



A Remedy for Overeducation—A Year of Required National Service

By AMITAI ETZIONI

If one looks at American schooling as a whole, one sees that it is top-heavy. A very high proportion of the young stay much longer in the educational sector, especially in colleges, than in most other societies. For instance, as many as 50 percent of Americans in the relevant age cohorts attend college, compared to about 10 percent in countries such as West Germany or France. (This is not to suggest that the United States should have as few of its young in college as these countries, but just as 10 percent may be much too restrictive, 50 percent may be too expansive.)

This overeducation is slowly being recognized as college graduates no longer find that a college degree is a secure ticket to a job, let alone a good job. Unemployment rates for college graduates under age twenty-five, though nowhere near those for inner-city youth, run quite high (5 percent to 8.3 percent between 1974 and 1977); more important, an estimated one fourth to one half of graduates hold jobs that do not require a college

education. In the view of the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, overeducation on the college level is both a misuse of scarce resources and a political time-bomb.

One reason for overeducation is that colleges, especially junior and community colleges, are doing work not completed in the high schools, so-called remedial education. Colleges are often used as a remedial education tool because many metropolitan high schools are written off as beyond remedy. Thus, for example, in New York's City College, learned, expensive professors of comparative literature teach remedial English to people who graduated from New York City high schools unable to write a simple sentence correctly.

Moreover, as concern for the scarcity of resources has increased in recent years, the time is ripe to reemphasize completing more of the educational task at earlier age levels, where it is most cost-effective. A downward shift of resources could be achieved by adding no new public resources to colleges, especially four-year ones, and instead adding resources to primary and high schools.

It is much more efficient to teach a subject effectively the first time around than to allow pupils to waste high

school, acquire poor study habits, and then try to correct all these problems in college.

A study of low-income children who attended preschool in the 1960s suggests that, regardless of their background and intelligence, these children were far less likely to require special education, be retained in grade ("fail"), or drop out of school than similar children without preschool experience. Social scientists located some of the original preschool students, by then aged nine to nineteen, and examined the long-term effects of the early schooling program. Irving Lazar and Richard Darlington of Cornell University coordinated the Consortium for Longitudinal Studies. They report: "We can safely conclude that low-income children benefit from preschool programs—in being more likely to meet the minimal requirements of later schooling—and that this finding is not due to initial treatment control differences in sex, ethnicity, early intelligence level, or early family background." Preschool graduates did markedly better in later schooling than their nonpreschool counterparts, scored higher on achievement tests, and were more likely to express pride in specific achievements.

Most important, since we stress the

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role of personality in these matters, personality is shaped early and is particularly difficult to reshape once it is misformed. Some data suggest that little progress on this front occurs after the sixth grade, roughly age twelve.

Work-Study Opportunities

A more radical reform would start schooling at age four and continue it until age sixteen, to be followed by two years of mixed work and study. Schools could either recognize certain kinds of work as providing educational experiences equivalent to classroom-time (e.g., work as an apprentice instead of in the school's carpentry shop) or provide internships in voluntary or government agencies on a part-time basis. This is one of the recommendations of the National Commission on Youth, whose report has the telling title *The Transition of Youth to Adulthood: A Bridge Too Long*. The Commission would also lower the age of mandatory school attendance to fourteen. Taking a different approach, a Carnegie study, *Giving Youth a Better Chance*, suggests that school could be cut back to three days a week—in effect leaving half time for regular (rather than “educational”) employment, without necessarily any loss to education.

The work-study years should be aimed at easing the transition from the school to the work world, and at adapting the last years of schooling to a large variety of needs, e.g., allowing some pupils a more vocational and less academic mix. This would work best if the work were meaningful and properly supervised, i.e., more educational, which is certainly now not always the case. Social psychologists Ellen Greenberger and Laurence Steinberg found that young people receive little on-the-job training in many of the jobs they typically hold. Few develop relationships with adults (potential role-models) on the job, and students who work use more alcohol and marijuana than those who do not. On the other hand, when Northwestern High School of Baltimore sent six hundred students to work one day a week as volunteers in hospitals, offices, and primary schools, the pupils gained in maturity,

insight, and reality of expectations, as well as involvement.

A Year of National Service

A year spent serving the country, interrupting the “lockstep” march from grade to grade, right into and through college, has been widely recommended. While the suggested programs vary in detail, many favor a year of voluntary service, with options including the armed forces, Peace Corps, VISTA, and Conservation Corps. Some would make it the senior year of high school; I prefer for it to follow high school, replacing the first years of college for those who wish to continue, or providing a year between school and work for those not college-bound.

The merits of a year of national service range from primarily pragmatic to normative ones. In an average month of 1979, while the unemployment rate was 5.8 percent for all workers, it was 9.0 percent for those aged twenty to twenty-four and 16.1 percent for those sixteen to nineteen. High unemployment among teenagers and young adults is creating a demoralized youth population and undermining the rest of society, since young unemployed persons make up a sizable part of the criminal population. A year of meaningful national service might well help many unemployed youths avoid enticement into crime. Much of the potential impact lies in psychic development, in enhancing the individual's self-respect, sense of worth, and providing a positive, constructive experience with which to start one's post-school life.

In terms of future employment, a year of national service could furnish young people with an opportunity to try their hands at a skill they might later want to develop. For those planning to go on to college, service after high school would provide a break between “work” in two institutions, and time out to consider their goals in a setting that is largely noncompetitive.

On the normative side, national service would provide a strong antidote to any ego-centered mentality as youth become involved in vital services shared by all. Thus, an important criterion for including a particular form of service in the program should

be its societal usefulness; that is, promotion of values that transcend the mere advancement of self-interest. This could encompass myriad possibilities, from improving the environment and beautifying the land to tutoring youngsters having difficulty in school or visiting nursing homes, schools for the retarded, and other such institutions to check on the quality of services. At the same time, forms of service that infringe on the rights of others would be excluded; for example, volunteers would not be given responsibilities that would, in effect, take away jobs by providing a pool of cheap labor.

Rebuilding the Community

Finally, one of the most promising payoffs is that the program could serve as the “great sociological mixer” America needs if a stronger national consensus on fundamental values is to evolve. That is, national service could fill a role somewhat similar to that once served by the march toward the western frontier. At present, America has few structural opportunities for shared experience to develop shared values that are essential if the polity is to reach agreement on courses of action with sufficient speed and without disruptive conflict.

One of the major reasons for America's low consensus-building capacity is that the schools are locally run; they do not subscribe to a common national curriculum, and they transmit different sets of values. A year of national service, especially if it were designed to enable people from different geographical and sociological backgrounds to work and live together, could be an effective way for boys and girls, whites and nonwhites, people from parochial and public schools, North and South, big city and country, to get to know one another as equals while working together at a common task. The “total” nature of the situation—being away from home, peers, and “background” communities, and spending time together around the clock—is what promises the sociological impact. It is the reason such a year may be more effective than several years of casual contact in high school

or college, cafeterias, pool halls, or bowling alleys.

The costs of such a program are formidable. If every American who reaches eighteen were to participate—a very far-fetched assumption—it would cost an estimated \$21 billion a year (\$7,000 per person times 3,000,000). However, one must deduct from this the costs, such as salaries, for young people who would be serving in the armed forces anyway; the cost of fellowships and grants-in-aid from public funds to college freshmen; the cost of unemployment and welfare for eighteen-to-nineteen-year-olds, itself a hefty sum, as unemployment in this group is particularly high; savings from an almost certain reduction in crime, police work and jail sentences. Moreover, at least 10 percent of the cohort can be expected to be mentally or physically unable to participate.

Even so, the program has a multi-billion-dollar net price tag; it can be seriously considered only if there is great public support for it, and parallel commitment from Congress and the administration.

To state the obvious, that the first duty of schools is education, turns out not to be self-evident. First, there is a strong tendency to equate education with teaching, transmitting skills and knowledge, which it is not; at least that is not the school's only major task. Second, there is a lack of understanding of how important character formation, education's core subject, is *in itself*—as a source of basic skills for work, for mutuality, for membership in a civil community, and for effective teaching.

The single most important intra-school factor affecting education is not curriculum or teaching style, at least

not as these terms are normally used, but the experiences the school generates. In many schools, perhaps as many as half, these experiences are not supportive of sound character formation, mutuality, and civility. While many factors combine to account for this weakened condition of many American schools, the ego-centered mentality is probably the easiest to reverse; it is almost certainly a good place to start the reconstruction of the schools, by providing legitimation for a structure under which self-organization will be more likely to evolve. Reconstruction must also draw upon other factors, many external to the schools, ranging from greater parental support for the schools' primary educational mission to a reduction in the number of other missions, which currently dissipate their resources and blur their focus.