

[HIGHER ED GAMMA \(/BLOGS/HIGHER-ED-GAMMA\)](#)

MOOCS and beyond.

Higher Education: Equalizer or Engine of Inequality?

The steps we need to take to reduce inequality.

By [Steven Mintz \(/users/steven-mintz\)](#)

// May 24, 2021

If education is, in Horace Mann's words, "the great equalizer," why hasn't a substantial increase in spending on education and a sharp rise in college attendance and graduation rates narrowed the income and wealth gaps in the United States?

Americans have the second largest number of years of education of any people in the world. Yet economic stratification has increased even among those with a college degree, challenging the widespread view of higher education as an engine of upward social and economic mobility.

The best explanation I have seen for this paradox -- that economic inequality expands even as educational attainment increases -- can be found in Cristina Viviana Groeger's stunning *The Education Trap*.

A powerfully persuasive rebuttal to Claudia Goldin's claim that educational attainment largely explains the decline in economic inequality after 1929, *The Education Trap* is anything but a thesis-driven polemic. This richly researched, methodologically sophisticated, well-written study of schooling in Boston from the 1880s to the early 1940s offers eye-opening insights into the shifting pathways into the labor force.

Much more than an impressive work of historical reconstruction, this book should serve as a cautionary tale for our own times, when, once again, the paths to an economically secure livelihood are undergoing a momentous transformation.

During the last decades of the 19th century, informal pathways into the workforce -- including apprenticeships and reliance on kin and ethnic networks -- were supplanted by formal education. It was then that education began to acquire the credentialing responsibilities that it holds today.

As Groeger demonstrates, a wide range of educational options proliferated around the turn of the 20th century. Alongside the rapidly expanding public high schools, there were proprietary trade, commercial and secretarial schools; normal schools; correspondence schools; and an expanding ecosystem of colleges, universities and technical institutes with highly differentiated missions and resources.

Indeed, the educational universe was broader and the options greater than today.

One of Groeger's most important discoveries is the many attempts to create educational institutions specifically designed to serve working-class men. Some, like Northeastern, one of many YMCA and night schools, survived, but most efforts at industrial education failed, with profound consequences for the future.

The inability to create technical and vocational training opportunities facilitated the growth of Taylorism and what Harry Braverman called the degradation of labor.

Industry increasingly replaced skilled craftsmen with semiskilled laborers (who had been hired informally, often by kin or fellow workers, who were responsible for their training and supervision). Increasingly, hiring became the responsibility of expanding HR departments.

At the same time that industrial labor was proletarianized, many young women benefited from the shift to the new educational path. Office work, following a training course, offered a much-welcomed alternative to earlier kinds of female employment in domestic service and the garment industry, even at a low, pink-collar wage.

Meanwhile, management positions increasingly went to those who attended traditional colleges and the new research universities or prestigious technological institutes like MIT.

All of this should sound eerily familiar.

Our deep-seated belief in the value of education as the key to economic opportunity leads many who never earn a college degree to regard themselves as failures who are personally responsible for their lack of success.

Meanwhile, we severely underfund technical and vocational education and seem not to care about its inability to place those who complete those programs in appropriate jobs. We still do a terrible job of coordinating training with likely employers.

We call out less selective colleges and universities when they cut programs but refuse to fund them at the levels commensurate with the high-need students that they serve.

Then, the selective institutions, in turn, disproportionately funnel their graduates into the analytic, symbolic upper management and professional jobs that reap the largest rewards and exercise the most societal power and influence.

We need to recognize an unsettling truth: whatever else it is, our educational system is also a sorting mechanism. Education's failure to narrow class divides isn't an accident. That's how the system currently works.

As Groeger observes, increased education was only one factor -- and not the most important -- in the decline of economic inequality during the mid-20th century. Unionization, Social Security, the minimum wage, the abolition of child labor and various kinds of government regulation also contributed.

We live in a very different context, and past solutions may not work today. But have no doubt: If we hope to diminish economic disparities, two- and four-year institutions have a big role to play.

Here's what I'd recommend:

- Study labor market trends and hold conversations with stakeholders about how your institution can best address emerging needs. In particular, devote increased attention to how your institution can achieve equitable outcomes while raising the number of graduates who are prepared to succeed in the high-demand fields that involve analysis, data and statistics, design, finance, foreign languages, health care, information technology, technical communication, and similar areas.
- Consider how your institution can strengthen labor market on-ramps, for example, by greatly expanding experiential and field- and project-based learning.
- Integrate training, certificate and certification programs into the curriculum.
- Consider how your institution can better serve those populations that are unserved or poorly served educationally and tailor your offerings to their needs.

No one wants higher education to entrench or magnify economic inequalities. It need not. But if it is to be a great equalizer, it needs to innovate.

Steven Mintz is professor of history at the University of Texas at Austin.

By [Steven Mintz \(/users/steven-mintz\)](/users/steven-mintz)



Copyright Inside Higher Ed | insidehighered.com