

Competitiveness vs. Excellence: The Education Crisis That Isn't (##)

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Competitiveness vs. Excellence

The Education Crisis That Isn't

By Alfie Kohn

"What's the matter with us?" demands Bob Herbert in his August 7 New York Times column. "The latest dismal news on the leadership front" proving that we've become "a nation of nitwits" comes courtesy of a report from the College Board, he says. "At a time when a college education is needed more than ever to establish and maintain a middle-class standard of living, America's young people are moving in exactly the wrong direction."

"The educational capacity of our country continues to decline," Herbert quotes the report as saying, adding that this is "beyond pathetic."

Now one could take issue with this alarmist rhetoric on the grounds that our well-being (as individuals and as a society) is once again being framed in purely economic terms: The benefits of education are measured by the size of one's future paychecks. Or one could point out that, even from an

economic perspective, we're blaming the victims here. There aren't nearly enough high-paying jobs even for those with impressive credentials, and projections suggest that the vast majority of jobs expected to be created in the years ahead will not require a college degree.

But there's a more basic problem with Herbert's column – and with a similarly themed speech that President Obama just delivered at the University of Texas (on Monday afternoon). Its premise is dead wrong. If we want more people to attend and graduate from college than currently do so, the trend has actually been in exactly the right direction for quite some time.

In the College Board report that Herbert cites, you will find a graph showing that the percentage of 25-to-34-year-olds with an associates degree or higher was 38 percent in 2000 and has edged up pretty steadily since then. As of the last year shown, 2008, it had reached 42 percent.

For the bigger picture, we need to go back farther. The most readily available figures use a slightly different metric: the proportion of adults at least 25 years old who have completed four or more years of college. In 1970, only 11 percent had done so. In 1980, it was up to 17 percent. In 1990, 21 percent. In 2000, 26 percent. In 2009, 30 percent.

Now we may say, "That's still not high enough." But how in the world do these numbers support the conclusion that we're moving in "exactly the wrong direction?" The operative phrase in that question, it turns out, is "in the world." Herbert (like the College Board and the President) doesn't seem to be interested in whether we're making progress. The only question of interest is whether the U.S. is beating other countries.

It turns out that people of other nationalities have the audacity to want their students, too, to get more education.

And they, too, are making progress toward that goal. Like most op-ed columnists, reporters, and politicians (of both parties), Herbert actually regards this fact as bad news.

From any reasonable moral standard, we'd want kids to succeed regardless of where they call home. If progress were being made worldwide, that would be terrific news. But what kind of standard is it when the goal isn't success (for all) but merely victory (for America)? Have we really reached the point where life itself is treated like a sports match, where what matters most is whether we can pump the air with our fists and shout, "We're number one!"?

Even if we're talking only about economics, it's worth rethinking our zero-sum assumption. In an article in *Foreign Affairs* called "Competitiveness: A Dangerous Obsession," Paul Krugman showed why it's simply inaccurate to believe that other countries have to fail in order for our country to succeed. (The late economist David M. Gordon made essentially the same point in *The Atlantic*; his essay was entitled "Do We Need to Be No. 1?")

And when we're talking about education – how effectively students are learning, or how long they remain in school – the preoccupation with rankings is even less appropriate, for several reasons.

First, the two realms aren't all that closely connected, the conventional wisdom notwithstanding. Even if you're not persuaded by Krugman and Gordon, even if you always feel compelled to follow the word "global" with "competitiveness" – as if the only way to understand interactions among nations is in purely adversarial terms – a country's educational status doesn't drive its economic status. I don't just mean that education ought to be about more than dollars and cents. I mean that the two don't tend to track all that closely. For individual students, school achievement is only weakly related to subsequent workplace performance. And for nations,

there's little correlation between average test scores and economic vigor.

The late Gerald Bracey, for example, found 38 countries whose economies had been rated on the Current Competitiveness Index calculated by the World Economic Forum and whose students' test scores had also been assessed. There was virtually no correlation between countries' scores on the two lists. And it doesn't help to stagger the two so as to compare today's students in a given country with tomorrow's economy (giving the students time to take their place in the workforce). Consider Japan's outstanding test scores in the 1980s and its dismal economic performance in the 1990s.

(You wouldn't get an argument from me if you attributed this lack of connection to the fact that standardized test results are lousy indicators of educational aptitude or achievement. But I'm not aware of any educational indicator that suggests a country's economic strength is mostly determined by the quality of its schools. Politicians and editorial writers keep assuming that connection even though social scientists keep failing to find any evidence for it.)

Second, even if test scores, or average number of years of education completed, were meaningful measures, it makes no sense to look mostly at how countries rank against one another. All of them may be shamefully low or impressively high. Or the differences among them may not be statistically significant. It's absolute attainment that matters. Relative success tells us nothing of interest – unless, again, your goal isn't substantive excellence but the right to claim victory.

Third, there's no getting around that basic moral consideration. To say that our goal isn't for our kids to keep improving but to score better than their counterparts in other countries – or that it isn't for more of our students to stay in school longer but to “retake the lead,” as

President Obama put it on Monday, alluding to a nonexistent international contest – is to say that we want children to fare relatively poorly just because they aren't Americans.

The toxicity of a competitive worldview is such that even people who are reasonably progressive on other issues literally don't notice evidence that's staring them in the face – in this case, showing that more and more of our population are getting college degrees with each passing year.

And when we're perpetually worried about being – and staying – king of the mountain, we find ourselves taking a position that leads us to view progress made by young people in other countries as bad news. That's both intellectually and ethically indefensible.

Maybe Bob Herbert is right after all to ask "What's the matter with us?"

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