention and gainful employment data and that they be punished by losing federal funding if their student debt to income ratios are deemed too high. DeVos argues in part that such reporting resulted in the stigmatizing of for-profit career and vocational postsecondary institutions (Green 2018). Legislators and researchers will be watching carefully to see how such “pauses” and rollbacks will play out in future months and years.

With student debt reaching new highs, the concerns about predatory, for-profit colleges and institutions are warranted, and policymakers and legislators
should certainly heed those social forces that have influenced the growth of the for-profit sector in recent decades. According to a U.S. Senate 2012 report from the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, the recent surge in growth of for-profits is a result of two factors: (1) “an era of drastic cutbacks in State funding for higher education” and (2) “an enormous growth in non-traditional students—those who either delayed college, attend part-time or work full-time while enrolled, are independent of their parents, or have dependents other than a spouse” (p. 1). This second point is no doubt heavily influenced by a confluence of social and economic trends that explain why Allie, Sam, and Joy are back in school: gendered jobs, gender inequalities, outsourcing, the demise of labor, and technological advances. As cited previously in chapter 2, community colleges were conceived to address the diverse needs of local communities, but in the wake of growing economic inequality and disinvestment in public education, community colleges have been hurt hard by state cuts to their funding. As a result, community colleges have not been provided with the resources necessary to keep up with their for-profit counterparts, which recruit aggressively and charge significantly higher tuition, charging on average four times the tuition of comparable programs at community colleges (U.S. Senate 2012).

In order to increase financially sound choices for all students, researchers and progressive legislators in recent years have called for reinvestment in our nation’s public colleges and universities (Mettler 2014; Zornick 2017). They argue that community colleges should be provided with the resources they need so that they can work intensively both with local employers to provide the skill training that is needed in particular employment sectors and with local four-year colleges and universities to provide opportunities for further educational advancement for those students who choose a more traditional academic path (Mettler 2014). Programs like those implemented by Tennessee governor Bill Haslam, which inspired President Obama’s America’s College Promise initiatives in 2015, begin to address rising student debt by rewarding community college students with good grades by covering their tuition. In recent years, several cities and states, from San Francisco to Rhode Island, have passed legislation promising free community college for their residents, and some states have implemented or are exploring offering tuition-free four-year degrees as well.9

In creating tuition-free programs, however, we must acknowledge the diverse life trajectories, particularly of older students and student parents. We must acknowledge that not every college student enters right out of high school and not every student moves seamlessly through an associate or baccalaureate program in two or four years, respectively. Many of the free community college programs that are cropping up across the country place limitations on qualifying applicants, restricting the opportunity to only low-income students, recent high school graduates, or first-time college applicants (Kobosco 2017; O’Brien 2017). Imposing such restrictions may make short-term financial sense for
administrators, since many of those younger students are less likely to have familial obligations that might interrupt their progression through a program of study. But it also ensures that older students, who are more likely to be parents and caregivers, cannot access financial resources that will aid them as they work to complete previously unfinished degrees. Students like Allie and Sam, who are among those who possess the lowest levels of credentials in my study, would not qualify. And student parents, as these stories clearly show, are often highly invested in the future of their families. With the costs of tuition steadily increasing, potentially denying them these opportunities would be a mistake.

POPULAR DISCOURSE and cultural logics that highlight the role of higher education in the twenty-first century all too frequently devolve into narrow discussion that focuses on jobs, skills, and the economy. The stories of these three students, however, make clear that the relationships between education, skills, jobs, and economic success are often tenuous and varied. The stories shared here reveal how the relationship between higher education and jobs is more complicated than is often relayed in aggregate statistics correlating degree levels and income. Numerous social factors—including but certainly not limited to economic and manufacturing trends, gendered industries, gender inequalities, the demise of labor unions, outsourcing, and changes in technology—have collectively shaped Allie’s, Joy’s, and Sam’s job opportunities.

As described earlier in this chapter, the prevailing instrumentalist discourse that pushes individuals to pursue higher levels of education too often displaces critical discourse of the contemporary economy. It is simply easier to blame individuals’ lack of education for their failures in the job market than to target complex economic shifts or deeply rooted gendered inequalities that may shape an individual’s job trajectory. In this way, the inequities of our current economic system are hidden in plain sight under a blanket call for more education. And then when postsecondary institutions fail to provide immediate access to jobs, individuals and schools are often blamed for not meeting the needs of an ever-changing, overwhelmingly service-oriented economy.

It is important to note that, with the exception of the job seekers, most of these student parents turn to cultural logics that reveal that they expect more from their education than merely jobs and skills. Some of them yearn for the credential and status of being college graduates and the respect that is accorded that status in their families and communities. Some are interested in acquiring social and cultural capital that allows them to participate more fully in their social world, sharing their understanding of history, literature, economics, or politics. Others are merely curious and eager to be intellectually challenged, while advancing their and their family’s opportunity for upward social mobility. As described in chapters 4 and 5, the meaning and value of a college education vary significantly for these forty student parents, and so public colleges and
universities are tasked with addressing these students’ diverse needs and expectations.

However, one thing is clear. Higher education by itself cannot solve the troubles inherent in our current economy. No amount of early childhood education will change the economic prospects for graduates in that field. As multiple prior researchers have determined, the system of higher education is fraught with inequalities (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; McMillan Cottom 2017; Mullen 2010; Stuber 2011). Earning a degree may not fully redress the problem of growing inequality, but these student parents want that degree anyway. When these student parents are able to go to school without incurring high levels of debt, they believe their lives to be better. The practical explorers and self-reflective learners engage in learning that they believe expands their understanding of themselves and the world and positively influences their parenting. Ultimately, these student parents value the opportunity to start over, to finish, or to continue on an educational path of their choosing.

Historically, state colleges and universities provided an affordable option for students to pursue their goals. However, in recent decades we have seen steady disinvestment in our public institutions, so their costs keep rising and students are forced to dig deep into their pockets, often relying on loans to gain entry into the collegiate club. A student used to be able to choose to attend college for a variety of personal and professional reasons, but we are increasingly living in an era where a degree cannot promise social mobility and is becoming prohibitively costly. We have to ask ourselves as a nation, are we willing to continue moving in this direction?