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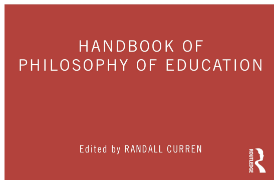

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The Costs of Upward Mobility

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23

THE COSTS OF UPWARD MOBILITY[1]

Jennifer M. Morton

A core ideal to which many of us subscribe is that the opportunities available to a citizen should be determined by that person's motivation, talent, and perseverance rather than by the family into which she was born. Even though spelling out this ideal in a broadly appealing way is no easy task, we aim to have our educational institutions embody it. Mobility, both upward and downward, is seen as a sign that we are living up to this ideal. If a child born into a family at the bottom of the income scale can emerge at a higher socioeconomic level than their parents due to the educational opportunities available to them, we take the system to have worked as it should.

Much like other societies that profess to embody the ideal of equality of opportunity, the United States falls dramatically short of it. A child's future earnings, a flawed but widespread mobility measure, is more likely to be determined by her family's zip code than by her talent or motivation (Chetty et al. 2014). The story is now familiar to many. Families with resources tend to buy into neighborhoods with other families from similar socioeconomic and racial backgrounds, thus segregating themselves away from lower-income families and, often, Black and Latinx families (Orfield & Lee 2005). Schools in such neighborhoods tend to be better resourced and enjoy higher test scores, higher rates of graduation, more experienced teachers, and higher rates of college attendance (Darling-Hammond 2013). Outside of school, better-resourced families also invest in their child's educational development through extracurricular activities and other forms of academic enrichment (Lareau 2011). As Richard Reeves (2018) has argued, families who can afford to do so will "hoard opportunity" for their children, thus cementing intergenerational advantages (and disadvantages). Once a child is poised to apply for college, much of their educational trajectory has been determined by factors outside their control: family income, parents' education, neighborhood, and school (Chetty et al. 2014).

Despite, or perhaps because of, these facts, we uphold university as the educational institution that can and should mitigate inequalities by propelling low-income students out of a trajectory that seems destined to leave them behind. Economist Raj Chetty's (2017) work has been influential in making the case that we should judge higher education institutions based on a "Mobility Report Card" that awards its highest grades to those colleges and universities that admit more low-income students and successfully move them up the economic ladder. On this measure, the most selective private institutions fare much worse than less-selective public institutions. The mobility report card has reified upward mobility as an ideal for the higher education sector, but should it be? In this essay, I ask us to reconsider upward mobility as an ideal. I will make the case that upward mobility has significant costs to the higher education sector, the individuals who experience it, and our society. This is not to say that we should give up on equal

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opportunity, but it means that we need to think more deeply about the role that colleges and universities should play in its pursuit.

The Knowledge Aim

The role that colleges and universities play in society has changed over time. In many countries, a college education is becoming necessary to achieve middle-class employment. Enrollment numbers reflect this. Whereas a minuscule proportion of high school graduates considered attending college in the early part of the 20th century, by 2018 69% of graduating seniors in the United States enrolled in some sort of postsecondary education (NCES 2019). Though in the United Kingdom the numbers are lower (37.9%), there too have we seen a significant increase in the number of 18-year-olds enrolling in postsecondary education (UCAS 2021). According to UNESCO (2017), between 2000 and 2014 the number of students enrolled in higher education across the world doubled. While some might applaud this trend as constituting an expansion of access to higher education and thus opportunity, others are concerned that this is evidence of an "arms race" of credentials that deepens inequality. For example, Randall Curren (2017) worries that our focus on university and college attendance as a way to mitigate inequality has led us to ignore alternative non-academic postsecondary pathways to good employment and flourishing lives. He suggests that such alternatives might be a better way of mitigating inequality. Peter Cappelli (2015) argues that the returns on a college degree are not as high as they might initially seem. It depends on the institution one attends, the amount of debt one takes on, and degree type. Notwithstanding these skeptical voices, much of the recent debate around higher education has focused on upward mobility, often at the expense of other dimensions of education that are equally important.

Given that a college degree affects access to good employment, a livable wage, and the goods that usually flow from them, many have come to think of the university's task as "leveling the playing field." Kotzee and Martin (2013) label this the "distributive" conception of the university. According to this view, the university's role is to "redistribute life-chances in some egalitarian fashion" (628). Kotzee and Martin argue that this view of the university is too thin to account for much of what a university education does. To drive their point across, they ask us to consider alternatives to redistribution, such as compensating people born into disadvantage with a sum of money equal to the value of the education they missed or making it illegal to consider a university degree in hiring admissions (634). They admit that these are outlandish alternatives. However, the argument allows us to see that if students were offered these alternative forms of compensation, they would be missing out on a critical part of higher education – the knowledge and understanding that constitute the university's educational and research aim. Kotzee and Martin label this the "knowledge" aim and argue that this is the university's central mission.

Kotzee and Martin's argument focuses on an essential role that the university plays – enriching our knowledge and understanding. A college or university that conferred degrees to mitigate inequalities without educating the disadvantaged students it admitted would be doing a disservice to them even if it allowed them access to opportunities for employment they would not have had otherwise. However, this does not show that considerations of equality are irrelevant to thinking about who should have access to a college education. Even if an institution's essential aim is orthogonal to equality, it might still play such a significant role in exacerbating inequalities that the state is permitted to interfere in its inner workings to make its effects more equal.

David O'Brien (forthcoming) offers an argument against this line of thinking. He argues that liberal egalitarians might be committed to thinking of the university as a special institution similarly to how they conceive of the family. Briefly, the family is a social institution that serves an essential political function and that is central to many conceptions of the good life. According to O'Brien's interpretation of Rawlsian liberalism, these features protect the family from political interventions

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aimed at altering its inner workings for the sake of equalizing opportunity. Even though well-functioning families exacerbate inequality, liberal egalitarians are committed to finding other ways to mitigate these inequalities that do not involve political intervention into family life because such intervention would alter the character of this essential institution. O'Brien suggests that universities are also social institutions that serve an important political function – discovering, promoting, and communicating knowledge – and that their existence is a central element of reasonable, good lives. In virtue of this, they too are protected from political intervention.

O'Brien's argument is compelling, but it is important to note that it is a conditional argument. It tells us that if we are committed to liberal egalitarianism, it follows that some institutions are shielded from state intervention. Some might take this argument to speak against political liberalism rather than in favor of the sanctity of the higher education sector. Furthermore, one might argue that under non-ideal conditions, such interference is warranted even if we want to preserve something like the sanctity of the university under more ideal conditions. For example, Brighouse and Swift (2014) have made compelling arguments about why considerations of equality apply to what families are allowed to do in our non-ideal circumstances, even if these constraints are limited by the internal goods families provide. Similarly, we might argue that there is much we could do to make higher education institutions more equal even while we respect the internal goods that these institutions provide.

The problem with focusing only on the distributive effects of higher education is that it instrumentalizes education. We end up thinking of higher education as a tool for the achievement of certain egalitarian goals, but in doing so miss the deeper transformative potential of the educational experience. In her essay "Liberal Education and The Possibility of Valuational Progress" Agnes Callard (2017) puts forward a vigorous defense of a liberal arts education. She suggests that colleges and universities are uniquely well-positioned to offer "access to a distinct domain of aesthetic, scientific, [and] literary value" (14). On her view, a liberal arts education offers students the opportunity to fall in love with a domain of value to which they might not have been exposed until they arrived on campus. This is another dimension of education that we miss if we're only focused on mobility.

Some might dismiss this as a romantic conception of education. Students from low-income families might be taking on enormous amounts of debt to get through college (Goldrick-Rab 2021). For them, the socioeconomic payoff might be quite important. This kind of valuational progress view of education might seem like a luxury that they cannot afford. This is an important point. It's not clear, though, that it should push us to ignore the dimension of the educational experience that Callard stresses. Instead, we might consider the possibility that everyone should have access to this kind of educational experience for free (Martin 2021).

These arguments help us see that the focus on mobility is too narrow to encompass the many things that universities and colleges do. We want to know not only whether students are "moving up" but how their lives are being transformed and enriched through education. We want universities to not only be places that enable students to move up the socioeconomic ladder, but also places that enable students to pursue knowledge. Many students attend college to discover new sources of value, not just to increase their socioeconomic standing. Whether all these aims can be coherently satisfied is not a question I can address here, but the preceding discussion shows us that we impoverish the conversation about higher education by focusing only on socioeconomic mobility.

The Ethical and Health Costs of Upward Mobility for Strivers

Education is meant to be transformative. Eager students arrive on campus ready to deepen their interests or to discover new passions. They make friends, meet their future partners, and develop

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mentorship relationships with professors and older students. If all goes as advertised, a college degree positions a student to have an engaging career, an interesting group of friends, and a rich intellectual life. Yet, for some low-income or first-generation students – strivers, as I call them – higher education brings different kinds of transformations. Some of them are welcome. As we have discussed, college degrees hold for strivers the promise of upward mobility. This means that, if they succeed, their class and social standing in society will change and they will be able to access certain goods that they might previously have been prevented from accessing – valuable expertise, well-paid and interesting jobs, and different professional and social circles. Yet this potential transformation of their life trajectories comes with steep costs. First, as I will argue, many strivers find that accessing mobility often means joining communities where opportunities reside and distancing themselves from their home communities. This distancing changes their position with respect to important goods in their lives – relationships with family, friends, and other community members with whom they have close ties. Second, as Brody et al. (2020) show, upward mobility can undermine strivers' physical health. Even as strivers succeed, they increase the likelihood that they will suffer from heart disease and diabetes.

As I argue in my book *Moving Up Without Losing Your Way* (Morton 2019), many strivers face a conflict between pursuing opportunities for advancement and remaining connected to their family, friends, and community. Due to socioeconomic segregation in housing, schooling, and social life in the United States, disadvantage tends to be concentrated. Those communities in which low-income and first-generation students tend to grow up will often have underfunded schools, low-paying jobs, and fewer opportunities for advancement. Furthermore, because of neighborhood segregation, those born into well-off families tend to go to school, work, and socialize with other people from similar families, while those with fewer resources tend to do the same. Finally, the safety net in the United States often leaves many people behind. The families of students born into disadvantage have to contend with lack of access to suitable healthcare, childcare, eldercare, and the like. As a result, a striver seeking upward mobility through education will often have to leave their home and enter those communities where opportunities and resources are available. In doing so, strivers feel torn, especially if they are playing critical support roles within their families. These sources of value that strivers potentially put on the line to pursue mobility are what I call "the ethical costs" because they are critical elements of a well-lived life.

Many of the strivers I interviewed in the book talked about how hard it was to prioritize their education over supporting their families. Henry, a white middle-aged academic, grew up with his mother and sister in poverty. At times, they had no electricity or hot water. They relied on food stamps. As Henry found himself climbing the ladder of opportunity, his sister fell into drugs, but he was unable to help her while simultaneously pursuing his degree. Reflecting on his experience of mobility, Henry wrote to me that "When I think about them [his mother and sister] I feel like I have no soul. I keep walking away" (31). Furthermore, the more a striver inhabits these new communities, the more likely they are to become proficient in the norms and expectations of those communities (Jack 2019). This enables them to navigate these spaces in increasingly successful ways, but it might also make them feel more distant from those with whom they grew up. Strivers describe feeling like visitors in their home communities and like outsiders in the communities they seek to enter.

To be clear, not all strivers face the same choice situations or make the same choices. Some strivers grow up in diverse communities to which they remain connected even as they climb the ladder of opportunity. Other strivers might reject upward mobility in favor of remaining connected to those for whom they care. Moreover, others never feel connected to their community of origin and are glad to find more welcoming communities. This might be especially true of those who grow up in communities with sexist, racist, or homophobic ideologies. Finally, some strivers might find that the trade-offs they make are not quite as sharp. However, for many strivers, the transformation that higher education promises is ethically fraught.

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Mobility is not only ethically difficult for strivers; research suggests it also negatively affects their health. Brody et al. (2020) looked at 368 low-income rural African American youths. They found that those who exhibited higher levels of planning and self-control during childhood were more likely to attend college, have lower symptoms of depression, and have better social adjustment. However, that group also exhibited an increase in factors contributing to heart disease (metabolic syndrome or MetS) and higher levels of insulin resistance (IR) levels than their counterparts who had not attended college and had stayed in poverty. The authors write:

> What is it about striving for upward mobility that undermines the health of skin-deep resilient young adults? In this study, most participants were the first in their families to attend college. They feel tremendous pressure to succeed to ensure their parents' sacrifices have been worthwhile. Many feel socially isolated and disconnected from peers from different backgrounds. They may encounter racism and discrimination. Against this backdrop, striving for success in the face of interpersonal, community, and institutional challenges is likely to occasion frequent activation of stress responses from the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis and the sympathetic nervous system … . Sustained exposure to high levels of these hormones can promote weight gain, elevate blood pressure, dysregulate lipids, and promote inflammation, all of which could hasten MetS and IR.
>
> *(Brody et al. 2020: 924)*

Given that the comparison group that did not make it out of poverty did not see the same health effects, the research appears to show that it is striving that leads to the adverse effects on strivers' health, not poverty itself. This is a striking finding. Strivers who are succeeding by the measures that we focus on – mobility – are endangering their health in doing so. Health, arguably, is also an important ethical good – one that is central to a flourishing life.

When we consider the costs of mobility for strivers, we start to understand why upward mobility is not an unalloyed good. It is arguably better for those born into poverty to be able to strive despite these costs. We cannot deny the value of having an education that enables one to have well-paying, stable employment and to be able to offer one's own family a good life. Nevertheless, strivers undermine critical aspects of their flourishing in this pursuit. This should lead us to rethink the structure of opportunity and our focus on mobility as the standard by which we judge its success.

The Costs to Community

A problem with looking at higher education as an institutional mechanism to increase mobility is that it ignores the costs that this imposes on our communities and civic relationships. The first kind of cost involves the loss of valuable relational social goods we have discussed in the previous section. Striving does not only undermine these essential relational goods for strivers but also for those with whom strivers have these relationships. The second kind of cost derives from the competitive nature that underlies much of the higher education system. By making admissions into university competitive, we encourage students to approach their education in a way that estranges them from each other.

As we saw in the previous section, for some strivers, college is not only a place to deepen their understanding of the world and develop skills that will serve them as they move through the world – it is also a place that threatens to siphon them off from their families and home communities. The ethical costs strivers pay is the result of the geography of inequality and the structure of opportunity. These two factors, in effect, incentivize individuals that wish to pursue avenues for economic advancement to do so at the expense of remaining connected to their communities. The process of mobility threatens to make family relationships, friendships, and tight community bonds ever more fragile. Increasingly, the institution that has taken on the role of facilitating this process is the university.

In the previous section, I argued that these costs were ethical because they concerned essential aspects of a flourishing life. In effect, strivers need to prioritize their education over other elements of their lives that they cherish for the sake of mobility. Here I would like to suggest that this system undermines goods that are central to flourishing communities. In effect, it poses a dilemma for communities – either some of their talented and motivated members attain opportunities for socioeconomic advancement elsewhere, or those members stay and contribute to their community at the expense of attaining mobility. This situation undermines the bonds of care between families, neighbors, schoolmates, and friends that bind communities together. In all communities, these bonds constitute the forms of solidarity critical to social flourishing. Poverty challenges these bonds, but the pressure of mobility threatens them further.

When a striver leaves, this is a loss both for the striver and for those with whom she has a relationship. Neighbors, friends, and community members lose someone they loved or cared for. The community loses a potentially contributing member. Some strivers might reject opportunities for mobility, preferring to stay connected to those they love. But, in doing so, they opt out of economic advancement and the benefits that such opportunities might bring to them and their families. This also undermines communities in which lower educational attainment, joblessness, and other ills of poverty are already concentrated.

Another way in which mobility frustrates important societal values is that it undermines solidarity among citizens pursuing higher education. Mobility is often understood positionally. Chetty et al. (2017), for example, measures how many people from the bottom quartile make it into the top. This means that if someone moves up, someone else must move down. More concretely, if universities are sites for upward mobility, we must acknowledge that those who do not gain admissions will lose out when they are competing with others who do hold those degrees. In countries like the United States, where accessing employment opportunities with job security, health benefits, and the like often requires a college degree, university admissions at those campuses that provide mobility is an increasingly fraught, high-stakes competition. Those who can secure those admissions spots significantly increase their likelihood of not just earning a degree but of accessing the kind of stable, well-paid employment that is out of reach for many. According to Cappelli (2015), the college wage premium is partially the result of declining wages for those who do not attend college. He writes, "it paid to have a college degree because the wages if you didn't have one were awful" (90). Consequently, even for students who grow up with a fair amount of socioeconomic privilege, gaining admissions at selective college campuses has become increasingly competitive (Tough 2019).

Waheed Hussain (2020) argues that institutions can mistreat people by defining a normative framework that "pit[s] people against each other" (80). Competition, Hussain argues, is vital, but some institutional arrangements increase the stakes in a way that undermines solidarity between citizens. Hussain argues that such institutional arrangements lead to estrangement because citizens see each other as potential obstacles to the attainment of goods essential to a good life. For example, applying for a job that offers health care in an environment in which healthcare is expensive and few jobs offer it becomes a high-stakes competition that pits the health of one applicant against that of another.

Arguably this is happening in higher education. There are few alternatives to a college education that offer a pathway to the kind of work that will offer retirement savings, healthcare, and a good enough salary to be comfortably middle class. As the gap between those with a degree and those without is not just about salary but about access to elements central to good lives – healthcare, housing, and access to good schools for one's children – the competition is ever more fraught. This makes the competition for college access one that threatens to undermine solidarity between citizens.

A similar critique is leveled by Michael Sandel (2020) in his book on meritocracy. As Sandel sees it, the problem is that meritocracy depends on the idea that those who earn positions through talent

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and hard work deserve it. A society that operates under the illusion that it is pursuing a meritocratic ideal is liable to fall prey to a kind of hierarchy of "smarts." Those who are the beneficiaries of meritocracy end up buying into the idea that their success is earned, which leads them to act with a kind of entitlement that breeds resentment. Those on the bottom resent the power garnered by those on the top. Even as we know that those who do "win out" in this meritocratic race started with the privileges that stem from being born into well-off families in wealthy neighborhoods, the system continues to bestow admiration on the "winners" and contempt on the "losers." The fact that some students from less well-resourced backgrounds manage to make it in this system only reinforces the entitlement of those who make it. According to Sandel, this erodes civic relationships and creates distrust of elites.

Sandel's critique focuses on how the idea of meritocracy validates a system of "winners and losers" tied to educational achievement. He proposes that it is this idea that is to blame for the erosion of solidarity among citizens. However, Hussain's analysis offers an alternative theory – the high-stakes nature of the competition, not the justification we offer for it, leads to estrangement between citizens. Regardless of whether we think it is the entitlement of those at the top or the increasingly high-stakes nature of the educational divide, higher education has the potential to exacerbate the deterioration of critical civic bonds.

According to the argument I have laid out, the problem with looking at higher education as an institutional mechanism to increase mobility and equalize opportunity is that it ignores the costs that this imposes on communities. An individual who has access to the opportunity to go to a good school to obtain a degree that will lead to a good job is doing better in some ways than many of those who do not even have that opportunity. However, if what this means is that we, in effect, have created a high-stakes competition that undermines the bonds that hold communities together and offers few good options for those who do not "win," then we have failed to organize our society in a way that reflects what we value.

Conclusion

Equality of opportunity is an ideal because we want to make sure that the lives of citizens are not determined by the accidents of birth but by their own talent, effort, and choices. In our non-ideal circumstances, in which children born into poverty do not fall far from the tree into which they were born (Bowles et al. 2009), equalizing opportunity means increasing the likelihood that those children will be able to transcend the circumstances of their birth. This has led us to focus on mobility as an important measure of how well we are achieving opportunity. In this essay, I have made a case for why upward mobility is not the panacea that we should be after. The pursuit of a college degree has become a high-stakes competition with high costs to our educational institutions, strivers, and to our communities. Focusing on mobility obscures these negative effects. Shifting the focus away from mobility would allow the university to focus on delivering the educational goods that are inherent to this mission – knowledge, personal transformation, and value acquisition. However, we must ensure that these goods are available to all who wish to pursue them and that those who would like to pursue other opportunities have equally good alternative paths to a flourishing life. What we should be after is a system of educational opportunities that lifts us all. Such a system would not focus on mobility, but on the flourishing of all who are touched by it.

(Related Chapters: 15, 19, 24, 25, 28.)

Note

1 Thanks to Dustin Webster and Monika Greco for their feedback on this piece.

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