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Framing the college debate : insights on Obama's rhetoric through the capabilities approach

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*Framing the College Debate:
Insights on Obama's Rhetoric through the Capabilities Approach*

by

Caitlin M. Manak

Honors Thesis

in

*Leadership Studies
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Advisor: Douglas Hicks

Abstract

***Framing the College Debate:
Insights on Obama's Rhetoric through the Capabilities Approach***

Caitlin M. Manak

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President Obama has proposed that the United States increase the number of college graduates by 8 million by 2020 in order to raise national educational standards and to engage in global competition. Obama's policies and rhetoric frequently describe "education as a pathway to success" and "education as a pathway to jobs," but fail to emphasize its comprehensive, intrinsic values. America's national discussion on education needs to shift away from framing higher education merely as pathway to the workforce, and should focus instead on education as a vital part of a well-lived life. To fulfill social justice under the capabilities approach, American leadership should strive to give everyone the *genuine choice* of pursuing a higher education.

Signature Page for Leadership Studies Honors Thesis

Framing the College Debate:

Insights on Obama's Rhetoric through the Capabilities Approach

Thesis presented

by

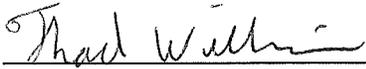
Caitlin M. Manak

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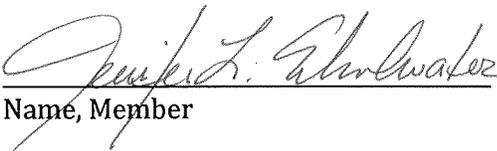
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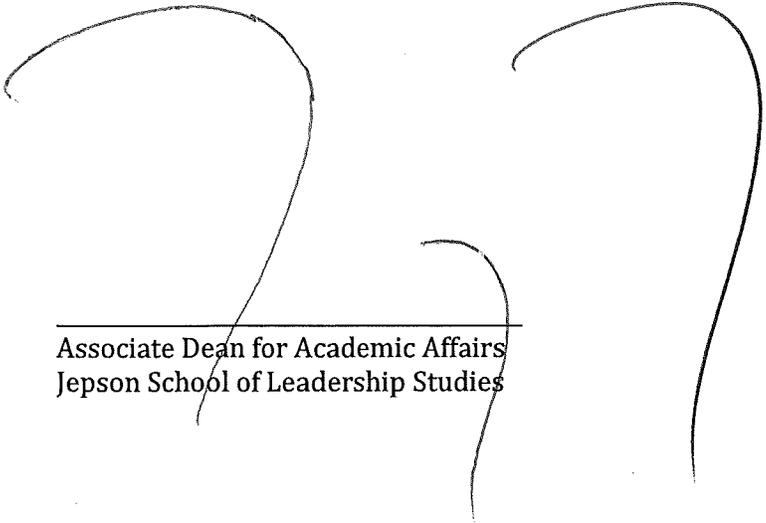
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Introduction:

Across the 20th century, the United States was a leader in higher education, but now it is falling behind other countries in college graduation rates. Although America once had the most college graduates, the number of American college graduates had dropped below nine other developed countries across Europe and Asia.¹ Today as the United States competes to be a leader in economic trade and production, educating citizens seems more important than ever.

Since becoming the President of the United States of America, Barack Obama has acknowledged the high cost of college, high student loan debt, and high drop out rate; and he has focused on expanding access to higher education. Because of the importance of educating citizens, the Obama administration has highlighted education as one of its central issues. In his first address to Congress in 2009, President Obama announced a plan for education that will work towards regaining the competitive edge that America once had. He declared, “We will provide the support necessary for all young Americans to complete college and meet a new goal: By 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world.”² In this proposal, Obama wants to increase the current number of college graduates by 8 million. In his address to the country, Obama is saying two things: that America will increase production of college graduates and that the significant support of the United States government will help achieve this ambitious goal.

With a more educated citizenry, it is hard to disagree that opportunities for innovation and efficient production become more abundant. However, by setting this new benchmark, Obama locks himself into fulfilling a difficult promise. The additional number of graduates to be produced by this proposal raises questions about the ability to fund and truly support such a

¹ Barack Obama. “Obama delivers remarks at the Community College Summit with Dr. Biden.” Washington, DC., October 5, 2010.

² Barack Obama, “Remarks of President Barack Obama—Address to Joint Session of Congress,” February 24, 2009.

policy. Rhetorically, Obama has said that higher education is the pathway to success, but does this policy fit within the present needs of Americans as citizens, in the context of American society?

Today, in 2012, the national conversation on education has a significant focus on the economy, but education is about so much more than its utility in the workforce. When leaders limit their focus on education to its function as a pathway to economic success, the country loses a valuable and vital breadth of perspective on education's enriching potential. This thesis argues, through the lens of the capabilities approach, every American should be able to go to college, but that national policy should avoid trying to send everyone into college. American leadership should strive to enable everyone to have the *genuine choice* of pursuing a higher education, to fulfill social justice. America's national discussion on education needs to shift away from framing higher education merely as pathway to the workforce, and it should focus instead on education as a vital part of a well-lived life.

To understand the higher education debate in a more comprehensive context, chapter 1 introduces the vocabulary of the capabilities approach. The capabilities approach is a theory of social justice that measures human well-being through capabilities and functionings not merely via economic success. The framework offers a way to look at education through an alternative mindset by considering what a person can do and be. The capabilities approach is a different way to understand the educational needs of individuals and society as well as how education should look in America.

Chapter 2 examines the roots of education in America in order to give a necessary background of how we arrived at the contemporary conversation about college today. In the 19th century, when the first public schools were created, proponents of progressive education argued

for the importance of establishing active learning environments to educate students for citizenship. Eventually, intentional policies directed young wealthy Americans into schools that practiced liberal education and placed immigrants and African Americans into vocational training with a focus on skills building. Today, as more schools educate people for the workforce, students lack the critical thinking necessary to engage as citizens. In this chapter I ask, how have we lost sight of education for citizenship?

In chapter 3, I use the capabilities approach to shed light on the college debate from a broad standpoint of well-being. Given the context of American society today, what does the national college conversation look like? Many Americans argue that a person is able to do more with a college degree. There is no denying that more job opportunities are available to persons with a higher level of education; in the workplace one has more job options with higher credentials. However, how does a college education affect what one can be? On the “college for all” team, scholars argue that everyone should have a chance to go to college to gain a greater understanding and to develop critical thinking, while fulfilling the economic demands of the workforce. Conversely, others argue that today a college degree is not necessary to succeed in the workplace. Although rare, today it is possible for a computer programmer without a college degree to secure a job with a salary of over \$100,000. However, college or not, the capabilities approach emphasizes the importance that every American be able to think critically and engage in society as an active citizen and that higher education is simply part of a well lived life. The contemporary college debate includes a dynamic discussion of personal development and development of society. What does it really mean to live well? Is higher education necessary in this process?

Chapter 4 analyzes Obama's higher education rhetoric in terms of the American Dream and the vocabulary of the capabilities approach. In many speeches, Obama refers to America's great possibilities and opportunities when he describes the powers of education today. The ethos of the American dream has maintained the idea that the public education system gives every American the chance to succeed. At one time, the American Dream represented an idea that Americans come together to strive for the common good in this land of opportunity. Today, there seems to be a more individualistic view of success. How does his rhetoric align with the modern realities of education in American society? What does American success look like? The previous chapters will have constructed an idea of education that teaches students to be citizens, to exercise their skills and talents, and to develop capabilities such as critical thinking. This chapter examines whether Obama's higher education rhetoric meet the demands of the capabilities approach as defined in chapter 1.

Based on Obama's message that education leads to jobs, chapter 5 asks, how do Americans view job success versus job fulfillment? Following the recession, by necessity, Obama's leadership has had to address America's economic weaknesses and propose solutions for rectifying them; he has chosen to propose solutions that are closely related to education. In many speeches on education, the Obama administration has said that higher education will lead to success and in the same vein that the only way to success is by getting a good education. In a more educated society, there will be more workers to fill the various needs in the workplace. Although education can be an indicator of a person's capabilities, a higher education degree does not automatically lead to well being. To gauge the values of work in America, it is not only important to look at the jobs that Americans consider successful, but to consider which jobs are

the most fulfilling. By looking at polls and surveys, this chapter investigates Americans' work values, incorporates Obama's focus on jobs and re-evaluates the rhetoric.

Chapter 6 rounds out the discussion of college and returns to an examination of education for its intrinsic value. Viewed through the lens of the capabilities approach, each person has different needs that enable him or her to lead a flourishing life. Despite the importance that Americans place on their work, a well-lived life is a balance of various factors that meet unique needs. In America, it is sometimes easy to forget that one's identity is more than just her job. With that said, there are significant implications for the ways that leaders, such as President Obama, frame the college debate. Drawing on the capabilities approach, I strongly argue for a more comprehensive conversation about college that considers the differences that exist among individuals. A consideration of capabilities not only directs the focus away from an impersonal aim for success, but also expands the discussion to include an emphasis on well-being and a standard of social justice.

1

A Life Well Lived: The Values of Education

“By various agencies, unintentional and designed, a society transforms uninitiated and seemingly alien beings into robust trustees of its own resources and ideals. Education is thus a fostering, a nurturing, a cultivating, process.”

John Dewey, Democracy and Education, 1916



Given the high unemployment rate in this post-recession era, it is understandable that Americans are concerned about securing a job. However, it is dangerous for our democracy to let the conversation about education become a conversation about jobs. Now, a large focus of the national education conversation is on the utility of a college degree rather the value of education for a well-lived life. In the public eye, the focus on jobs and the economy has begun to overshadow the value of a higher education for its ability to expand students' worldviews, challenge their beliefs, and introduce them to new social networks and opportunities. The current focus on jobs also obstructs the importance of education in developing good citizens who are able to think critically about their government and its policies. In a time when young Americans are so oriented towards career progression, American leadership should emphasize that education not only leads to jobs, but also enriches the wellbeing of individuals and the health of society. The capabilities approach compels us to ask, “What are the ultimate ends of society, and what role should education play in getting us toward those ends?”

According to Amartya Sen, “The ‘good life’ is partly a life of genuine choice, and not one in which the person is forced into a particular life – however rich it might be in other respects.”³ In the college debate, this genuine choice requires that every person be able to choose whether or not to go to college and that each person has the real opportunity to enroll. Higher education is rich in many aspects; however, attending college still may not be the best decision for every person.

Obama’s proposal to increase the number of college graduates expands college access, but does not address the idea of a *genuine choice* to attend college. Although the distinction may seem small, there is a difference between giving citizens the *genuine choice* to go to college versus enacting policies that increase enrollment. Whereas increasing college enrollment simply requires more funding and more structural capacity for more students, creating a *genuine choice* requires an examination of the social conditions and other factors that exist today that prohibit one from going to college. If America were to incorporate the capabilities approach into its creed of social justice, everyone would have the opportunity to pursue what he or she wants in order to have a fulfilling life. In a fair society, the social conditions would exist so that every person would be able to enroll in higher education. However, for some Americans, the path to fulfillment may not include college.



Although the capabilities approach has been widely explored by economists, ethicists, and philosophers, scholars have only begun to apply it to education over the past ten years. This approach, which considers the fundamental elements of human well-being, is a way to think about the aims of education in America and enables one to more deeply think about the purpose

³ Amartya Sen, "Well-being, Agency and Freedom: The Dewey Lectures 1984."

of a college education. The capabilities approach provides a valuable vocabulary for understanding both the instrumental and the intrinsic values of a higher education.

Some of the most vital capabilities people need to thrive in society are the ability to think critically, the development of a narrative imagination, the ability to secure a well-paying job, and the ability to exercise practical reason in planning of one's life.⁴ While basic needs (i.e. food, shelter, water, clothing) are universal, the details of a fulfilling life depend a significant extent on social context and look different for each individual. Factors like accumulation of money, amount of leisure time and family are more variable; they provide different fulfillment for every person. Since well-being looks different for every person, different pathways to reaching that well-being must be considered. By asking the question, "What is each person able to do and be?" the capabilities approach focuses on individual achievements and the freedom, or capability, to achieve them.⁵ This theoretical perspective of well-being examines the range of opportunities that people have in "life, health, and bodily integrity [and] political liberty, political participation, and education."⁶

Ideally, increasing access to higher education moves in the right direction toward achieving social justice. Greater access to a college education would mean more opportunities for a greater number of people. However, if a person has not had the educational opportunities necessary to prepare him for college, more access to post-secondary educational opportunities will not change the fact that he is not ready to attend college. In America's school system today, too many students are slipping through the cracks. The fact that the capability approach considers a person's range of *capabilities*, *functionings*, and *freedoms*, grounds the debate to the situations of individual people, and gives targeted insights on how which capacities we should be

⁴ Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, 33.

⁵ Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, 18.

⁶ Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, 24.

striving to develop. The work of Martha Nussbaum, a prominent philosopher and capabilities approach scholar, considers the capability approach's application to education and the humanities. Her work will be examined more in depth below.

An Objective Measure of Well-being

The capabilities approach, or the human development paradigm, is a social justice based alternative to economic theories that measure human development in terms of economic capital. In 1980, Nobel prize-winning economist, Amartya Sen, first introduced the capability approach as a more comprehensive way to assess well-being than the development measures being used. Previously, experts had primarily used Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to measure quality of life. However, this purely economic measure of well-being indicates the average prosperity of a country, as in GDP per capita. In comparison to the capabilities approach it also focuses on income alone as a measure of well-being and does not consider circumstances on an individual basis.

According to Sen, a person's life is "a set of interrelated functionings consisting of beings and doings."⁷ Again, because every individual has differences, each person's *capability set* is also unique; it consists of "alternative combinations of functions" from which a person can choose.⁸ While capabilities represent a person's opportunities, *functionings* represent a person's achievements or acting out of the capabilities. This freedom to make choices about how one uses her capabilities is essential in order to have control in one's life; often a well-lived life consists of the ability to act in accordance with one's talents and gifts. The right balance of a

⁷ Amartya Sen, *Inequality Reexamined*, 39.

⁸ Amartya Sen, *Inequality Reexamined*, 40.

person's opportunities, or *capabilities*, and achievements, or *functionings*, contribute to a person's flourishing life.

Freedoms

A central aspect of the capabilities approach is *freedom*, which is a requirement for social justice. In Sen's capability approach, the capability to achieve functionings is directly influenced by a person's comprehensive freedoms. Sen describes freedom as "the *real opportunity* that we have to accomplish what we value."⁹ This real opportunity connects with genuine choice, to describe true opportunities a person has in life, taking into account her social context and freedoms. Sen focuses on a set of five fundamental freedoms that provide the opportunity for capabilities to emerge: *political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees, and protective security*.¹⁰ Although Sen does not speak directly about the freedoms that are necessary to enable educational opportunities, he would agree that *economic facilities* and *social opportunities* are instrumental in securing quality educational opportunities in the United States.

A consideration of a person's social context broadens the perspective on well-being by evaluating the existence of the specific capabilities or freedoms that are needed to achieve her goals or values. A life worth living includes having many choices so that one may be able to actively decide on what he chooses to do or be. Sen argues, "achieving well-being depends on the capability to function."¹¹ A quality education can be an important part of expanding a person's choices and developing capabilities that enhance well-being. When one does not have the capability to attend college, his functionings are limited or he is able to do less. Today, there

⁹ Amartya Sen, *Inequality Reexamined*, 31.

¹⁰ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 38.

¹¹ Amartya Sen, *Inequality Reexamined*, 40.

are many obstacles to college attendance, such as lack of academic preparation, low self-confidence, ineffective guidance counseling, low family support, ect. When society's structures and institutions prohibit a person from pursuing a college degree, the overall social inequalities in that society increase.

For instance, a lack of financial means should not prohibit any individual from pursuing a higher education. Returning to the issue of college affordability, another freedom, *social opportunity*, plays a role in a person's ability to attend college. Since public schools are funded on local property tax revenue, quality of education tends to correspond with the wealth of a community, thus affecting the residents' social opportunities. In many ways, *economic facilities* and *social opportunities* work together. When a family has the capability to pay for college without financial assistance, there is a high probability—but not certainty—that they also have full access to social opportunities. Conversely, limited income can also indicate limited social opportunities.

Just like the interplay between economic facilities and social opportunities in the question of college affordability, many of the other freedoms build upon each other, working in conjunction with one another. Since the value of different freedoms depends on a person's individual situation and values, Sen argues that it would be difficult to create a universal set of standard capabilities. As a result, Sen “speak[s] of freedom as an overall good and leave[s] each nation the task of selecting the specific capabilities that its constitutional structure will protect.”¹² By describing freedom as an “overall good,” Sen avoids assigning any culture or group a narrow capability set that may or may not describe their cultural values and norms. In addition, by describing this wide range of freedoms, rather than a specific set of fundamental capabilities, Sen

¹² Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, 71.

ensures that his concept of human development remains inclusive of individual and societal priorities and concepts of a well-lived life.

Since a person must pay tuition to attend college in America, varying amounts of wealth affect a family's ability to provide a quality education for its children. College affordability is one of the factors that limits access to higher education for many Americans and there are no signs that the trends are reversing. According to the American Institute of Economic Research, "College tuition has been outpacing inflation for decades. Between 1990 and 2008, tuition and fees rose 248 percent in real dollars, more than any other major component of Consumer Price Index."¹³ As long as tuition grows at a faster rate than inflation, the cost of college will continue to limit a greater number of families who are not able to afford the expense. The capabilities approach helps to provide a vocabulary that can be used to talk about many factors, such as exorbitant costs, that inhibit a person's access to education.

Thus, for many Americans who have college aspirations for themselves or for their kids, the high cost of a post-secondary degree places a college experience out of reach. Even in a wealthy society like America, that values economic wealth and success, 46.2 million Americans still live below the poverty line, yet the cost of college is often out of the reach of the middle class.¹⁴ This discrepancy between the cost of college and the number of Americans who can afford it, limits the college experience for the least well off. Author of *The American Dream and Public Schools*, Jennifer Hochschild describes education as a series of nested disadvantages: "The structure of nested inequalities creates the worst problems in the schools in large, poor central cities (and in some small rural schools as well). In the largest 100 school districts, almost 70 percent of the students are non-Anglo (compared with 40 percent of students nationally), and

¹³ Anya Kamenetz, *DIY U*, viii.

¹⁴ Sabrina Tavernise, "Soaring Poverty Casts Spotlight on 'Lost Decade'." September 13, 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/14/us/14census.html?pagewanted=all>

over half are poor or near-poor (compared with fewer than 40 percent nationally).”¹⁵ ¹⁶ This concentrated poverty along race lines describes a social system that denies the least well off the opportunity of a quality education.

According to the capabilities approach, once a student has graduated from high school, she should be academically prepared to continue on to a higher education. Especially in America, a country that prides itself on its education system, students should be able to follow through with the desire to continue their education at an adequate academic preparation and at an affordable cost. In a country that takes the capabilities approach seriously, there should be no limiting factors that deny a student a higher education. To ensure that America serves all its citizens fully, the government must work to ensure that students are better prepared to attend college. However, in the end, this is not just an issue that concerns the education system; rather, it involves many aspects of society. In order to begin to think about what tangible steps leaders should take to attack social inequalities to work towards social justice, Nussbaum’s universal standards for a threshold of minimum justice, are a good place to start.

A Threshold for Minimum Justice

Until recently, the capability approach, or human development paradigm, was most widely known in development economics as a comparative measure of quality of life. However, since the 1990s, Martha Nussbaum has been deepening Sen’s capability approach by an application to humanities and education. Nussbaum’s capabilities theory is a normative political theory, which “defends a minimum threshold of capability as a necessary condition for social

¹⁵ Jennifer L. Hochschild, *The American Dream and the Public Schools*, 25.

¹⁶ Hochschild uses 2001 data of eligibility for free or reduced price lunches from the National Center of Education Statistics to define “poor” and “near-poor.”

justice.”¹⁷ She says that, in the pursuit of human dignity, each capability is important and exists in conjunction with one another; as capabilities simultaneously contribute to a person’s well-being, their value cannot be separated or reduced to any one indicator. Although her theory seems very similar to Sen’s ideas, the subtle differences between Sen and Nussbaum emerge through further explanations of the theory.

Nussbaum’s capabilities approach consists of most of the same elements as Sen’s, i.e. functionings, freedoms, capability, and agency; however, Nussbaum’s concept of capabilities has additional sub-categories that describe the influence of contextual variables such as environmental, social and economic factors. According to Nussbaum, three main characteristics of the capabilities approach are its treatment of *each person as an end*, a focus on *choice and freedom*, and a concern with *entrenched social injustice and inequality*.

These three characteristics help describe areas of improvement for higher education in America. First, according to Nussbaum, the process of education should *treat each student as an end* in their journey of learning, rather than a means to a job or a statistic for the school. In the current era of testing and accountability, schools must always strive to consider the students ends within themselves. Next, a focus on *choice and freedom* should enable open access to higher education in terms of social opportunities and affordability. Ideally, a student should also have choice and freedom when she explores her area of studies, decides on a major and pursues a career path. Nussbaum also says that the capabilities approach addresses *entrenched social injustice*, or systematic injustices that require effort and attention of the leaders. This category provides a baseline for evaluating whether the current college discussion considers the existing and future state of social justice in America.

¹⁷ Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, 76.

Nussbaum's view of social justice gives the capabilities approach a unique philosophical perspective on the elements of a flourishing life. Rooted in Aristotelian ethics, Nussbaum argues that there should be a minimum threshold of social justice, across every nation or group that transcends culture-specific norms of justice. Contrary to Sen, Nussbaum believes it is necessary to establish a list of *central capabilities* in order to adopt a meaningful benchmark for universal standards of justice. Not only is her list helpful in describing the specific ways that the capability approach pursues social justice, it provides a "basis for the idea of fundamental political entitlements and constitutional law."¹⁸ Nussbaum's central capabilities, as described in Nussbaum's words, are as follows:¹⁹

1. Life – being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length; not dying prematurely
2. Bodily Health – good health, nourishment and shelter
3. Bodily Integrity – to move freely from place to place, to have security against sexual assault
4. Senses, Imagination, and Thought – to imagine, think and reason
5. Emotions – the capacity to love others
6. Practical reason – to engage in critical reflection about future plans and to conceptualize the good life
7. Affiliation – (a) to connect with others and show concern for other humans; non-discrimination based on sex, gender, race, ethnicity, caste, ect... (b) having the social basis of respect and non-humiliation
8. Other Species – respect for other species
9. Play – being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities.
10. Control over one's environment – (a) Political: Being able to participate in the political process, (b) Material: being able to hold property on an equal basis as others;

¹⁸ Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, 70.

¹⁹ Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, 33.

to have property rights; having the right to seek employment on an equal basis as others; in work being able to work as a human being, exercising practical reason

This list distinguishes the capabilities that are most important to any human life, regardless of social conduct or what the person chooses to do or be. According to Nussbaum, these capabilities work together to construct a baseline for determining a minimum social justice. Because the categories of the ten capabilities can be broad, at times the inherent flexibility of the list can introduce difficulties in application to a specific context. However, Nussbaum's established vocabulary is helpful in framing the college debate around the capabilities approach.

All ten of the central capabilities are important for a government or group to consider during the creation of its constitution, Nussbaum asserts. Although the list demonstrates certain capabilities, governments and groups must consider their values to determine a level at which a capability becomes "truly human." Because the central capabilities are a "moral basis of central constitutional guarantees by people who otherwise have very different views of what a complete good life for a human being would be."²⁰ In a broad sense, we must begin to think about the minimum threshold of social justice of education in America. In a more tangible sense, Nussbaum's central capabilities can help to distinguish *input capabilities* that are necessary to engage in education and *output capabilities* that should be the result of the education system, as I consider in the following section.

Under Obama's proposal to increase the amount of college graduates in America, it would be relatively easy to send more students to college. Once the funding is secured, more doors would be open and a greater number of Americans would be able to enroll in college. However, some say that the quality of education will be difficult to uphold. This is the challenge, to ensure that students receive a meaningful and useful education. It is a challenge to

²⁰ Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, 71.

hold schools, teachers, and students accountable to ensure that students are developing the capabilities they should be.

Educational Inputs and Outputs

The vocabulary of Nussbaum's central capabilities is a helpful way to be more specific when thinking of how education should look in America. I have examined Nussbaum's central capabilities and I created two subcategories, input capacities and output capabilities that describe a way to work towards a minimum threshold of justice in American higher education. *Input capabilities* are certain capabilities that one must have to arrive at or engage in college and *output capabilities* are certain capabilities that a person develops in college.

Input Capabilities

According to Nussbaum's categorization of the central capabilities, it is clear that students must have certain capabilities to reach and engage in a higher education. Specifically, *life*, *bodily health*, and *control over one's environment* all contribute to one's freedom or capability to attend college. These three capabilities are the most apparent necessary inputs to education. Since there is no hierarchy in Nussbaum's central capabilities, all of them are important. First, to have the capability of *life* does not refer to the act of being alive, but the quality of living a long life without suffering a pre-mature death. The second capability, *bodily health*, includes freedom from illness once she grows to the age when she can attend college. A third input to education is *control over one's environment*. To attend college, a person must have *control over her environment*. Nussbaum would describe this as *material control*; in an educational sense, this control describes having access to a quality education on an equal basis as others. Although *life* and *bodily health* may seem to apply more to education in developing

countries, the reality is that fulfilling these capabilities is still a concern in America. In a country where obesity is such a prevalent problem, it is a struggle to ensure that kids are eating healthily. Schools have been increasing efforts to ensure that kids are receiving nutrition by instituting healthy school breakfasts and lunches; however, a lack of funding and resources sometimes makes this difficult.

Control over one's environment applies to higher education in America, especially in areas of low socioeconomic status. Again, this is a matter of social justice. Some young Americans who work to sustain their family's livelihood and take care of their siblings do not have control over their environment. Due to familial financial constraints, low-income students often have to grow up quickly and drop out of high school. When a young person has very little *control over her environment* during his childhood, he will have fewer social opportunities later in life. If a person does not complete high school, he does not have the freedom or capability to enter college.

Output Capabilities

The individual growth process is different for every person; and there are boundless ways that a higher education can affect a person's life. Although it is difficult to try to narrow a person's growth process to categories on a list, Nussbaum's central capabilities help to describe the capabilities that a person should develop in college. From Nussbaum's 10 central capabilities, four of her "central capabilities" contribute to my list of output capabilities, including *practical reason*, *imagination*, *control over one's environment*, and *affiliation*.

The first output capability is *practical reason*—having the ability to implement plans as well as having a conception of the good life. An instrumental aspect of practical reason is

learning about other social contexts and other social issues in college. College is supposed to expand the choice set of what a person might do with her life as well as expand her points of reference. The other less tangible value of practical reason is the capacity to conceptualize “the good life.” The concept of the good life directly stems from Aristotle’s theory of *eudaimonia*, which means “happiness,” or “flourishing.” *Eudaimonia* is not the action of feeling happy, but rather living an active life of functioning to contribute to one’s well being.²¹ It is this reason, Aristotle says, that distinguishes humans from other animals. Education is a valuable process for cultivating this reason, thus contributing to a broader perspective of what a person should do and be to be fulfilled. Why should a person strive towards the good life? One answer is simply that it is good. In this sense, education is instrumentally valuable, but also intrinsically valuable that is, it has value within itself.

The second output capability, *senses, thought and imagination*, expands a person’s mind, and allows her to connect with others and leads one to imagine, think, and reason in a “truly human way.”²² Informed and cultivated by an adequate education, this capability includes but is not limited to having basic skills in literacy, math, and science. Nussbaum describes Socratic thinking as a way to fulfill democratic citizenship.²³ Not only being able to think, but to truly question are vital capabilities associated with the Socratic method. Educating people more in depth will be discussed more thoroughly in the next chapter.

The third output from education is *control over one’s environment*, in (a) a political sphere and (b) a material sphere. *Political control* includes the ability to be politically active in areas that affect one’s life as well the freedom of political participation and the right to free speech, press, and association. Here, practical reason interacts with political control. Not only is

²¹ Kraut, Richard. "Aristotle's Ethics." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

²² Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*, 33.

²³ Martha Nussbaum, "Education and Democratic Citizenship: Capabilities and Quality Education," 388.

practical reason important for planning the future, it also provides the faculties to exercise the rights and duties of a citizen such as being politically active. Having *material control* includes being able to hold property, having the right to own property on an equal basis with others, and “in work, being able to work as a human, exercising practical reason and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers.”²⁴ Education should provide a person with the basis of skills that are attractive to an employer, creating opportunities for meaningful and dignified work after school. A dignified job is one essential part of a well-lived life, for it instills one with self-worth and dignity.

The fourth output capability is *affiliation*, includes being able to live with others and relate in a way that shows concern and to imagine the situation of others. College helps people to join in communities, networks, and social relations that enable people to join together to work for common aims. This human connection is vital in order to establish mutual relationships and a greater understanding among people of different backgrounds. Nussbaum describes this kind of affiliation further as, “Having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others. This entails provisions of non-discrimination on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, caste, religion, national origin and species.”²⁵ Ideally, colleges provide a setting that enables diverse people to come together as friends and coworkers; once these people interact on a personal level, an understanding will develop and people will respect others regardless of their differences. Nussbaum calls this ability to connect with others through understanding and empathy, a *narrative imagination*. She expands upon the importance of affiliation in developing good citizens, “Protecting this capability means protecting institutions that constitute and nourish such

²⁴ Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*, 33.

²⁵ Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*, 33.

forms of affiliation, and also protecting the freedom of assembly and political speech.”²⁶

Because of their ability to facilitate this deeper connection, colleges can serve as an important place where citizenship is cultivated.

From the framework of the capabilities approach, education should help young people develop the ability to think critically about social justice and the policies and institutions of the country in which they live. Certain capabilities, especially practical reasoning and critical thinking, are vital for ensuring that citizens do not become complacent and apathetic about life around them. Because education is taught by teachers who have personal opinions and biases, no system of education will be completely void of an outside perspective. The goal of education therefore, is not to teach memorization of facts or to drill opinions into students, but to challenge them and teach them to think for their own. All knowledge is constructed over time; it is the hope of the capabilities approach that students will be able to think about different perspectives and distinguish their own viewpoints and ideas while respecting the ideologies of others.

Nussbaum’s central capabilities and my *inputs* and *outputs* of education serve as a framework for describing education’s role in facilitating personal and societal growth, encouraging human relationships and connections, and developing active citizens. Additionally, Nussbaum’s concept of a *minimum threshold of social justice* provides context for the structures that must be in place to ensure that every person has *genuine choice* in making life decisions. President Obama’s policies expand access to college, but under this proposal, it is unclear whether every citizen really has a genuine choice to attend. Much of this unequal opportunity results from structures that are in place which result in unequal learning in schools. To understand the conditions of schools today, it is valuable to look back in history at the origins and beginnings of the public school system in America.

²⁶ Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*, 33.

2

The Point of Education

“ Education is the process by which the individual relates himself to the universe, gives himself citizenship in the changing world, shares the race's mind and enfranchises his own soul. ”

John Huston Finley, President of the City College of New York (1903 until 1913), and Commissioner of Education of the state of New York



In the 19th century during the construction of the American education system, every expert seemed to have insights about how education should look in America. When common schools first emerged, liberal educators advocated for academic studies such as Latin, Greek, and philosophy, while progressive educators thought children should engage with their communities and learn how to interact with society. Whereas liberal educators wanted to keep academic studies in the classroom, progressive scholars, like John Dewey, saw the value in hands-on learning. Then and now, many people are at odds with the answer to the question, “what is the point of education?”

Looking at the debates of the past can help inform the current education debates, as many of arguments are strikingly timeless. Two aims of education throughout the 19th century were *educating students for citizenship* and *preparing students for the workforce*. Back then, and now, educators ask: Should students engage in academic subjects or hands-on learning? Should we train students for standardized testing or critical thinking? Should we educate students for the workforce, or educate them for life?

Some people believe that everyone should not go to college, because every person does not have the capability to go to college. They think that because everyone will not benefit from a curriculum that utilizes and develops critical thinking, there is no point of teaching beyond basic skills for these students. The reality, in a capitalist society, is that some people will work their whole life at a fast food chain or to tend to the cashier at a grocery store. However, although fry cooks and taxi drivers do not have to think critically to fulfill the duties of their job, they do need to develop capabilities such as practical reason and critical thinking in order to live a fulfilling life. Over the past century, as education has become more streamlined and testing-oriented, education for development of capabilities and education for citizenship has faded away. Today, there is a disconnect between the push for standardized testing and preparing students to be active citizens. The more that education is described as a pathway to the workforce, there is even less direct focus on critical thinking and a greater focus on testing and satisfying benchmark goals.

Drawing from the capabilities approach, in order to educate citizens, schools must find a way to engage their students in critical thinking and to develop capabilities that they will use in life. According to the capabilities approach, every student needs the capabilities to think critically to decide how to live a full life and to engage as a citizen. In thinking about “the point of education,” this chapter looks at the emergence of education for capabilities and citizenship, and it then investigates the disappearance of this broad approach. This chapter focuses on K-12 educational aims, since that developmental time is the start of the formative years for many young Americans. The skills, knowledge, and capabilities that a student builds in middle school and high school prepare him for college. Therefore, the quality and style of education a person

has throughout her schooling plays a central role in the development of skills and capabilities with which she enters college.

Education for Citizenship

Schools are a place where students gain empathy and a common understanding, both which are vital to forming connections and social relationships and participating as active citizens. According to Nussbaum, “democratic citizenship” means active participation, the ability to dissent against authority and the capacity for empathy for other cultures. Her central argument is that the humanities and the arts breed the creativity and Socratic thinking necessary to participate in “responsible citizenship.”²⁷

Free public schooling has been a cornerstone of the United States since American public schools emerged after the American Revolution. Because education in America is free, many American’s believe that every citizen has equal access to the benefits of education. By law, this is true—every citizen is guaranteed a place in school, however the quality of education in schools differs greatly. In 1991, Sociologist Jonathan Kozol investigated the public school systems of East St. Lewis, Chicago, New York City, Camden, Cincinnati, and Washington D.C., and found that enormous discrepancies in funding and pedagogy exist due to racial segregation.²⁸ More recent research by political scientist James Ryan has found that in Richmond, Virginia, two schools that are economically segregated by class, but are only five miles apart, likewise experience vast inequalities.²⁹ These inequalities are present in cities all across America. Unfortunately, the widespread presence of capability building in schools is largely dependent on economic standing. Typically, middle class and wealthy schools are able to foster strong

²⁷ Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, 93.

²⁸ Jonathan Kozol. *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools*.

²⁹ James Ryan, *Five Miles Away, A World Apart*.

capabilities in their students and low-income schools are not. How did these vast inequalities emerge? A look into the birth of education in America gives a broader perspective on education's role in society and how schools have been used over the years.

Common Schools

With the introduction of the “normal school” in 1823, experts began to train the first teachers. Until this time, the American Public School “system” of today did not exist; instead, thousands of independent schools and hundreds of colleges and universities spanned the nation. Each of these schools taught different curriculums and had varying expectations for their students, thus each school developed vastly different capabilities in its students. Depending on the educational philosophy of the leader of each school, these first schools had many different educational aims.

In 1837, a decade and a half after the implementation of the normal school, Horace Mann, the newly elected Secretary of Education, introduced the “common school,” so that all students would learn the same curriculum.³⁰ “His quest was for a new public philosophy, a sense of community to be shared by Americans of every background and persuasion.”³¹ Mann’s efforts to unite the separate schools into a new “public philosophy” would ideally create the capability of *affiliation* in its students, or the capacity to relate to one another and to understand each others circumstances. Mann’s idea was not a school “for the common people...but rather a school common to all people.”³² The network of common schools would also instill good moral character and develop in students, capabilities for active democratic citizenship. At every common school throughout the country, children learned the basics of reading, ‘riting, ‘rithmetic

³⁰ Lawrence A. Cremin, *Transformation of the School*, 10.

³¹ Lawrence A. Cremin, *Transformation of the School*, 10.

³² Lawrence A. Cremin, *Transformation of the School*, 10.

and the meaning of good behavior. However, students not only practiced basic skills, but also learned the importance of values such as responsibility, honesty, hard work, respect for elders, good manners, and patriotism. By gaining basic knowledge of reading and writing, practicing good character, and developing loyalty to America through a common history, one of the primary educational aims of this time was to educate students for citizenship.

Today, people reminisce about the “good old days” when standardized testing had not yet infiltrated the classrooms; but learning was not as engaging as rumor has it. With aims of developing character and instilling values, common schools appeared to be building a comprehensive foundation for the first system of schools in America; however, these aspects of forming a well-rounded person were also accompanied with rote memorization and repetition of stories, poems, and songs. Teachers taught basic academic skills and character by enforcing cooperation through expectations of obedience. Values such as “speak when you are spoken to” and “don’t speak, listen” were prevalent throughout common schools.³³

Author Lawrence Cremin references a multi-article exposé written by Joseph Mayer Rice in 1892, to highlight the inadequacies in schools in the late 19th century. In his investigation of American schools, Rice wrote, “With alarming frequency the story was the same: political hacks hiring untrained teachers who blindly led their innocent charges in singsong drill, rote repetition, and meaningless verbiage.”³⁴ In actuality, few teachers were formally trained, so lessons were taught through stories in a kind of textbook called a reader. Although students were able to absorb and store an abundance of facts and passages, the memorization did not engage them in critical thinking, a vital capability for democratic citizenship.

³³ Diane Ravitch, *Left Back*, 21.

³⁴ Lawrence A. Cremin, *Transformation of the School*, 5

As educators became discontent with common schools, two points of view pervaded American education in the late 19th century: education for “knowledge for general intelligence” and education for “utility.”³⁵ In the 1850s, liberal educators thought that education was the great panacea and that the diffusion of knowledge could equalize society. In contrast, progressive educators advocated that education should have practical value and be useful in later life. Educational leaders of America’s early schools had contrasting opinions of which capabilities schools should develop in their students.

Education for General Intelligence: Liberal Education

Disregarding the rote memorization and basic skills training that was prevalent among common schools, liberal educators of the 19th century promoted schooling that encouraged students to think more deeply through academic studies. In 1869, liberal educator, Charles W. Eliot, focused on making common school curriculum more comprehensive by calling for an elimination of excess memorization and an addition of subjects such as: botany, zoology, geology and physics, algebra, geometry and foreign languages. Eliot also advocated for individualization in the classroom based on students’ needs and emphasized the critical thinking” skills we value today: “it does not matter what subject the child studies, so that he study something thoroughly in an observational method.”³⁶ Ultimately, Eliot wanted students to be exercising their capabilities of *practical reason* and *critical thinking*; the specific subject did not matter so much as they were utilizing and developing their capabilities.

Since so many independent schools existed, it was difficult to maintain control over the specific capabilities that each school was cultivating. Upon realizing that high school curriculum

³⁵ Diane Ravitch, *Left Back*, 26.

³⁶ Diane Ravitch, *Left Back*, 32.

needed to be standardized, the National Education Association hosted “the Committee of Ten in 1982”. Chaired by Eliot and Haris, the group proposed that each child should receive a liberal education:

Every subject which is taught at all in a secondary school should be taught in the same way and to the same extent to every pupil so long as he pursues it, no matter what the probable destination of the pupil may be....It has been a very general custom in American high schools and academies to make up separate courses of study for pupils of supposed different destinations...³⁷

One of the most important tenets of liberal education, believed Harris and Eliot, was universal access to education as a democratic right. Proponents of liberal education argued that it was important to give a universal education to all children despite their background or projected future. Thus, they tried to create a system that enabled each American to have a *genuine choice* of the specific type of schooling he would experience.

Hands on Learning: Progressive Education

On the other hand, advocates of progressive education found that liberal education was too academic and not applicable to real life. The aims of progressive education were to make the schools more realistic and hands on, to humanize methods of teaching, and to devote energy to social welfare rather than academic studies. The American philosopher and progressive educator, John Dewey (1859-1952), wrote essays that promoted an experiential, hands-on progressive education. He argued that learning and pedagogy should be based on the interests of the child rather than the subject matter and thought that schools should create curriculum on problems and processes rather than academic subjects. Through this hands-on learning, students should strive to improve social conditions through “observation, the acquisition of information,

³⁷ Andrew J. Milson et al, *American Educational Thought: Essays from 1640-1940*, 284.

and the use of constructive imagination.”³⁸ (Nussbaum’s work on the humanities and the capabilities approach, frequently references Dewey’s ideas and writings.)

Dewey thought that schools could be an instrument of social reform and that hands-on learning would best facilitate learning and teach students to be well-rounded, well-informed citizens. The goal was to engage students with moral reasoning and to produce active learners rather than passive learners who work towards end goals of achievement and monetary gains. Ideally, active students would become engaged citizens who construct the fabric for a democratic society. To create an environment that adapts as its people do, he says, engaged citizens should interact with each other through the practice of moral reasoning and creative thought. Dewey explains, “a democracy is more than a form of government; it is a primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience.”³⁹ This concept of a “conjoint communicated experience” is vital for forming a united front of citizens that strive to form a strong society. The society does not exist simply to pass on its accomplishments to future generations, but constantly strives to improve itself.⁴⁰

Public schools across America adopted Dewey’s educational pedagogy and his educational aims; however, not every student experienced this vision of education for citizenship. Most likely, Dewey never predicted that his writings would be used to limit opportunities and diminish the quality of learning for certain students; however, proponents of a “new education” ended up using his hands-on learning theories as justification for sending students to mechanical training schools and vocational schools, without giving them any choice in the decision. As private progressive schools and large public schools adopted different pedagogical paths, intentional differentiated learning occurred. Wealthy private schools with

³⁸ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 76.

³⁹ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 52.

⁴⁰ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 56.

small class sizes were more apt to have engaging discussions and to practice child-centered education that is based on a child's own needs and interests. In contrast, large low-income public schools focused on training students with workplace skills. In the language of the capabilities approach, this left lower classes without *genuine choice*.

Education for Work

During the late 19th century, American schools began to distinguish which students they thought would succeed based on their family background and history. From onset of the industrial revolution and the arrival of new immigrants, schools began educating students for the workforce. During this time, there was a growth of vocational and mechanical schooling, however individuals had no choice whether or not they would study academics or follow a vocational tract. This division ended up sorting children into industries and technical training based on class and race. Rather than allow students to choose their pathway, the schools forced them into career tracks that could potentially limit their options for the future. Conservative thinkers argued that child immigrants with few English language skills and no formal academic skills were not capable of rigorous academic studies; rather they needed industrial education, vocational education, manual training, and home economics such as sewing and cooking.⁴¹

The problem with the sorting was not that individuals were learning manual training and home skills, but that they were denied an academic education and *forced* into vocational education. This unqualified judgment of a person's capabilities does not treat every citizen equally. However, many schools justified this process by calling it democratic: "The New experts in the education world insisted that a school offered the same academic curriculum to all students was 'antidemocratic' and 'aristocratic,' while a school with differentiated educational

⁴¹ Ravitch, *Left Back*, 56.

programs was democratic.”⁴² According to the capabilities approach, it would be beneficial to offer every student the choice of which curriculum to pursue; being able to make that personal decision would be very democratic. However, in reality, the opposite was happening; wealthy elite were deciding which track students would take. The students who they thought had the capability to pursue intellectual academic studies would have the opportunity, and all the rest were trained for work.

As difficult as it was for poor white students to gain a quality education, black students were even worse off. While white educational leaders were debating the benefits of progressive education versus liberal education, black scholars were trying to expand access to education for blacks. In 1890, only one third of black children attended any kind of school and nearly none were enrolled in high school.⁴³ At this time, schools were segregated and funding for black schools did not come close to the funding for white students. It was also certain that the quality of education in the black schools was inferior to white schools; teachers at black schools were less more and the schools received fewer supplies.⁴⁴ These deeply entrenched educational inequalities along class and race lines that began in the 19th century, have transcended the years, and still exist today.

Aims of Education Today

The history of education in America tells a story of intentional divergence of quality of schooling along citizenship status, class, and race lines. In America today, educational inequality closely mirrors socioeconomic status, just as it did in the 19th century. Where there are wealthy citizens, there are good schools. Where there are poor citizens, there are inadequate

⁴² Ravitch, *Left Back*, 57.

⁴³ Diane Ravitch, *Left Back*, 38.

⁴⁴ Patricia Sullivan. *Lift Every Voice: The NAACP and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement*.

schools. “American higher education has been built on the premise that human capital is widely distributed among social classes and does not correlate with conditions of birth or social status.”⁴⁵ However, this value is clearly not reflected in current realities. As it stands, the education system in America would not pass Nussbaum’s minimum standard of social justice. “The fact that class and race or ethnicity are so intertwined and so embedded in the structure of schooling may provide the greatest barrier of all to the achievement of the dream for all Americans, and helps explain much of the contention, confusion, and irrationality in public education.”⁴⁶ As long as these entrenched inequalities exist in the public schools across America, the country is not fulfilling a minimum standard of social justice. By allowing educational inequalities to exist along race and class lines, the United States is allowing entrenched social injustices to exist.

To fulfill the capabilities approach, it is vital that American leaders must be honest that entrenched inequalities exist and must address them in the national discourse. These injustices prohibit select individuals from experiencing a quality education and limit life and college opportunities. In addition, all schools need to reevaluate their methods of “teaching to the test” in favor of development of capabilities like *critical thinking* and *practical reason*. Using the lessons of the past, America leaders need to realize that education for citizenship is vital for the American democracy and that educating every student to develop capabilities for a well-lived life is vital for society. Thus, all Americans should enjoy the *genuine choice*, the capability, to attend college.

⁴⁵ Andrew Delbanco. “College at Risk.” February 26, 2012. <http://chronicle.com/article/College-at-Risk/130893/>.

⁴⁶ Jennifer L. Hochschild, *The American Dream and the Public Schools*, 5.

3

College Ready

“As a phrase, there would be nothing wrong with “college for all” if merely uttering the phrase magically provided the “all” the means to actually finish college. Nearly 70 percent of high school graduates now go to college within two years of graduating, but only about 4 in 10 Americans have obtained either an associate’s or bachelors degree by their mid-twenties”⁴⁷

Pathways to Prosperity,

A study by the Harvard Graduate School of Education



People who advocate for “college for all” also describe a college experience as an important period of personal growth and exploration. Ideally, citizens who are college educated will contribute positively to the workforce as creators, innovators, and dynamic leaders. Higher education can also be an important journey of personal inquiry and growth. It is a chance to for a student to specialize in her area of study and to pursue her academic interests in a more demanding and thorough level under the mentorship of professors. College can be a unique place where young people come together to debate, write, and share ideas. Ideally, a liberal arts higher education strives to engage students in moral reasoning and to produce active

⁴⁷ Noddings, "Schooling for Democracy," 1.

learners, rather than passive learners, whose worldview is broadened and informed. In American society, a college experience can also sometimes seem to make it or break it for an individual. Often, employers advertise job openings with a prerequisite post-secondary degree—it appears that a college degree is necessary in this economy.

On the other side of the debate, individuals are further divided: like the dissenters of the past, some do not believe that everyone should strive for a post-secondary degree because they think certain students are not capable of understanding advanced concepts and learning the skills that are necessary to succeed in the workplace. Others argue that in a society so technologically advanced, a college degree is not necessary.

President Obama has dedicated himself to bolstering the education standards in America to ensure that citizens will be ready for the workforce and so America will be prepared to compete globally. *Pathways to Prosperity*, a study by the Harvard Graduate School of Education, describes Obama's recognition that a four year college is not the only solution for American students, "The President is acknowledging that the 'college for all' rhetoric that has been so much a part of the current education reform movement needs to be significantly broadened to become a 'post high school credential for all.'"⁴⁸ Advocating that students engage in meaningful pathways, in 2009, Obama announced:

...Tonight I ask every American to commit to at least one year or more of higher education or career training. This can be community college, a four-year school, vocational training, or an apprenticeship. But whatever the training may be, every American will need to get more than a high school diploma.^{49 50}

Obama acknowledges that there needs to be different pathways than the traditional four-year college that include skills certification and vocational programs. As more young adults

⁴⁸ Robert B. Schwartz et al., *Pathways to Prosperity*, 8.

⁴⁹ Robert B. Schwartz et al., *Pathways to Prosperity*, 8.

⁵⁰ Barack Obama, "Remarks of President Barack Obama—Address to Joint Session of Congress," February 24, 2009.

experience different types of higher education, he says, America will once again be competitive with other nations. The capabilities approach argues that being educated is an important aspect of a well-lived life, and that at the post-secondary level, there are multiple pathways to a flourishing life. However, the capabilities approach also argues that there must be a genuine choice to enroll in various post-secondary pathways. In American society today, these pathways are not open to all individuals. Many students are not prepared for college and countless others drop out of school before they reach the college level. As so many students slip through the cracks, the capabilities approach is not being fulfilled.



Existing Educational Inequalities

According to the capabilities approach, every student should have the opportunity to receive a high quality of education in America. However, existing inequalities have set up an educational system that prepares students unequally for a college experience. Increasing access to college does not inherently acknowledge the students who are slipping through the cracks before the age when college is even an option. Somewhere between high school and college, young adults are dropping out of school at a rapid rate. In 2007, nearly 6.2 million students between the age of 17 and 24 dropped out of high school in the United States.⁵¹ According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, “the United States now has the highest college dropout rate in the industrialized world.”⁵² The alarming drop out rate and poor educational outcomes of American students is an indication that the public school system is not

⁵¹ Northeastern University, 2007, p.2

⁵² Robert B. Schwartz et al., *Pathways to Prosperity*, 10.

meeting students' needs. "College for all' might be the mantra, but the hard reality is that fewer than one in three young people achieve the dream."⁵³

Of those that stay in the system, many who graduate high school are not "college-ready."⁵⁴ Too many students are leaving schools without the skills and capabilities they need to flourish in the workforce and within their communities. During the "testing and accountability movement," teachers often "teach to the test" rather than engage students in active learning. Although critics say that standardized tests narrow a student's scope of learning, the movement has highlighted the importance of accountability in schools. According to *Pathways to Prosperity*, "The standards movement has helped forge a much clearer national consensus on what children need to learn. The accompanying accountability revolution has cast a harsh spotlight on our continuing failure to equip many students with even basic math and reading skills, as well as persistent racial achievement gaps."⁵⁵ These poor educational outcomes contribute to less opportunities and untapped capabilities. As long as entrenched inequalities exist in the K-12 public school system, the *genuine choice* to attend college will not be available to every young American. While President Obama's proposal vows to expand access to college by enrolling 8 million more Americans, the opportunity for young people to go to college will be extended to students who have already been academically prepared by the existing system.

If America truly strives to prepare all students for a college education, more students will have access to a meaningful higher education experience. Not only will more students receive a more advanced academic perspective, they will have the chance to develop relationships and coalitions with diverse students they would not have otherwise met. If the administration does not have a plan to overhaul the American public school system, his new policy will not assist the

⁵³ Robert B. Schwartz et al., *Pathways to Prosperity*, 9.

⁵⁴ Fernanda Santos, "College Readiness Is Lacking, City Reports Show" 2011.

⁵⁵ Robert B. Schwartz et al., *Pathways to Prosperity*, 9.

least well off; many of these students will continue to cycle through an unequal system. Thus, not only must school reform include measures of social justice, but also find a way to keep students engaged and to increase graduation rates from high school.

Common Standards

President Obama is challenging schools and leaders to educate students to be “college and career ready” and acknowledges that curriculum reform must happen in order to make this goal a reality.⁵⁶ A lack of accountability for meaningful student learning and low achievement of learning objectives has been plaguing American schools since the birth of the public education system.⁵⁷ There have been past attempts to increase accountability in policies such as No Child Left Behind, enacted in 2001 under President George Bush, however the problems with educational accountability in K-12 schools persist.

A lack of accountability for meaningful learning in primary and secondary education has even merged into institutions of higher education, says Richard Arum in his book, *Academically Adrift*. Despite the high cost of a college education, Arum has found that in many colleges across America, “critical thinking, complex reasoning, and written communication are either exceedingly small or empirically nonexistent.”⁵⁸ His study found that over the first two years of college, at least 45 percent of students did not demonstrate a significant improvement in the Collegiate Learning Assessment [CLA].⁵⁹ Since primary and secondary education “feeds”

⁵⁶ Robert B. Schwartz et al., *Pathways to Prosperity*, 4.

⁵⁷ Jennifer L. Hochschild, *The American Dream and the Public Schools*, 24.

⁵⁸ Richard Arum, “Chronicle of Higher Education,” Are Undergraduates Actually Learning Anything? January 18, 2011.

⁵⁹ Richard Arum, “Chronicle of Higher Education,” Are Undergraduates Actually Learning Anything? January 18, 2011.

students into higher education, accountability must start early and continue through all years of schooling.

To streamline the curriculum in K-12 schools and to ensure that American public schools are giving students a meaningful experience, Obama has created the “common core standards” that will be implemented throughout the states. According to the website, the Common Core State Standards Initiative is a state-led effort coordinated by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). “These standards define the knowledge and skills students should have within their K-12 education careers so that they will graduate high school able to succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing academic college courses and in workforce training programs.”⁶⁰ Obama’s push to create these core standards in primary and secondary schools is a way to prepare students to be college and career ready. Many of the elements of the core standards seek to develop capabilities in students, but the overarching focus is nevertheless instrumental in its aim. Obama’s policy focuses on college and career readiness could potentially undermine the value of education for its comprehensive, intrinsic values.

Throughout the process of up scaling the capacity of higher education in America, Obama must be weary of further accountability problems that may arise. In the current system, as Arum argues, many college students are not earning a meaningful experience, “They might graduate, but they are failing to develop the higher-order cognitive skills that it is widely assumed college students should master.”⁶¹ To fulfill the capabilities approach, the core standards should consider such “higher-order cognitive skills” such as critical thinking and practical reason that are not only valuable career skills, but valuable life skills.

⁶⁰ "Common Core State Standards Initiative." <http://www.corestandards.org/>.

⁶¹ Richard Arum, “Chronicle of Higher Education,” Are Undergraduates Actually Learning Anything? January 18, 2011.

Economics

Despite the low college readiness of many students across America, there are pressing economic concerns for an increase in college-educated citizens; the reason is jobs. In the past century, there has been a transition from mechanical and industrial labor to computerization and outsourcing. As this shift from mechanical work to technological work occurs, more jobs require greater technical skills. In addition, “Outcomes of schooling increasingly matter because they are becoming linked more closely to a person’s financial and political success,” says Hochschild. The reality is that “In 1979, college-educated men who worked full time earned 29 percent more than full-time workers with only a high school diploma; by 1998 that gap had increased to 68 percent.”⁶² A strong economic case for college exists in the large discrepancy in salary between a college graduate and a non-college graduate. According to the most recent studies, there is a difference of 1 million dollars over a lifetime between college graduates and individuals who have no post-secondary schooling.⁶³

In addition, in the aftermath of the recession in the late 2000s, there is also a mismatch of employer skills and job qualifications. Countless businesses are reporting that the qualifications and skills sets of job seekers are a mismatch with the employer’s needs. Many employers claim that their field of potential workers does not have skills such as critical thinking and the professionalism that these jobs require. In 2010, Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce released a report that says that the United States is "on a collision course with the future" since the number of jobs that require a college degree is growing faster than the eligible applicants.⁶⁴ The report continues: By 2018, the economy will have jobs for 22 million new workers with college degrees, but, based on current projections, there will be a shortage of 3

⁶² Jennifer L. Hochschild, *The American Dream and the Public Schools*, 24.

⁶³ Robert B. Schwartz et al., *Pathways to Prosperity*, 9.

⁶⁴ Jennifer Epstein. "Should Everyone Go to College?," June 15, 2010.

million workers who have some postsecondary degree (associate or higher) and of 4.7 million workers who have a postsecondary certificate.⁶⁵ The projected shortage of 3 million workers with a postsecondary degree and nearly 5 million that do not have a postsecondary certificate indicates a tangible need in the American workforce. The scarcity of qualified workers raises warnings as well as some questions. In such a wealthy country, why are Americans lacking in qualifications?

In 21st century America, a degree in higher education is seen as a crucial step to success in society—since 2000, the percentage of Americans who believe college is necessary has gone from 31% to 55%⁶⁶ Many young Americans with this ideology view education as instrumental, continuously searching for the utility and benefits in their educational process. The shifting demographics within the job market reflect the value of higher education in American society today. From 1973 to 2007, the “total number of jobs in America had grown by 63 million, [while] the number of jobs held by people with no post-secondary education had actually fallen by some 2 million jobs.”⁶⁷ The changing job market demonstrates a positive relationship between a college degree and an individual’s prospects of employment. Obama’s proposal to expand higher education is an attempt to address and combat this mismatch.

Mismatch of Skills

In today’s economy, it seems that having a high school diploma is an essential part of avoiding poverty and having a college degree is necessary to be qualified for any well-paying job; however, in the midst of an unemployment rate near 9 percent, companies are actually

⁶⁵ Jennifer Epstein. "Should Everyone Go to College?," June 15, 2010.

⁶⁶ John Immerwahr and Jean Johnson. *Squeeze Play 2009: The Public's Views on College Costs Today*. Public Agenda and The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. 2009.

⁶⁷ Robert B. Schwartz et al., *Pathways to Prosperity*, 2.

having a difficult time filling skilled jobs. It may be true that businesses are calling for more employees with a bachelors degree or higher, but companies are also suffering from a lack of qualified applicants. “‘There’s a tremendous shortage of skilled workers,’ said Craig Giffi, a vice chairman of the consulting firm Deloitte. A recent survey from the consulting firm found that 83% of manufacturers reported a moderate or severe shortage of skilled production workers to hire.”⁶⁸ As skilled mechanical workers reach their age of retirement, many companies with heavy-duty blue-collar job openings cannot find skilled employees to fill them. Dana Saporta, an economist with Credit Suisse predicts that this mismatch has added 1.5 percentage points to the unemployment rate.⁶⁹

Alternate pathways that Obama has endorsed, such as vocational programs and certifications, begin address this need for more skilled workers. Ben Casselman of the Wall Street Journal writes, “Replacing [these workers] has been a challenge for a number of reasons: an erosion of vocational education at the high-school level, a reduction of in-house training through companies and unions, a now-vanished construction boom that once gave people well-paying jobs without the need for much training, among other things.”⁷⁰ Casselman indicates that the answer to finding qualified employees is not the traditional four-year college, but better vocational training and better pay for jobs for people of all skill levels.



While Obama’s “common core standards” represent his effort to increase accountability and to develop challenging and streamlined curriculum, ultimately, the common core standards have a purely instrumental focus and do not acknowledge the intrinsic or comprehensive values of

⁶⁸ Help Wanted: In Unexpected Twist, Some Skilled Jobs Go Begging, WSJ.com

⁶⁹ Help Wanted: In Unexpected Twist, Some Skilled Jobs Go Begging, WSJ.com

⁷⁰ Help Wanted: In Unexpected Twist, Some Skilled Jobs Go Begging, WSJ.com

education. Spearheaded by President Obama, the mission of Common Core Standards Initiative is as follows:

The standards are designed to be robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting the knowledge and skills that our young people need for success in college and careers. With American students fully prepared for the future, our communities will be best positioned to compete successfully in the global economy.⁷¹

The mission states that being prepared for college and career equates with being “fully prepared for the future.” Arguably, it is important for young people to be realistically prepared for the real world, however beyond striving for “success in college and careers,” they should also feel prepared for life. A hands-on learning style, first promoted by John Dewey, is an active way to facilitate development of capabilities in the classroom, but an important aspect of these reform efforts should be to emphasize the possibilities of education beyond college and career. As Americans schools teach students skills that will enable global competition, the President should remember that the health of society extends beyond economic value. While the common core standards are a tangible step towards increasing accountability in schools and a way to try to decrease the drop out rate, a part of the policy should focus on less instrumental aims of education.

As president of the United States, Obama’s message is important; his direction for higher education has implications for society. His policies serve as evidence of his political leadership in America, for their ability to shape the groundwork for education in the schools. However, his rhetorical message is also important for its ability to shape public opinion and national discourse. In the next chapter, I look at the rhetoric in 11 of his speeches to see what his main messages are about the future and importance of higher education in America. In America today, college is one standard for success and many students who are not able to achieve the college dream fall

⁷¹ "Common Core State Standards Initiative." <http://www.corestandards.org/>.

short. The capabilities approach argues that college is an important time of growth, but it is not necessarily the only pathway to a fulfilling life. President Obama has made it clear that he wants to increase the amount of college graduates by 8 million by 2020. This proposal is not incompatible with the capabilities approach, but it does not consider a college education for its comprehensive benefits such as development of capabilities.

4

Obama's Higher Education Rhetoric

“Most of all, the single most important thing companies are looking for are highly skilled, highly educated workers. That's what they are looking for. More than ever before, companies hire where the talent is... But it's not going to be enough just to graduate from high school. You're going to need some additional education. And a good education equals a good job.”

Barack Obama, Miami Florida, March 4, 2011



From his days as a senator in Illinois to his current position in the White House, President Obama has always expressed a dedication to improving education in the United States. As a national leader, he has emphasized the strong importance of higher education in America's history and future. Recently, in a speech at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, he attributed first lady Michelle Obama and his personal success to the quality of their education: “We didn't come from wealthy families. The only reason that we were able to achieve what we were able to achieve was because we got a great education. That's the only reason.”⁷² While President Obama earned degrees from Columbia University and Harvard Law School, Michelle earned degrees from Princeton University and Harvard Law School. At these prestigious institutions, the Obamas were able to develop the capabilities they use as leaders today. In America, education represents opportunity and dreams and President Obama's own story and his

⁷² Barack Obama.. “Obama delivers remarks on the economy at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor”, Ann Arbor, January 27, 2012.

rhetorical message describe higher education as fulfillment of the American Dream. Americans recognize that higher education opens doors for the future and serves as a symbol of status and class for individuals and in the broader picture of society. At one time, college was seen as privilege of the elite, but now according to the National Center for Education Statistics, almost 9 out of 10 American high school seniors want to go to college.⁷³ In his speeches on higher education, Obama refers to the American Dream in describing the role of education as a vital step on the pathway to jobs and success.

Obama's rhetoric from during his first term shows that he wants to increase the number of college graduates in order to meet society's needs for a more educated workforce and to be the top producer of college graduates once again.⁷⁴ Not only does college enhance an individual's capabilities and credentials, but a nation of high-skilled workers with post-secondary degrees is able to compete with the other most successful nations. The capabilities approach provides a vocabulary through which we can engage with Obama's proposal for more graduates and evaluate its function in society. The capabilities perspective on education in chapter 1 emphasized that some of the most important capabilities in and out of the workforce are the ability to *think critically*, the development of a *narrative imagination*, the ability to *secure a meaningful job*, and the ability to exercise *practical reason* in planning of one's life.⁷⁵ Rather than lifting up these comprehensive aims, Obama has narrowed higher education to a tool for preparing students for the workforce. Although this economic message may be one that the American people want to hear, it is not the message about higher education that society needs to hear in the long term. This chapter seeks to answer how closely Obama's message aligns with the capabilities approach's vision of higher education put forth in chapter 1.

⁷³ Anya Kamenetz, *DIY U*, vii.

⁷⁴ Barack Obama. "Obama delivers remarks on higher education and our economy" Austin, August 9, 2010.

⁷⁵ Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, 33.

To attain a representative sample of Obama's educational rhetoric, I evaluated 11 of Obama's speeches that related to higher education. Starting with his Democratic National Convention address in July 2004 and continuing to the 2012 State of the Union, the sample includes 11 different speeches ranging in audience, date and location. He delivered two of these speeches before his election, one in 2009, two in 2010, four in 2011, and two in 2012. The speeches took place in Washington DC; Bettendorf, Iowa; Austin, TX; Florida; Boston, MA; Alexandria, VA; and Ann Arbor, MI at community colleges, cities, graduating college seniors in a commencement address, and to the nation. This representative collection, which spans 8 years and different target audiences, has a common focus on Obama's higher education message and the role of the American Dream in education.

Throughout the speeches, I recorded common themes of: education as a pathway to the American Dream, education as success, and education as a pathway to jobs. From there, I examined the rhetoric to determine the higher education message that Obama is sending to Americans. While Obama speaks education as a pathway to the workforce in 8 out of the 11 speeches, he described educating students for a well-lived life just once out of the 11 times—during a commencement speech. This one speech is evidence that Obama believes in educating students for a well-lived life, however the point is that he does not emphasize this message to America as a whole. In the midst of the recession, it is clear that Americans are concerned with jobs and the economy; however, it does not serve America well in the long run to describe education merely as a fulfillment of the country's immediate economic needs.



The American Dream

Originally, the American Dream was the notion that citizens will engage in debate and work toward social equality in America.⁷⁶ Through the lens of the American Dream, it appears that institutions like education can play a significant role in solving society's social injustices. Under the dream ideology, various scholars including Horace Mann have called education America's "great equalizer." A 1937 Life Magazine article indicates that this mindset was prevalent throughout the mid 20th century: "This faith [in the benefits of higher education] is a cornerstone of any democratic philosophy, the very pith and kernel of what writers since Jefferson have called the American Dream."⁷⁷ The idea is that education has the capacity to put every citizen on an equal standing at the beginning of life; it seems to follow that every American is capable of holding whichever job or engaging in whichever career his talents and passions lead him.

Obama attributes his own success to the American dream. Not only is he the first African American president, but his success wasn't handed to him either. His father left when he was two years old and he was raised by his single mother. The ambition and encouragement of his mother and grandparents, engrained in him a sense of discipline and the idea that he could do anything if he put his mind to it. Through his rhetoric, he sends this same hopeful message to Americans. At its core, the American dream is the ideology that with determination, anything is possible in America. According to the dream, in the "land of the free," opportunity is boundless and reward for hard work, plentiful. In his November 7, 2007 speech on the American Dream, Obama described the idea that American citizens come together to work for social justice and to uphold the beliefs that the country was founded on:

⁷⁶ Jennifer L. Hochschild, *The American Dream and the Public Schools*.

⁷⁷ Kamenetz, *DIY U*, 11.

What is unique about America is that we want these dreams for more than ourselves – we want them for each other... America is the sum of our dreams. And what binds us together, what makes us one American family, is that we stand up and fight for each other's dreams, that we reaffirm that fundamental belief –I am my brother's keeper. I am my sister's keeper - through our politics, policies, and in our daily lives. It's time to do that once more. It's time to reclaim the American dream.

Obama starts by saying that a collective spirit for the wellbeing of others defines America today; the American Dream represents the upward mobility that exists in this land of opportunity.

However, in an age of economic success and competition, America has become more individualistic than ever. People are focused on their own personal success and achievement over the well being of other citizens. Is it true to say that we “stand up and fight for each other's dreams?” Does the American Dream look the same today? By the end of this excerpt, Obama shifts to talking about “reclaiming” this dream, inferring that the American Dream that the country once had, does not really exist any more.

Obama's initial description of the American dream in his American Dream speech describes a country that cares about others as if everyone were in one big “American family.” In this dream, every citizen would sincerely want other citizens to fully develop his or her capabilities. If there really were an American family, society would adequately reward individuals for engaging in work and leisure that is meaningful to him or her. For example, if a person's capabilities and interests led her to a career in transportation services, this “American family,” or society as a whole, would value the transit authority worker the same as a doctor. In this situation, both individuals are following their own dreams, while providing vital services to society. If America wants to live up to this collective idea of the American Dream, we must re-evaluate the meaning of work and the ways we reward work in society. I examine American values more in the following chapter.

A Dream of Personal Success

An important aspect of the capabilities approach is the opportunity for everyone to have basic needs met and basic rights afforded, one of which is education. Obama has said many times that in America every child should have the chance for a quality education regardless of her background, race, gender, or class. In March 2011, Obama was clear on his stance on educational equality at TechBoston high school. He said, “As a nation, we have a moral and economic imperative to give every child the chance to succeed.”⁷⁸ During the same speech, Obama delivered the message that every person has the innate capacity to learn and to achieve in school:

Every day, TechBoston is proving that no matter who you are, or what you look like, or where you come from, every child can learn. Every child can succeed. And every child deserves that chance.”⁷⁹

As president, it makes sense that Obama sends inspiring messages that reinforce that background or appearance every child can succeed. However, American Dream rhetoric glazes over the fact that existing structural inequalities pose obstacles to fulfillment of the dream. Because the ideology states that every person has the equal opportunity to “climb the ladder of success,” many Americans become complacent with the existing social structures. They do not question social inequalities or the institutions that perpetuate them. Because of the current economic inequalities in America, many scholars argue that the American Dream no longer exists today; social mobility is not as accessible as it seems. Instead, the American capitalist society runs under the free market and rewards individuals in the financial industry to make the big money.

⁷⁸ Barack Obama.. “Obama delivers remarks on the future of education in Boston, Mass” Boston, March 8, 2011.

⁷⁹ Barack Obama.. “Obama delivers remarks on the future of education in Boston, Mass” Boston, March 8, 2011.

These structural problems— weak social safety nets, inadequate retirement security, a tax system that disproportionately benefits the wealthy, an education system that is failing to adequately prepare our workforce, and incomes below a living wage – have literally undermined the American Dream: opportunity and the promise of a better future.⁸⁰

Rather than the promise American Dream, many political scientists and sociologists refer to the ideology as the myth of the American Dream.⁸¹

As Obama carries the dream rhetoric through to his other speeches, the message he sends about the role of higher education in America is singular and individualistic. In the sample of speeches, Obama does mention education’s role in bettering “America as a whole,” but instead of focusing on social justice, he stresses the collective economic benefit of educated workers. Again, it is clear that Obama must address the current societal concerns like joblessness and unemployment; however, as long as his rhetoric on higher education is primarily concerned with jobs and the workforce, and does not mention educating citizens as a part of a well-lived life, his message does not fulfill the educational vision of the capabilities approach.

What does “Success” Mean?

Obama’s rhetoric carries the assertion that higher education leads a person on the pathway to success, however in his speeches, he never clearly defines “success.” This creative ambiguity is most likely an attempt appeal to a broad range of people by leaving room for interpretation. However, as a leader, it is important that Obama’s message be clear. In nearly every one of the 11 speeches I reviewed, Obama most often correlates success with a “good education” and a “good job.” However, describing post-secondary education as necessary for success undervalues other professions and ways of life without really considering what success

⁸⁰ Lauren Damme. “Rethinking the American Social Contract: The International Labor Organization's Decent Work Agenda in the United States.” Report. Internatinal Labour Organization, 2011.

⁸¹ Jennifer L. Hochschild, *The American Dream and the Public Schools*.

means in society. Although Obama may not believe that success equals a good job, his speeches send that message. Drawing from the capabilities approach, a more comprehensive ideal of success is related to a person's version of a well-lived life and active fulfillment of her capabilities.

On a societal level, Obama articulates that a country with more college graduates will be better off financially. His rhetoric implicitly describes higher education as a vital step in achieving the American Dream. Throughout his speeches, Obama links success to getting the best education—as he does in a 2010 speech in Austin, Texas:

And if we as a nation offer our children the best education possible from cradle through career, not only will American workers compete and succeed, America will compete and succeed. And we will complete this improbable journey that so many of you took up over three years ago and we're going to build an America where each of us, no matter what we look like or where we come from can reach for our dreams and make of our lives what we will.⁸²

The rhetoric in this speech mirrors the tone of many others by supporting this idea that a post-secondary degree is the keystone for success in American society. By describing American citizens as “American workers,” it is clear that the success to which Obama is referring is economically driven. In addition, by calling for the necessity of the “best education possible” from cradle to *career*, Obama emphasizes jobs. Drawing from the capabilities approach, he should really demand the best education from *cradle to contribution* to society and to one's own life.

Here, Obama also links having the “best education possible” to being able to “compete and succeed.” In this speech, he does not mention the comprehensive values of education and he does not describe Americans as citizens. Nevertheless, at the end of this excerpt, Obama's rhetoric once again resembles the rhetoric of the American Dream ideology. He describes an

⁸² Barack Obama.. “Obama delivers remarks on higher education and our economy” Austin, August 9, 2010.

America where “we're going to build an America where each of us, no matter what we look like or where we come from can reach for our dreams.” In the same sentence, Obama describes the best education as enabling a person to “compete and succeed, ” and then describes an America where individuals join together in a coalition to attack social injustices. In reality, individual competition is not necessarily compatible with the collective idea that we are one big American family.

Half of a year after the Austin speech, in March 2011, Obama and his speechwriters once again sent message that success stems from having the “best education,” this time at TechBoston high school:

I travel all across the country, I go into factories, I go into companies. And it doesn't matter where you are working -- if you do not have a good education you are not going to be able to succeed. And that includes being on the factory floor these days, because most of the equipment is highly technical.⁸³

This rhetoric carries a sense of urgency and an ultimatum: “if you do not have a good education, you are not going to be able to succeed.” Rather than his usual message of “higher education brings success,” he told the students at TechBoston that with “no higher education there will be no success.” However, Obama’s leadership is represented through his actions and words; his language is the way he communicates his message. Ultimately, it is true that being well educated is an important capability for a well-lived life; however, Obama is once again describing the importance of education in a very limiting way. The instrumental way that he refers to “good education” does not incorporate any of the comprehensive benefits of a quality education such as the capabilities of critical thinking, problem solving, and an understanding for others.

⁸³ Barack Obama. “Obama delivers remarks on the future of education in Boston, Mass” Boston, March 8, 2011.

Education and Jobs

In the midst of the recession, it seems that Obama has been linking jobs to education in every speaking opportunity he has. In an Austin, Texas speech, Obama notes the economic benefits of education for individuals and society:

If we're serious about making sure America's workers and America itself succeeds in the 21st Century, the single most important step we can take is to make sure that every one of our young people here in Austin, here in Texas, here in the United States of America has the best education that the world has to offer. That's the number one thing we can do.⁸⁴

Again, by summoning America's workers, instead of America's citizens, this language sends a message that education is a tool that comes with economic benefits and is necessary for success in the 21st century. It says, that in this difficult economic time, not only is it important that American citizens succeed, but that "America itself" succeeds too. In this excerpt, Obama directly links "best education" to "America's workers" to "success," again, without defining success. "America succeeds," he says, by providing every Texan the "best education the world has to offer," so that they grow up to be good "workers."

Three days before his BostonTech address, Obama spoke in Miami Florida and stressed the imperative to go to college with a greater emphasis on the demand for highly skilled workers:

Most of all, the single most important thing companies are looking for are highly skilled, highly educated workers. That's what they are looking for. More than ever before, companies hire where the talent is... But it's not going to be enough just to graduate from high school. You're going to need some additional education. And a good education equals a good job.⁸⁵

Here, Obama's words are strong and certain, highly skilled workers are the "single most important thing that companies are looking for." And he says, if you are one of these skilled workers, with a postsecondary education, you will have the chance to get a good job. Now, there are a few problems with this statement, namely that there are plenty of highly educated

⁸⁴ Barack Obama.. "Obama delivers remarks on higher education and our economy" Austin, August 9, 2010.

⁸⁵ Barack Obama. "Obama delivers remarks at Miami (Fla.) Central High School." Miami, March 4, 2011.

Americans who are unemployed. While Obama explicitly says, “a good education equals a good job,” he must be more careful to avoid making overstatements. Even a person with the best education is not guaranteed success. Further, the word “good” is a vague and subjective. The meaning of a “good education” or a “good job” varies from person to person.

Back to Boston, Obama said: “Getting the best possible education has never been more important than it is right now. And that's because in today's world, a good job requires a good education.”⁸⁶ By evaluating this sentence, one can get a breakdown of what Obama means by a good job. First, he says that a higher education equals a good job. Jobs that require a higher education usually have a livable salary. But, it does not follow that a high salary equals a good job; not all of the jobs that pay well are fulfilling for employees. For instance in the financial industry not everyone enjoys the long hours and demanding work that are requirements of the job. Most likely, Obama would clarify this statement if given the chance. He would likely describe a good job as fulfilling and satisfactory, in different ways for different individuals.

Even if Obama would like to shape his higher education rhetoric on its ability to contribute to a well-lived life, he is sending an economic message for a reason. Today, Americans are receptive to economic recovery and job creation. It is true that Obama’s rhetoric is a reflection of the issues that are important to Americans, but as a leader, he also has the power to shape the national discourse. The capabilities approach demands that the president of the United States of America send a message that education leads to a more fulfilling life.

So, is higher education the pathway to success? On a societal level, Obama claims that education is vital for the success of America. In an economic sense, he is absolutely right. The more educated Americans, the more job candidates that exists, the greater the opportunity for companies to enjoy economic success. However, as far as of the long-term message that should

⁸⁶ Barack Obama. “Obama delivers remarks on the future of education in Boston, Mass” Boston, March 8, 2011.

be sent to America, in society, the institution of education is not *the* pathway to success.

Entrenched social injustices exceed the scope of education to mediate the existing inequalities.

If America is serious about fulfilling the capacities approach, deeper reform of the social welfare system and the labor market are necessary.

On an individual level, if a person's definition of success is money, then the answer could be yes. A graduate is twice as likely to be hired as a high school dropout is.⁸⁷ Education could also be the pathway to success if education is the vehicle through which a person develops her capabilities and learns how to use them. On an individual basis, education can be a person's pathway to success, but the important thing to take away from the capabilities approach is that it is not the only pathway to success and that success and a well-lived life are developed in many ways.

Paying a premium for a college degree grants job seekers access to more opportunities and guarantees a greater salary than a non-degree seeking candidate. However, how do people measure success beyond money and beyond work? Jean Johnson, a co-author of a college cost report published by the *Public Agenda and The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education*, considered the trend towards society's higher value on college, stating, "our society has to ask: after all of this emphasis on college, whether we have a society that respects people who do different kinds of jobs."⁸⁸ While the workforce indicates that many career jobs require a college degree, the reality is that there are countless other jobs that do not. There are also many majors, such as humanities or English literature, that a student can choose that are not direct pathways to the workforce, but instead develop his capabilities. Chapter 5 investigates different measures of success and fulfillment for reasons other than financial reward.

⁸⁷ Barack Obama. "Obama speaks on Higher Education" Washington, DC, April 24, 2009.

⁸⁸ Robert B. Schwartz et al., *Pathways to Prosperity*, 9.

5

Work Values in America

“ The best and safest thing is to keep a balance in your life, acknowledge the great powers around us and in us. If you can do that, and live that way, you are really a wise man. ”

Euripides (ca. 480 – 406 BC)



Important capabilities include living a fulfilling life of dignity and having the capability for meaningful work. Obama’s national discourse on education and the workforce demands a deeper investigation into the work values of Americans. In America success is often defined in financial terms; however, the capabilities approach argues that financial fulfillment is only one aspect of a well-lived life. This chapter examines the extent to which Americans value as meaningful for reasons other than salary. It also looks at people’s motivations for work and how job choice changes over the years.

What is the meaning of work in America? Does it align with Obama’s idea of success? While the prestige of a job is often associated with its financial gains and status, the capabilities approach views job fulfillment by considering many other factors that satisfy a person’s unique needs. This chapter looks at societal and individual’s values in the workplace and the factors that contribute to job fulfillment in America.

Since many employers are demanding higher credentials of prospective employees, more Americans than ever view college as the next logical step after high school. In the mid 2000s, The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education reported that 87% of their survey

respondents said that high school graduates should go on to college rather than taking any decent job after high school and 76% of the respondents said that getting a college education is more important than it was 10 years ago⁸⁹ In the debate that was explored in chapter 3, many proponents of “college for all” argue that higher education is necessary in order to prepare young Americans for the career that lay ahead. It is true that today, a growing number of jobs require at least a college degree; however, there are also countless industrial companies that have a shortage of skilled workers. In the last chapter, we saw how President Obama’s rhetoric sends the message that higher education is the pathway to success in the workforce. Obama has expressed a commitment to expanding the scope of higher education in order to fill the needs of the workforce and to give millions of Americans more career opportunities. This chapter offers a more complicated understanding of the relation between work and education.

Work Identity

The most obvious reason for which Americans work is to earn an income that will sustain themselves and their families. After all, a person needs money to acquire resources to live and to enjoy life. However, ideally a job should be an intentional aspect of a person’s life. Not only is it a way to provide a paycheck, but it is also an element that fits into a balanced, well-lived life. Douglas Hicks asks a question that shifts the conversation about money as an end to a more meaningful consideration of money as a means to something greater. He explains, “Economic goods serve to open up or make possible those more intrinsically valuable goods, such as participating in public life or making a contribution to one’s society. The question shifts from

⁸⁹ National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, “Necessary for Success.” 2004. <http://www.highereducation.org/reports/pubatt/necessary.shtml>

‘how much money?’ to ‘money for what?’”⁹⁰ Hicks explains this participation in public life through the framework of the capabilities approach. In America, in order to make a contribution to society or to engage with the community, one has to have extra leisure time or extra income to spend. Further investigating how a person uses his income would give interesting insights on American work values and job identity.

Many factors such as work culture, flexibility, salary, and stability are important factors that contribute to a job’s compatibility with a person’s needs and values. However, in a capitalist country founded on strong work ethic, Americans are known for working more than resting. According to the International Labour Organization, Americans work the longest hours of any industrialized nation at nearly 2,000 hours per capita.⁹¹ In the report, the International Labour Organization does not give insight as to whether Americans work long hours because of a strong work ethic or because people feel compelled to work to have a sense of security for their families. Nevertheless, in a country with such long workdays and limited vacation days, a job becomes a substantial time commitment and a consuming part of a person’s life. Because of this commitment, in America, a job can become a part of a person’s identity. However, according to the capabilities approach, work is still only one a factor in a well-lived life.

Meaningful Work

The capabilities approach argues that every person has a unique capability set partly due to her existing opportunities, talents and social conditions. Based on a person’s talents, she might

⁹⁰ Douglas Hicks, “Reframing the Economics of Pastoral Leadership,” 83.

⁹¹ International Labour Organization Press Release, “Americans work longest hours among industrialized countries, Japanese second longest,” http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/press-and-media-centre/news/WCMS_071326/lang--en/index.htm.

be more fulfilled as a manual laborer rather than a professor or a computer technician. Ultimately meaningful work differs based on one's capabilities and interests.

In his book, *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, Matthew Crawford shares his experiences of working with different people and different organizations over his lifetime. After working a year at a Washington, DC think tank, Crawford realizes that academic work is not his passion, and decides to pursue his motorcycle repair work as a full time job. In the book, he makes the case that a person can gain extraordinary value from craftsmanship and hands-on work with materials. When a person's job confined him the office, the environment in which he works may be taxing and draining. While in some fields of work a person has to search for meaning outside of work, Crawford makes the case that hands-on manual work has meaning within itself. In the words of philosopher Alexandre Kojève, "The man who works recognizes his own product in the World that has actually been transformed by his work: he recognizes himself in it, he sees in his own humanity reality, in it he discovers and reveals to others the objective reality of his humanity, of the originally abstract and purely subjective idea he has of himself."⁹² Whereas it is more difficult to acknowledge tangible results in project management or consulting, the man who works with his hands "recognizes his own product in the World that has actually been transformed by his work," he finds direct evidence of his impact on others.

In American society, the case for craftsmanship is often pushed aside in favor of more lucrative or prestigious work. However, Crawford argues that banking jobs and consulting jobs are often not as fulfilling as crafts or manual labor. He proposes that expectations for the business sector and consulting are to gain a wide array of knowledge without specializing in a certain area. Crawford says that Americans value the ability to bounce around in interesting jobs: "The preferred role model is the management consultant, who swoops in and out, and

⁹² Matthew Crawford, *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, 14.

whose very pride lies in his lack of particular expertise.” In contrast, Crawford describes the value of becoming familiar with work and learning how to do it well:

The satisfactions of manifesting oneself concretely in the world through manual competence have been known to make a man quiet and easy. They seem to relieve him of the felt need to offer chattering *interpretations* of himself to vindicate his worth. He can simply point: the building stands, the car now runs, the lights are on.⁹³

Crawford makes the case that the value of manual labor does not get enough credit in America. And from his perspective, vocational schools are an appropriate option for some people. From satisfying and meaningful work, comes a sense of pride. Rather than funnel everyone through the higher education system, a serious consideration of vocational schools in America would help people develop their skills and talents to engage in relevant work in the future.

Another type of meaningful work that soothes the soul can be seen as unrealistic or simply a childhood dream. Some people choose to work at a “cool job” because they would rather be spending their days adventuring or living in an engaging location rather than finding work in an urban office building. Cool jobs are out there, but to work in the mountains, or on a beach, there is usually a tradeoff of a lower salary for a great location. On the website, coolworks.com, one can find any number of open positions such as: Sous Chef on Mackinac Island, Michigan, a Naturalist Guide at the Backcountry Lodge in Alaska, or a Human Resources Professional at the Chisos Mountain Lodge in Big Bend National Park, Texas. The website gives a person the ability to search for a job by category, state, season, or National Park. For most of the employees at these jobs, their work is meaningful in ways other than financial success. However, American society often looks down upon such jobs as unserious or not meaningful. The following studies consider how a person’s job choice tends to have a close

⁹³ Matthew Crawford, “Shop Class as Soulcraft,” 9.

association with one's interests during childhood and shifts to a more practical outlook during adulthood.

Most-Valued American Jobs

One of the ways to measure satisfaction in the workplace is to survey workers about their subjective well-being. In this self-reported method, researchers gauge a person's life satisfaction by tracking factors such as physical health, family status, employment, income, and age. Since Obama's rhetoric sends the message that a college degree is supposed to be leading Americans to successful jobs, it is valuable to know which jobs Americans consider most successful and which jobs are most satisfying.

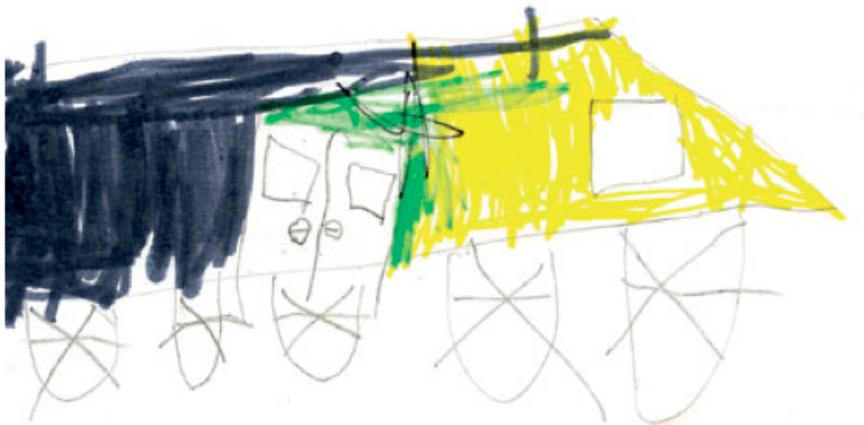
Contrary to the capabilities approach's version of a well-lived life as a successful life, American society is focused on money as an indication of success. Derek Bok, author of the *Politics of Happiness*, writes that the priorities of students as they first start college mirror the perception of values on the American workplace. In the 1960s, only 40 percent of incoming freshman felt that making "a lot of money" was a "very important goal" compared to the mid 1970s when making "a lot of money" became a "very important goal" for 75 percent of incoming freshman.⁹⁴ As more students become interested in earning a high salary after college, the entrepreneurial spirit and drive for money continues to increase. "From 1970 to 1990, the number of business majors rose threefold to become by far the most popular undergraduate concentration."⁹⁵ Although many such business-minded college students might be immersed in special topics like derivatives, accumulated dividends, accrued income, pooled investment vehicles, and returns on capital, an interest and in money did not always play a part in their future; during childhood, a child's dreams for the future tend to be simple and fun.

⁹⁴ Derek Bok, *The Politics of Happiness*, 166.

⁹⁵ Derek Bok, *The Politics of Happiness*, 167.

At a young age, nearly every kid is able to describe his dream job and it usually correlates to what is meaningful to him. When an adult asks, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” the answers are creative. With responses from ballerina, to athlete, to superhero, childhood dreams are based completely on his familiarities and fascinations, rather than real life concerns. In the US online edition of the *Guardian* newspaper, one can find Frances Booth’s article, “When I Grow Up, I want to be... Childhood Dream Jobs,” under the Money: Work and Careers Section. The online feature showcases children’s dreams and corresponding drawings they created to describe their dreams. The kids’ answers are logical, and make sense according to their personalities:

Kieron wants to be a train driver. He dreams about trains. He reads about trains. He draws pictures of trains. He is sure this is what he will do. Lucy, aged seven, wants to be a zookeeper. She loves animals. She wants to look after them. She has drawn a picture of her dream:⁹⁶



'I love trains. I want to drive one all by myself when I am older.' Kieron Griffiths, six⁹⁷

Kieron’s love of trains causes him to want to be a train conductor. This simple, innocent wish aligns with his passions, yet most likely, he does not have genuine support from his parents.

⁹⁶ Frances Booth, When I Grow Up, I want to be... Childhood Dream Jobs, Guardian.com

⁹⁷ Frances Booth, When I Grow Up, I want to be... Childhood Dream Jobs, Guardian.com

Coming from a six-year-old, adults find the sentiment cute. However, despite its endearing nature, Kieron's dream seems unrealistic and fleeting. Most kids' answers are purely based on fantasies, since they do not face constrictions or financial obligations. The Guardian article describes the process of childhood dreams fading away in the midst of the actual job search, especially in a recession. Nevertheless, Booth says that it is sometimes worth re-examining our childhood dreams to see if they align with our current occupation. If they don't find any correlation, Booth says, some deeper soul searching may be in order.

A similar article in the American *Forbes* magazine discusses the feasibility of childhood dreams in an economic sense. In the article, David Ewalt and his team polled several hundred children aged 5-12 in the New York Metro area to measure career aspirations. While a good number of kids would like to be fictional characters like superheroes or *Spongebob Squarepants*, the article's main finding is that most of the real jobs that kids want do not have the highest salaries:

The kids that want to work real jobs are in for a rude awakening as well... The fact is, many of the most popular kid-friendly careers aren't the best-paid. In our survey of 5-year-olds, five of 33 kids say they want to one day be firefighters, and three say they want to be police officers--a job that pays a mean annual wage of \$50,670.⁹⁸

However, it is unclear which standards Ewalt uses to make the judgment that these salaries are comparatively low. Although Ewalt describes a salary of \$50,000 as the catalyst for a "rude awakening," the average firefighter still receives a paycheck that is \$10,000 more than the mean salary in America and close to the median *household* income.⁹⁹ That is, half of American households make more than this amount, and half of all families in America live on less than

⁹⁸ Ewalt, "When I Grow Up: Kid's Dream Jobs", February 29, 2012.

⁹⁹ According to the Social Security Administration, the mean salary in 2010 was \$39,959, <http://www.ssa.gov/cgi-Sbin/netcomp.cgi?year=2010>

\$50,000. In the end, the common link between the kids in the poll is that in the future, they want jobs that help people or that align with their passions and interests.

Whether it is a coincidence or an indication of America's value of money, the main point of the Forbes article is that childhood dreams do not pay. As children grow into adults, childhood dreams are often forgotten in lieu of a job that is considered more realistic. As most Americans rule out their dream jobs, other factors have more of an impact in their job choice. It appears that the author assumes that the most important part of a job is its salary. Is this a reflection of American society? The CNN money surveys (below) say no. By looking at public opinion about workplace culture, it becomes clear that the highest ranked jobs do not correlate with the highest pay.

Self-reported Measures of Income, Satisfaction, and Stress

One way to try to understand the value Americans place on jobs is by surveying the public. Popular literature and independent polls can give an indication of the nation's job values because they are a direct representation of public sentiment. Recent data collection from *payscale.com*, enabled CNN Money to create a ranking of "America's best jobs" based on various 2010 data such as *salary*, reported *job satisfaction*, and reported *stress* levels.¹⁰⁰ Understandably, a news outlet's ranking system of the "best jobs," is not entirely objective. However, CNN Money created the rankings after a multistep process of an industry screen, job screen, and final ranking.¹⁰¹ All of the data in these categories is based on a

¹⁰⁰ All of the pay data is from *payscale.com*.

¹⁰¹ *Industry Screen*: MONEY and compensation experts PayScale.com used Bureau of Labor Statistics growth forecasts for 7,000 jobs, and identified industries with the biggest increases in jobs requiring bachelor's degrees. Ranked them by 2008-18 growth and pay.

Job Screen: each job that made the cut required at least a bachelor's degree, jobs that were projected to grow less than 10% from 2008 to 2018 were eliminated. Eliminated the jobs with a median pay of \$60,000 for experienced workers and fewer than 10,000 positions nationwide.

CNNMoney.com/PayScale.com survey of more than 40,000 workers. As a result, the “best jobs” rankings incorporate survey data that gives first hand insight into American workplace values.

Finances and Stress

Ultimately, one of the main reasons people have jobs is to get paid. For some Americans, a job can be a means to an end, or it can an end within itself. In most jobs, there are tradeoffs between salary and leisure or salary and low stress. As a job’s salary increases, the increase is usually correlated with a lot of responsibility and high levels of stress. At a high-pressure job, an employee is expected to dedicate himself for the good of the company, often at the expense of his own well-being. Many of the jobs that pay over \$100,000 demand self-sacrifice, long hours, high pressure, and high stress.

In the process of collecting research for their book, *The Secrets of CEOs*, Steve Tappin and Andrew Cave interviewed 150 chief executive officers to gain insight in global leadership, business, and fulfillment. One chief executive explained the tradeoffs of a job with such high responsibility: "I can't remember my boys growing up. I can't remember them when they were young. People ask whether you have to make a choice between your family and your career. You definitely do. You can't have both."¹⁰² Often, the higher the salary, the greater the tradeoff for family time.¹⁰³ Although these jobs can provide astronomical rewards for efficient and profitable work, sometimes it may not be worth it; many CEOs are frustrated, disappointed,

Final Ranking: Incorporated data from a PayScale survey in which 40,000 workers rated their jobs on quality-of-life factors such as stress and flexibility and short- and long-term employment outlook; Ranked titles using median pay for seasoned workers, industry and job growth, ease of entry, and estimated employment.

¹⁰² Mark Tutton, "Why Being a CEO 'should Come with a Health Warning'," <http://www.cnn.com/2010/BUSINESS/03/12/ceo.health.warning/index.html>.

¹⁰³ Methodology: CNN Money looked at jobs from the top 100 with the highest median salaries. Median salary is for an experienced worker (at least two to seven years in field). Top pay represents the 90th percentile.

irritated, and overwhelmed.¹⁰⁴ Although some people thrive in this high-pressure environment, not everyone wants to make the tradeoff that is required.

Below is the CNN Money ranking of best jobs based on salary:

Median pay

Rank	Job title	Best Jobs rank	Median pay*
1	Anesthesiologist	68	\$290,000
2	General Surgeon	75	\$260,000
3	Emergency Room Physician	25	\$250,000
4	Obstetrician / Gynecologist	100	\$210,000
5	Psychiatrist	29	\$185,000
6	Primary Care Physician	34	\$174,000
7	Nurse Anesthetist	13	\$156,000
8	Product Management Director	15	\$148,000
9	Software Engineering / Development Director	18	\$144,000
10	Sales Director	8	\$142,000

Figure 1: "Best Jobs in America" according to Median Pay¹⁰⁵

Top pay

Rank	Job title	Best Jobs rank	Top pay*
1	General Surgeon	75	\$412,000
2	Anesthesiologist	68	\$393,000
3	Emergency Room Physician	25	\$368,000
4	Obstetrician / Gynecologist	100	\$313,000
5	Psychiatrist	29	\$269,000
6	Primary Care Physician	34	\$256,000
7	Attorney / Lawyer	55	\$246,000
8	Dentist	12	\$237,000
9	Sales Director	8	\$222,000
10	Actuary	11	\$222,000

Figure 2: "Best Jobs in America" according to Top Pay¹⁰⁶

It is unsurprising that some of the highest paying jobs do not have a high "best jobs rank," according to the poll. For instance, although the annual median pay for an Obstetrician/Gynecologist is \$210,000, it is in last place in the poll's top 10 "best jobs." Likewise, the other two jobs that have the highest median pay (see figure 1) are Anesthesiologist and General surgeon, rated 68th and 75th respectively. Even though many Americans tend to strive for the largest salaries possible, the above rankings reflect the reality that the highest paying jobs do not

¹⁰⁴ MarkTutton, "Why Being a CEO 'should Come with a Health Warning'," <http://www.cnn.com/2010/BUSINESS/03/12/ceo.health.warning/index.html>.

¹⁰⁵ CNN Money, "Best Jobs in America: Median Pay", <http://money.cnn.com/magazines/moneymag/bestjobs/2010/highpay/index.html>.

¹⁰⁶ CNN Money, "Best Jobs in America: Median Pay", <http://money.cnn.com/magazines/moneymag/bestjobs/2010/highpay/index.html>.

turn out to be the most desirable. When we talk about job success, it is important to think about what we mean. Surely, “success” encompasses more than salary. Ideally, a successful job would be meaningful and fulfilling.

Satisfaction and Low Stress

Figure 3 shows the CNN Money ranking of best jobs according to the poll of 40,000 workers who responded to the survey. The top three jobs according to satisfaction are physical therapy director, risk management director, and security director. Interestingly, 6 of the 10 most satisfying jobs on this ranking list are either director or manager positions:

Satisfaction			
Rank	Job title	Best Jobs rank	% who say their job is satisfying
1	Physical Therapy Director	46	96.8
2	Risk Management Manager	14	93.8
3	Security Director (Facilities, Personnel, etc.)	98	91.7
4	Practice Manager	82	90.3
5	Emergency Room Physician	25	89.5
6	Anesthesiologist	68	88.9
7	Healthcare Services Program Director	50	88.0
8	Hospital Administrator	36	87.5
9	Environmental Health & Safety Specialist	22	87.1
10	Nurse Practitioner	65	86.2

Figure 3: “Best Jobs in America” according to employee satisfaction¹⁰⁷

One would think that high job satisfaction would have a close connection with jobs that are considered “the best jobs” in America. Based on the job satisfaction data in figure 3, jobs that

¹⁰⁷ CNN Money, “Best Jobs in America: Satisfaction”, <http://money.cnn.com/magazines/moneymag/bestjobs/2010/qualitylife/satisfaction.html>

bring people high satisfaction do not consistently receive the highest rankings as a best job. Whereas the *median pay* statistics included four jobs in the top 20 “best jobs,” the *satisfaction* category only has one job in the top 20. Likewise, one would think low stress is a factor that would be considered a “best job;” however, only two of the jobs on the top ten jobs of the lowest stress are in the top twenty best jobs. See figure 4 for more low stress jobs:

Low stress

Rank	Job title	Best Jobs rank	% who say their job is low stress
1	Biomedical Engineer	10	70.0
2	Transportation Engineer	51	69.0
3	Statistician	64	64.0
4	Web Developer	67	57.7
5	Geographic Information Systems Analyst	97	55.6
6	Technical Writer	88	54.9
7	Test Software Development Engineer	30	54.2
8	Marketing Consultant	61	53.5
9	Civil Engineer	6	53.3
10	Optometrist	56	53.1

Figure 4: “Best Jobs in America” according to employee satisfaction¹⁰⁸

Most of these low stress jobs most likely have a definitive ending point. When the day ends, the employee does not take the job home with her. It is interesting to see that most of the jobs on this list are in the technology or engineering fields—work that does not require constant interactions with people. In industries where one works with numbers and computers, the job is less likely to carry over into the employees’ personal lives. However, other meaningful work, such as social

¹⁰⁸ CNN Money, “Best Jobs in America: Low Stress”, <http://money.cnn.com/magazines/moneymag/bestjobs/2010/qualitylife/index.html>

work does tend to carry over. That is why there is a need to maintain a work-life balance. Depending on personal factors, the quality of work that an individual considers meaningful depends on her talents and sources of fulfillment.

Findings

Although polling is able to provide a general indication of work values in America, the measure is not entirely sound. As a result, the job rankings produced by CNN Money are not a scientific measure. A pioneer in happiness studies, Jeremy Bentham, once thought that measuring happiness and satisfaction is as easy as calculating profit and loss in business. However, he later recounted his statement and said that to compare one person's happiness to another, "you might as well add 20 apples to 20 pears."¹⁰⁹ Because it can be difficult to gauge a person's satisfaction through self-reported metrics, Bok, author of the *Politics of Happiness*, says that researchers try to record people's responses with varying ranges of precision, such as "extremely satisfied," "very satisfied," "fairly satisfied." This type of questioning, called retrospective evaluation ("asking people how happy or satisfied they are with their lives"), varies even more depending on how questions are phrased or by how people are feeling on a particular day.¹¹⁰

Based on the culture of success and achievement in America described in the beginning of this chapter, and Obama's intentional focus on education as the pathway to jobs and success, one might guess that many of the "best jobs" would have corresponding high salaries; however in the CNN Money poll, this was not the case. Rather, many of the jobs with the highest salaries got the lowest rankings (see figure 1 and figure 2). Under the "satisfaction" category, six out of

¹⁰⁹ Derek Bok, *The Politics of Happiness*, 32.

¹¹⁰ Derek Bok, *The Politics of Happiness*, 33.

the 10 jobs on the list were manger or director positions: Physical Therapy Director, Risk Management Manager, Security Director, Practice Manager, Healthcare Services Program Director, Hospital Administrator. All of these types of jobs are leadership positions in which the person is able to demonstrate the capabilities of *agency*, *affiliation*, *imagination* and *practical reason*. Not only do leaders have a lot of responsibility, they also have the freedom to determine the culture and environment of the workplace. Employees in leadership positions have the power to facilitate growth in others and to experience tremendous within growth themselves.

Although Americans do not necessarily value jobs with the largest salaries, according to Derek Bok, Americans are nevertheless concerned with the prestige that comes with their job.¹¹¹ However, by applying the capabilities approach to Crawford's argument for manual labor, it is evident that jobs develop a variety of freedoms and capabilities in workers. For instance, whereas financial analysts might have more *affiliation* and *economic freedom*, manual laborers and vocational technicians might enjoy more *freedom* and *agency* over their lives than many consultants or white-collar workers do. Drawing from the capabilities approach, different work is fulfilling for different people, as it allows and facilitates the growth of various capabilities. In addition, work is only one aspect of life—it can enable or obstruct a person's capabilities in her other aspects of life.

A challenge in American society is to reflect the value in different work in compensation. Once again, this inquiry would require an in-depth look and overhaul of the labor market as well an adjustment of the minimum wage to reflect the cost of living. The next chapter, extends the capabilities discussion beyond is application to meaningful work, to a broader glimpse of a fulfilling life.

¹¹¹ Derek Bok, *The Politics of Happiness*.

6

A Life of Capability: More than Just Jobs

Obama's proposal to expand higher education is compatible with the capabilities approach on education, in that it attempts to give more people the capability of being *well educated*. However, the proposal stops short of fulfilling the capabilities approach completely. In addition to expanding access to college, social justice requires that society should have structures so that everyone has the social opportunities to go to college and to be able to earn a living wage from labor without a college degree. Since the inequalities in America are so entrenched, it is clear that education alone cannot fix the social structures that perpetuate the systematic poverty in America. It is important to think about a well-lived life under the framework of the capabilities approach and whether Obama's message advances us toward this vision, while fulfilling his promise of improving social justice.

Obama's message

In the conversation directed by the Obama administration in the past few years, the societal benefits of higher education have all been instrumentally valuable for employment in the workforce. Although the big picture of the importance of higher education spans far beyond its economic value, this economic message is valuable; job projections warn of the impending shortage of workers who will not have enough credentials in the coming years. Obama wants to send more young Americans to college to fulfill tangible labor needs in society. The idea is that as more citizens acquire a higher education, prospective employees will have greater skills. With

a greater number of skilled workers, companies will grow and experience greater profits and trade will flourish. It follows that as more of the population experiences a higher education, more people will contribute to company growth and innovation. Following this line of reasoning, expanding the number of college graduates will enable America to be competitive once again.

Since America is so economically driven, politicians, like Obama, tend to cite the instrumental economic benefits of education more enthusiastically than the comprehensive benefits. And because America is currently in a recession and unemployment is high, American citizens want to hear the tangible ways that the situation will get better. Although Obama's proposal to send nearly 10 million more Americans to college gives more people an opportunity to experience education and perhaps get more jobs, ultimately, a higher education is not the only way for a person to feel fulfilled. Therefore, his message limits the scope of what education can do for society. While there is no question that a college degree can be beneficial and lucrative, we must consider the implications of this rhetoric. In a democratic country, every young person should have an equal opportunity, not just for college, but for whichever path that will contribute to a well-lived life.

Capabilities Approach within Obama's Rhetoric

In one speech out of the 11 in the sample, Obama actually describes the value of a college education in terms of how it can contribute to a well-lived life. His rhetoric in this situation solidifies that he does believe that education is more than just jobs. At the May 16, 2011, commencement speech at Booker T. Washington College, Obama described education as being valuable in itself for contributing to an informed and full life:

You learn how to learn—how to think critically and find solutions to unexpected challenges...All of these qualities— empathy, discipline, the capacity to solve problems and think critically— these skills don't just change how the world sees us. They change how we see ourselves. They allow each of us to seek out new horizons and opportunities with confidence— with the knowledge that we're ready, that we can face obstacles and challenges and unexpected setbacks. That is the power of your education. That is the power of the diploma you receive today.¹¹²

While addressing a cohort of young college graduates ready to take their next step in life, Obama described a comprehensive view of education that aligns with the capabilities approach. He emphasized values like empathy, discipline, problem solving, and critical thinking—as being important capacities in a person's life. These skills, which all relate to interactions and sustaining relationships with people, all contribute to a flourishing life.

For the first time out of 11 speeches, Obama departed from education's economic value in the workplace and described the power of education as the qualities that “change how we see ourselves [and] allow each of us to see new horizons and opportunities with confidence.” Obama's address at the commencement speech described higher education as being far more than a tool for producing good workers. In many ways, colleges are the ideal environments to define how we see ourselves and to surpass new horizons.

However, this speech was the only one out of 11 of Obama's speeches that focuses on education for well-being rather than having economic value. Americans want to hear that education leads to jobs, to satisfy their short term needs. As president of the United States, it is Obama's job to send this message, however, education for the workforce is not the only message that the general public should be hearing. In America, citizens need to be reminded of the intrinsic aims of education, in order to remember its everlasting value that transcends times of hardship.

¹¹² Barack Obama. "Obama Delivers Commencement Address at Booker T. Washington High School in Memphis, Tenn." Memphis, May 16, 2011.

The Message Obama *Should* Send through his Rhetoric:

(Excerpts of Obama's actual rhetoric are in bold)

Hello America! In this great country, every citizen should have the opportunity to experience higher education. Today, I want you to consider your future. Where will you be five years from now? Ten years from now? 30?

Education is full of intrinsic values and has the opportunity to open eyes and minds... **All of these qualities -- empathy, discipline, the capacity to solve problems and think critically – these skills don't just change how the world sees us. They change how we see ourselves. They allow each of us to seek out new horizons and opportunities with confidence -- with the knowledge that we're ready, that we can face obstacles and challenges and unexpected setbacks. That is the power of your education. That is the power of the diploma you receive today.**¹¹³ Colleges should be institutions that inspire young people to expand your thinking and to broaden your experiences. At their best, colleges “produce” engaged citizens who live an informed life according to their idea of the common good. The factual and empirical knowledge that students learn in school should not only serve private ends, but also contribute to communal ends in society.

Society is better off with an educated citizenry, that has the ability to have intelligent conversations with others and who have the ability to communicate and understand each other. Sen says that individuals can exercise these human capabilities, “in reading,

¹¹³ Barack Obama. "Obama Delivers Commencement Address at Booker T. Washington High School in Memphis, Tenn." Memphis, May 16, 2011.

communicating, arguing, in being able to choose in a more informed way, in being taken seriously by others, and so on.¹¹⁴ The more people who share a post secondary experience, the more *society* will flourish from innovation, communication, and creative ideas.

We must strive to ensure that more Americans graduate from college, but first, we must ensure that all Americans are prepared to go through the process of higher ed.... **from cradle through** contribution. Our system of education will prepare citizens to contribute in our workplaces, in town hall meetings, in the household and with our children. To ensure that every American has been prepared and nurtured, we must start at the youngest age. One of the most important investments we can make is to make sure we educate our young. They will be the citizens who will lead the future. With that said, too many students fall through the cracks. We must correct this injustice through policy and law.

In America, we should all have the capabilities to find work where our passion meets our purpose. We will strive to be a society that values all types of work. But in order to realize this value, today's national discourse must expand from its focus on education, and must examine the structures of social welfare and labor markets. As a nation, it will be a difficult process to begin to change these institutions and systems, but to fulfill social justice under the capabilities approach, we must begin to start this process.

A dynamic democracy must work to produce these output capabilities in order to maintain its energy to work for social change. The great educator John Dewey once said, "Such a [democratic] society must have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure

¹¹⁴ Sen, *Inequality Reexamined*, 294.

social changes.”¹¹⁵ In order to form a democratic society that has the capacity to serve its citizens, American citizens themselves must have a personal interest in furthering the goals of social change.

Are you passionate about social change? Do you want to see more equality in America? Although it will not be easy, as the President of the United States, I pledge to follow through with this new path of discourse and walking the talk through policies. We must look at the social injustices that have been intentionally created. Every citizen should be able to pursue his or her capabilities and to lead a fulfilling life.

Thank you.

¹¹⁵ Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*, 56.

This inquiry into higher education and the capabilities approach acknowledges that a broader discussion on social welfare is worth having. With the existing social injustices, America will not move towards the social equality that the American Dream promises, unless citizens work together. This sense of community and empathy stems from education's ability to bring people together and expose them to diverse ideas and ways of life. The capabilities approach argues that education is the way to facilitate this growth in citizens. However, if America limits the aims education to economic means, this great ability to connect young people will be lost.



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