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Johann Ducharme
College of William and Mary

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Progress for Low Income Students

Johann Ducharme
William & Mary

Comprehensive and compulsory education remains a long-standing value to the economic success and cultural vitality of the United States (Thelin, 2004). Education attainment is also a strong, historical indicator of human capital and increased social mobility (Bowen, Kurzweil, & Tobin, 2005; Cabrera, Burkum, & La Nasa, 2005). However, access to a quality education for low-income students who want economic independence and social stability has not proven to be a prevalent value in the United States, as evidenced by funding levels set by states and the federal government (Bombardieri et al., 2018; Bowen et al., 2005). It is this population of low-income students, which Dr. Mike Rose identifies in several essays (see Rose, 2011, 2012, 2014), who experience “chaotic childhoods, [attend] underperforming schools, and never finished high school” (2011, para. 6), and as a result are routinely left jobless. Rose (2014), a research professor in the Graduate School of Education at the University of California at Los Angeles, firmly believes

by bridging “the economist’s analysis with a more anthropological look at the side streets” (para. 12), low-income students do not need to remain without a job.

This essay argues in favor of Mike Rose’s assertion that funding cuts to education have a detrimental effect on numerous factors including: stunted job growth in America, not remaining innovative and competitive in global markets, and attainment of college graduation goals set by Department of Education. In support of Rose, I will provide comprehensive reasoning and data from numerous national centers: Georgetown University’s Center on Education and the Workforce, American Council on Education (ACE), The College Board, and American Association of Community Colleges (AACC). I will also examine the weaknesses of Rose’s arguments as he neglects to define key terms such as ‘the young’ and ‘poor.’ Lastly, I explore the question: Are there more people in poverty today than there were 50 years ago?

“Deep Cuts”

Rose (2011) is correct in surmising that “deep cuts in education will have disastrous long-term economic consequences” for the health of civil society (para. 12). These consequences, he argued, include greater unemployment, increased poverty,

and additional economic fortitude. Central to Rose's argument is a belief that more should be done to improve education even in the midst of economic hardship, most especially equitable access and affordability for "the poor and low-income Americans" (para. 4). He strongly asserted through personal observation that the best opportunity for these individuals to obtain a job is through excellent basic education and occupational training programs. Practically, this means supporting governmental measures for sustained, and hopefully increased, funding to community colleges, among other institutions. Rose is a major proponent for these programs because they are geared towards the low-income population most in need of educational advancement. His argument is incredibly timely in the face of current budget cuts, and so many state and federal priorities at stake.

Rose believes the solution to economic shortfalls and global competition that states are facing across the nation is not solely innovation but investment in vocational and technical programs as well as increased support for students' seeking financial aid. Two-year post-secondary institutions offer the majority of such programs, and research shows low-income and minority students consistently make up the bulk of

enrollments (ACE, 2005; Dougherty & Townsend, 2006; Tierney, 1999). While Rose's argument attacks the foundation of most public research universities that explore original theories and pioneer new technologies, it also sheds light on the explosive growth community colleges have seen in postsecondary education enrollment and degree and certificate attainment (Dougherty & Townsend, 2006, Mullins, 2011). For instance, between 1997 and 2007 U.S. community colleges awarded 58% more short-term certificates and 19% more associate degrees than the previous decade (Mullin, 2011). Rose is simply echoing the AACCC's cry that without matched financial support community colleges cannot bear much more of the educational burden nor graduate the five million additional students required to meet college completion goals set by former President Barack Obama's 2020 agenda.

Behind the 2020 agenda, though, there is an underlying assumption that degree completion alone will result in decreased unemployment and increased economic growth. Rose (2011) reasoned this is broadly "magic-bullet thinking" (para. 4). Even the average college student cannot solely rely on a bachelor's degree anymore to achieve success or an upwardly mobile life

(Cabrera et al., 2005). However, practical job training, heightened student interaction, and collaborative learning in the classroom can offer students the best quality education (Astin, 1993; Cabrera et al., 2002; Tinto, 1997). In today's complex job marketplace more is demanded from the educator and the educated, such as the integration of diverse perspectives and backgrounds, increased collaboration, and creativity skills; however, not every student has access to such opportunities.

The Value of a College Degree

It is commonly accepted that a college graduate earns more money over the course of their lifetime than a high school graduate (The College Board, 2010). This, however, is not always the case. A study done by the Center on Education and the Workforce, *The College Payoff*, reported that although individuals with more education make more money, "occupations can trump degree levels" (Carnevale, Rose & Cheah, 2011, para. 1). For example, the researchers estimated a construction manager with only a high school diploma will make two million dollars over the course of their lifetime, while a counselor with a bachelor's degree will earn three quarters of that. Furthermore, they discovered 14% of those who have a high school diplo-

ma, 23% of those with some college but no degree, and 28% of those with an associate's degree, earn more than the median lifetime earnings of those with a bachelor's degree. These statistics confirm Rose's belief that a quality secondary or community college education can improve an individual's earning power, if one has access to it.

Another major theme Rose invites his reader to consider is how the United States must provide equitable access to education for the poor to revitalize the economic stimulus currently needed. With an economic climate where unemployment hovers near double digits, more individuals are seeking to enhance their job training or begin anew with one- to two-year certificates. ACE published a report in 2005 entitled *College Students Today*, where they found "40% of all undergraduates in the United States are from low-income families" (p. 26). Of these students, 60% were enrolled in associate degree, certificate, or non-degree programs (p. 27). The other 40% of low socio-economic status students, "despite overwhelming odds," progress through four-year institutions (Cabrera et al., 2005, p. 157). For equitable access to exist, American colleges and universities must resist the longstanding value to remain *bastions of privilege*, and instead, fulfill "the civic and

moral dimensions” of their purpose (Rose, 2011, para. 10). The federal government can and must do more to encourage this shift.

Community colleges, primed with the values of access and affordability, suffered a tremendous loss when the American Graduation Initiative was *sacrificed* to make room for additional health care coverage. For many, it was hard to see a 12 billion dollar investment over ten years to community colleges slip away. Despite this loss, Pell Grants and the Supplementary Education Opportunity Grant continue to be two of the leading ways students in need receive financial aid to attend college. Former President Obama increased Pell Grant values from \$4,731 to \$5,350 and raised tuition tax credits to \$2,500. President Trump has not expanded Pell Grants; instead, he enacted significant cuts to the Department of Education. See Table 1 for \$200 billion dollars in cuts to financial grants and supports in higher education per Trump's 2018 budget (Bombardieri et al., 2018). This is all, however, during a time when present aid has not kept up with skyrocketing tuition prices, and unfortunately most federal processes are “duplicative, inefficient and not always successful in directing federal aid to the neediest students and families” (Brock, 2010, p. 123).

It is worrisome that the convergence of these factors may dissuade able Americans from seeking higher education altogether (Bombardieri et al., 2018).

Conclusion

The general themes Rose explored present strong cases for shared progress: increased access to basic education for low-income Americans will produce greater economic opportunity and social mobility, and the federal government must continue to equitably fund institutions, like community colleges, so that the more may access their vocational programs. But a closer critique reveals that there are weaknesses to Rose's arguments. He failed to support his claims with helpful statistics. In addition, Rose neglects defining key terms such as *the young* and *poor* who, in today's quantifiable world, can be broken down into multiple subgroups.

The United States Census Bureau reported in 2010 that 43.6 million individuals were living below the poverty threshold. The poverty threshold was set by the Census Bureau at \$22,541 for a family of four with two children over the age of 18. This is an increase of approximately 5.6 million people when compared to poverty levels 50 years ago. However, while more individuals are living below set standards, the

poverty rate has flatlined for the past 40 years at around 15%. The same is true for poverty rates by age, where 21% of those under the age of eighteen and 13% of those 18 to 64 are living beneath the poverty threshold. Rose's argument for the increased support for educational and occupational programs would do well to use these statistics to bolster his question: "What kind of society do we want to become?"

Michael Harrington (1962) wrote in *The Other America*, "the first step toward the new poverty was taken when millions of people proved immune to progress" (p. 9). Nowadays, progress for most low-income and minority students is stunted or denied at the gates of post-secondary education (Cabrera et al., 2005; Tierney, 1999). Two major barriers, the lack of academic readiness and limited encouragement toward degree aspiration, halt progress for low-income individuals (Cabrera et al., 2002; Rose, 2014). Although programs exist to help youth as well as adults navigate the myriad college admissions and financial information (e.g., TRIO and GEAR UP), these programs are no longer guaranteed under the current federal administration. Sustained poverty rates for youth in America over the past 50 years suggest not enough has been done, and creative ideas backed by

reliable data are needed more than ever.

Table 1

Trump Budget Over the Next 10 Years

Program	Final cuts over one year	Cuts over 10 years
Eliminating the Supplemental Education Opportunity Grant (SEOG)	\$728 million	\$7.3 billion
Cuts to Work-Study	\$483 million	\$483 million
Eliminating GEAR UP	\$337 million	\$3.4 billion
Eliminating Subsidized Loans	\$2.8 billion	\$28 billion
Eliminating Public Service Loan Forgiveness	\$4.5 billion	\$45 billion
Creating a simple income-driven repayment plan	\$12.8 billion	\$128 billion
Total	\$21.6 billion	\$216 billion

Note. Adapted from Fiscal Year 2019 Budget Request, Student Aid Overview, by U.S. Department of Education (n.d.), retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget19/justifications/n-sao.pdf>, and from Fiscal Year 2019 Efficient, Effective, Accountable: An American Budget, by Office of Management and Budget (2018), retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/budget-fy2019.pdf>

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About the Author

Johann Ducharme has a Master of Arts (MA) from the University of Maryland, College Park. He is a doctoral student in the Educational Policy, Planning, and Leadership Department with a concentration in Higher Education Administration at William & Mary.