This is no country for the young

I want to talk about education and why we as a nation are beginning to fail and what we can do about it. Foundations like Gates and Lumina, as well as the Obama administration and the Bureau of Labor Statistics, project that we must increase vastly degree production over the next twenty years if we want a workforce capable of innovating in the global competition for goods and wealth.

But we lack the wherewithal.

The root of the problem is not discovery-based learning; it is not too much or too little testing; it is neither too much unionization nor too little technology; it is not just low prestige and pay. It is not even the re-segregation of the schools with inequitable consequences, as a map would show. These are branches off the trunk.

The root is, rather, dispositional and philosophical.

Jefferson wrote about each generation's responsibility not to burden the next with excessive debt but rather to educate it for independence. John Rawls wrote on the moral imperative of just savings for the young. Economist James Tobin developed formulas for sizing endowments and determining equitable consumption and contribution by subsequent generations. Even Milton Friedman, for whom government intervention was an anathema, acknowledged a collective moral obligation to do basic education well.

Our culture tilts otherwise.

Today families spend more on eating out than educating. Indeed, our habits of consumption amount to eating our children, as Defoe recommended ironically, since we stuff our faces before filling our minds.

Since 1960, we have halved the proportion of the US budget spent on defense, although the raw amount still overwhelms. The savings have funded not the inter-generational transfer of knowledge but mainly the intra-generational transfer for pensions, welfare, and health services. In 1960, these three accounted for 18% of the total US budget; today they tally 48%. Education, as a share, has remained relatively constant.

Let me be clear. I am not making a neo-liberal attack on social programs. I am not saying that we should throw older people on the rocks. Rather, I want us to think about our assumptions and their implications, and then map alternatives.

Consider these unintended consequences. The premium that we are willing to pay for technologies and services that extend life decreases dollars to educate for life, in the zero sum calculus of public finances today. We spend one-third of health care dollars on the 20% of the population over 65, and one-sixth on the 40% under 18. In general, we spend twice the public dollars on a person over 65 than we do on someone under 18.

This pattern of spending also has reduced by two-thirds the proportion of elderly in poverty since the 1950s. At the same time, we have lowered the rate for children negligibly to 20%, the highest among advanced economies.

Now, private spending could make up the difference, but it does not. We rather invest in things—houses—expecting to flip them for near-term profit; we disinvest in schooling—people—because the return is indirect and distant. True, on average we send twice as many freshmen to college as we buy new houses each year. But during the boom the house's asking price outstripped the degree's cost by 3:1.

Were W. E. Deming alive, he would emphasize why these trends doom the accountability movement in school reform. Optimizing testing and productivity is fine; but it does not re-design a cultural system that maximizes a current generation's consumption. And that system, as an example, will lure someone talented in math away from teaching and toward capitalization. In fact, as Tom Peters might have pointed out, the numerist and seemingly rational approach of such optimization itself needs change; it treats people as widgets.

There is a paradox.

This obsessive quest for ever shorter cycles of investment and return for consumption across a lengthening life span is not feasible without accelerating innovation. Until innovation is itself automated, it requires the talent and resources sufficient to advance knowledge and expand educated labor. That is why a map that mines data about learning and earning in a metropolitan region like LA is so dismaying. Low high school and college graduation rates correlate with low income and high intra-generational transfers for subsidies; all this maps onto growing ethnic communities. The gap with better educated and wealthier communities represents lost capacity for innovation, increased need for intra-generational transfers, and sub-regional fragmentation.

History tells us why this matters and what has happened.

America can attribute much of its success in the 20th century to the expanding public tiers of common schools in the middle 1800s, high schools in the early 1900s, and universities after WWII.

By the '70s, though, graduation rates leveled off, while local tax revolts against egalitarian funding for schools gouged overall resources. Completing school or funding it for others to do so required faith in a more common future and satisfaction with delayed return. Increasingly, though, a culture of me and now prevailed, yielding the lead in innovation to societies that deferred me for us, now for later. Tony Judd has identified these sentiments as a legacy of '60s cultural politics.

Worsening matters was a simmering resentment against government's presumptive intervention on behalf of we.

American culture shifted noticeably in the 1970s. In the 1950s and the 1960s, building on the Brown decision and the California Master Plan for higher education, opportunity expanded. And when Governor Reagan backed the tax limits in Proposition 1, in part, to control social spending, California

voters roundly defeated the measure. But in the 1970s, inflation, wage stagnation, cynicism bred by Watergate, and frustration with ineffective responses to a series of recessions both undermined faith in the rewards of education and corroded the credibility of government programs.

By the late 1970s high school graduation rates leveled off in the range of 85% and college rates in the range of 27%; both have changed little since then. During the same time, the poverty rate for seniors plunged below the rate for those under 18. Increasingly it paid to look young, but not to be young, in America. In sum, youth programming has been squeezed between pressure on social spending and a culture that idolizes youthfulness but criminalizes rebelliousness.

Change is possible.

As a nation, we are capable of changing directions over twenty to twenty-five years. America's prisons are exhibit A. Since the late 1970s, the prison population has tripled largely because of changes in drug laws and the sentencing of repeat offenders. We have been more successful in locking up young black men than in educating them. Their prison population has grown nearly four times as much as their college representation. Nearly the same percent, 14%, of black men, 25 to 29 years old, have been to prison as have graduated from college. As parolees, two-thirds of them resettle in areas with under-employment and under-performing schools, closing a loop of debilitation. If we could find a way to deal with 25% of these young men outside of prison, in theory we could redirect dollars to graduate at least 50% more young black men from college.

But are we willing to risk an immediate increase in decriminalized yet disorderly behavior for the distant prospect of increased social productivity by the young? On the one hand, demagogues say that taking the risk is like releasing Willie Horton—immediate fright. On the other hand, researchers show that over a lifetime college graduates contribute far more in taxes and deductions than they draw in benefits and services, whereas high school drop-outs are quite the reverse—big difference but distant.

What must we do?

Today we crusade for the right of the unborn to be born, but not for the born to be well educated. That must change.

We create complicated formulas for funding intra-generational entitlements; but we under-capitalize the inter-generational transfer of knowledge because we under-estimate the escalating costs of expanding to under-served populations and because we project large efficiencies due to technology. That must change.

We pay and prepare teachers in inverse relation to the difficulty of the task. For instance, the critical nature of early learning is not in dispute. But have we attracted and trained the talent to teach students born into multiple language communities and weaned on the internet?

We strip-mine intellectual resources. To maximize GDP, we try to get the most consumption out of the least investment in the fastest time. When profits soared from 2003 to 2008, R&D as a percent of GDP

decreased. Since 1990, the fastest growing economies invested proportionately more in R&D than the US. That must change.

If we are going to do intergenerational transfer well, we will have to think differently about resources and problems. Because we value individual freedom more than paternalism, we use expensive—often technological—treatments of known social and physical dysfunctions with known etiologies after they fester. This must change. Prevention can free resources for the transfer of knowledge. For example, science is mapping how the mind learns. Yet we hardly mine the findings to mend schooling.

As he left the presidency, Eisenhower warned America to beware the military industrial complex. Today we must monitor the pharmacological medical technology complex. Certainly it has mastered disease and affliction. But as a commercial enterprise, it has profited mightily—and driven up health care costs—by marketing anxieties and discomforts as diseases requiring medicalization. And it has capitalized on Americans' faith in technology to intrude it everywhere. Either we moderate these habits, or as boomers age and these practices accelerate, support for education will decrease ever more rapidly.

Accountability should be conceived as a progression of compacts in which each generation aspires to exceed the forward payback of its predecessor. We dehumanize accountability—and education—when we strip out such obligation and think only in the terms of median scores and benchmarks subject by subject. That, too, must change.

Inevitably, attention to intra-generational transfer of knowledge—stewardship writ large—will lead us to reconsider the values embedded in consumption, the life cycle, and the business cycle. Like Narcissus, we can peer into the pool. Unlike him, let us fix on the future, not ourselves.

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