

# Vocationalism

*David B. Bills, Lukas Graf and Paula Protsch*

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## **Vocationalism defined**

Vocationalism refers to the accommodation of the educational system to the demands of the economic system. In particular, vocationalism depicts a vision of schooling in which the chief function and responsibility of education is to meet the expressed needs of employers for useful skills. Many see vocationalism as a historical process, in which the liberal, moral, or civic purposes of schooling are steadily displaced by economic purposes. Analysts of vocationalism are often sharply divided on whether or not this accommodation is a good thing, and much of the literature on vocationalism is quite normative. Hayward (2007:3), for instance, sees vocationalism negatively, defining it as “the over-promotion of the work-related learning aims of secondary and tertiary education at the expense of the civic, aesthetic and moral purposes of education.” Others have defined vocationalism more positively as being of great benefit not only to employers, but to students, job-seekers, workers, and society more broadly.

There is no single entity that can be identified as vocationalism. As Ryan (2003:159) observed, “vocationalism involves heterogeneous practices and multiple objectives.” Most importantly, vocationalism is not reducible to vocational education. While a narrowly vocational education comprises a particular aspect of vocationalism, the concept of vocationalism is broader, encompassing a range of practices and policies intended to maximize the occupational value of schooling. Among its staunchest supporters, vocationalism offers young people preparation for vocations – work that is meaningful and purposeful – rather than simply for jobs.

In one sense, vocationalism is a social movement. That is, there is an active and politically organized vocationalist community with its own professional associations, specialized journals, engaged core of advocates, and bureaucratic apparatus. Vocationalism is also an ideology, or at the very least an educational ideal, with its own system of beliefs, folk heroes, and guiding vision of what education should be.

The extent to which vocationalism has penetrated an educational system will vary across societies and historical periods. In principle, if not in practice, a society may organize its educational system around liberal or general studies with no explicit or even implicit connections to economic production. At the other extreme, virtually all curriculum, credentials, and pedagogy might be directed toward workforce preparation. What characterizes strongly vocationalized

educational systems is that schooling is in the end more responsive to the economy than it is an innovative or independent force for the dissemination of other sorts of values and priorities.

Vocationalism can refer to educational preparation both for entry-level occupations of mid-level skill and income levels and for professional or high-skill positions. Our focus here will be on vocationalism in secondary and tertiary schooling. We will not consider elementary education, although elements of vocationalism have penetrated curriculum and pedagogy even at that level. We will also ignore job training, a practice that is explicitly designed to enhance job skills, and which thus lacks the inherent tension between the competing civic or moral and economic purposes of schooling that characterizes other levels of the educational system.

Vocationalism typically brings with it the increasing involvement of labor market actors in the everyday operation of the educational system. This can take different forms, ranging from elaborated corporate governance structures involving the social partners and other representatives in the decision-making processes, active partnerships between school and business through lobbying, and otherwise influencing educational and labor force policy through the simple provision of money, equipment, or other resources. While business has rarely been indifferent to the output of the educational system, its direct involvement in schooling is almost certainly greater now than it has ever been. The relationships between business and education can be either consensual or conflictual, but the two institutions are in either case increasingly interconnected.

### **A brief history of vocationalism**

While the relationship between formal schooling and occupational entry is now so firmly established in contemporary industrial and postindustrial societies as to appear virtually innate, this relationship is actually a relatively recent development. Prior to industrialization and the expansion of mass education, young people acquired their job skills primarily through either their families or more formalized apprenticeships. In both the United States and much of Europe, the rapid expansion of both secondary and tertiary schooling beginning around the turn of the twentieth century (earlier in the United States, and a bit later in some other countries) was accompanied by the vocationalization of the educational system.

The history of vocationalism has been a contentious one, marked by strikingly different visions of exactly how school should prepare young people for work (Kliebard 1999). The humanistic visions of such figures as John Dewey in the United States and Georg Kerschensteiner in Germany, calling for high academic standards and contextualized learning, have co-existed uneasily with more instrumental conceptions of schooling focusing on often narrowly defined but “useful” job skills and knowledge. Likewise, the classical American debate over the proper direction for African-American education between the “practical” vision of Booker T. Washington and the more occupationally ambitious vision of W.E.B. DuBois sets out in stark terms the contested nature of vocationalism. The history of vocationalism is simultaneously one of being highly valued and highly stigmatized.

The historical processes by which vocationalism has come about have differed across societies. In the United States, various forms of work-based education (although less commonly full-fledged apprenticeships in the European sense) eventually gave way in the 1880s to a form of vocational high schools known as manual training schools (Kliebard 1999). Late nineteenth century vocationalism in the United States was often fueled by conflicts over unionization (Jacoby 2007). Early vocational education had powerful institutional backers. The National Association of Manufacturers (NAM), the American Federation of Labor (AFL), and the National Society for the Promotion of Industrial Education (NSPIE) all supported vocationalism, if often for quite

different purposes. The rapid ascendancy of vocationalism over the ensuing decades was further encouraged by the elevation of Taylorism and Scientific Management as dominant business philosophies. Kliebard (1999) believes that the American educational system was essentially vocationalized by the end of World War II.

The fulcrum of American vocationalism shifted yet again in the 1950s and 1960s away from vocational high schools and toward community colleges. Community colleges have always had multiple and contradictory purposes (Dougherty 1994). Their designers have as often focused on the role of community colleges in preparing students to transfer to four-year institutions as to prepare them for the workforce. Still, vocationalism has always been crucial to the community college mission. More recently, vocationalism has begun to shift toward a wide variety of private vendors and providers of “educational services.”

The history of American vocationalism at the postsecondary levels of schooling, and particularly at the graduate level, is considerably different from its often stigmatized counterpart at the secondary levels. The ascendancy of professionalization in the nineteenth century United States did much to vocationalize the university curriculum (Collins 1979, Larsen 1977, Abbott 1988). A series of broad structural changes including the emergence of mass education, the decline of liberal arts education (which had been the province of an elite class), and the increased role of science, rationality, and efficiency in virtually all sectors of the newly industrialized society together resulted in a historic shift to school-based occupational preparation and the dominance of academic majors articulated with particular occupations. These processes brought with them too the beginnings of educational credentialism in the United States.

Other nations have taken different routes toward vocationalism, although the result in industrial and postindustrial societies is virtually always an educational system that is to a great degree subject to the demands of the workplace. Germany’s “Dual System,” in which employers, employees, educational institutions, and the state collaborate on what has proven to be a highly durable system of skill formation, often serves as a model for an effective and efficient form of vocationalism. Evoking the concept of *Beruf*, which refers to the subjective meaning and honor attached to one’s chosen work, the Dual System makes explicit the linkages between occupational preparation and quite specific forms of work. In light of the recent economic crisis, the German model has renewed its reputation as exemplary. Nonetheless, it is increasingly coming under stress as it is faced with rapidly changing skill needs and accompanying further expansion of the tertiary education sector, structural transformations of the German economy toward services, and the mounting costs of maintaining an expensive apparatus of training which depends on the willingness of employers to invest.

The British history of vocationalism is different yet from that of either the United States or Germany. England did not develop mass schooling nearly as early as did the United States. Unlike the US, apprenticeships in England grew out of a guild tradition and were heavily regulated by craft unions. As a consequence, England had much more of a tradition of skills being acquired at work. Over the past generation, this situation has changed markedly, as the British policy and business communities have embraced a vision of schooling as a key component of a national effort at meeting the skill needs of an increasingly global and competitive market.

### **The changing context of youth and young adulthood**

Contemporary youth enter the workplace facing a very different social, economic, and demographic context than that which fostered the emergence of vocationalism over a century ago. Indeed, the context in which young adults must now establish careers is sharply different from even a generation ago. Despite important societal-level variations in educational systems, labor

market stringency, and institutional structures, youth in postindustrial societies face a broadly similar set of conditions. These conditions include a steady and evidently permanent decline in stable and secure manufacturing jobs requiring relatively little advanced education, the ubiquitous dissemination of information and communications technology in the modern workplace and a corresponding increase in the demand for the skills needed to negotiate these technologies, demographically aging societies in which the needs of the younger and older sections of the population are often in conflict over resources, an ever-greater global interdependence of both capital and labor across national boundaries, and the increased frequency and importance of "postindustrial work," characterized by teamwork, cooperation, and reciprocity. The net result of these many changes is that the entry of many youth into the contemporary labor market has become a problematic and protracted one. This early career disorderliness has been pessimistically characterized by some as floundering and more optimistically by others as job search, but the increased difficulty of growing numbers of young workers in establishing their early careers seems empirically well-established.

Analysts often study the early career period using the concept of the transition from school to work. Probably the most important thing to keep in mind about the "school to work" transition is that it is not a single identifiable and discrete event. Rather, the school to work transition is a maturational process that can develop over an often extended period of time. Youth enter and depart the labor market with great frequency, making any uniquely defined relationship between their educational and occupational statuses an ephemeral one.

In the United States, more than in most comparable nations, the transition from high school to the workplace is remarkably informal and unstructured. For the most part, the United States has not been aggressive about building institutions to facilitate the transitions of young school-leavers into the workforce. This is in sharp contrast to the school to work transition in many other nations. This does not mean that other industrialized nations are all of a piece. France has very active labor market policies aimed at youth employment and unemployment. These policies include youth employment schemes for unemployed and less-skilled young adults, on-the-job training arrangements, and payroll tax subsidies for minimum wage workers. Germany has established many different pre-vocational measures (*Übergangssystem*) which help circumvent youth unemployment but are often criticized for offering few opportunities for earning educational credentials essential for a successful transition to work. Great Britain often resembles the United States in its comparative "hands off" approach to how people move from school to work. In response to the economic crisis, the European Union recently adopted a European youth guarantee which focuses on funding active labor market policies. Southern European countries such as Spain and Greece which have high levels of youth unemployment have adopted several often poorly institutionalized programs directed to youth.

School to work policies differ across industrialized societies, but the increased demand of employers for skills is characteristic of all industrial and postindustrial societies. These ever more stringent skill demands are felt with particular force by young workers. Lacking the ability to observe these skills directly in job applicants (except in the case of apprenticeships), employers typically turn instead to an evaluation of the educational credentials of new workers. Many educational credentialists argue that this heightened demand for skills, certificates, and diplomas is less a rational response to technological and workplace change and more the acceleration of a process in which employers arbitrarily and unnecessarily increase their hiring criteria beyond any real change in the skills actually required to perform productively on the job. Extreme forms of educational credentialism seem to support extreme forms of vocationalism.

## Vocational education

While vocational education – coursework and curricula that are specifically designed to meet the needs of occupational preparation – is only one aspect of vocationalism, it is an extremely important one. Supporters of vocational education see it as the best long-term hope for young people for whom higher education is neither likely nor desired. Detractors of vocational education, in particular at the secondary level, counter with charges of blocked opportunities and class, gender, and racial privilege.

Somewhat paradoxically, in the United States the acceleration of vocationalism over the past generation has been accompanied by a sharp decline in traditional vocational education at the secondary level. Academic course taking has increased in American high schools since the mid-1980s while vocational education has declined. This is in part a response to more stringent high school graduation requirements set in motion by ‘A Nation At Risk’ (1983) and similar reports of educational crisis and in part because of a more demanding job market. Also, the high costs of vocational education came under increasing scrutiny in the 1980s as the economy slowed, leading eventually to diminished government support.

The decline in vocational enrollments was not, however, a consequence of the growth in academic enrollments. Rather, many American students simply increased the number of credit hours they took in high school. The major shift was away from enrollments in general education and toward enrollments in non-vocational, college preparatory curricula. In this sense, the declines in enrollments in postsecondary vocational education signal an even greater trend toward the vocationalism of the high school curriculum. The non-vocationally oriented general education fell by the wayside, while academic enrollments, by this point primarily a preparation for a vocationalized postsecondary tier, took on increased long-term vocational significance. The preparation of people for postsecondary education and the sorting and selection processes associated with this have become the centerpiece of contemporary vocationalism in that the ultimate aim is to channel people into jobs. In addition, in many cases such traditional subjects as math and science are now being packaged as practical and useful.

## The new vocationalism

Many critics (e.g., Grubb and Lazerson 2004) see American vocationalism as too narrowly focused on specific utilitarian and practical skills and capacities, and argue that the acquisition of many of these skills will only prepare people for occupational obsolescence as the demands of the economy continue to shift. In part as a response to this criticism, an emerging and disparate body of thought collectively known as The New Vocationalism has emerged. Advocates of The New Vocationalism intend it to provide a more inclusive and general workforce preparation than existing models of vocationalism. Supporters of such initiatives as career academies, youth apprenticeships, tech-prep programs, co-op programs, work-based learning, and cognitive apprenticeships define vocationalism broadly to encompass generic and especially academic skills. Increasingly, scholars and practitioners of The New Vocationalism concern themselves not only with the curricular dimensions of vocationalism, but with its institutional setting in the workplace as well. Proposals to align vocational education and academic education more closely are in a sense a “softer” vocationalism.

Scholars from different theoretical and normative perspectives understand the concept of The New Vocationalism quite differently. For some, The New Vocationalism is an exhortatory term, a call to action to meet the needs of a global economy. To others the term is more pejorative, signifying a dire warning of business encroachment on the democratic values and mission

of education. While even its harshest critics acknowledge that The New Vocationalism is more than a simple repackaging of traditional vocationalism (Grubb and Lazerson 2004), there is no doubt that The New Vocationalism is subject to many of the same contradictions that have plagued vocationalism from its inception. The contradictions include the tensions between vocationalism and academic excellence, equity and equal opportunity, and social inclusion.

The American approach to vocationalism differs significantly from the systems of collective skill formation of continental European countries such as Austria, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland (Busemeyer and Trampusch 2012). While the American approach has been to increase gradually the occupational orientation of comprehensive educational institutions such as high schools, community colleges, or universities (with the exception of elite liberal arts colleges), in systems of collective skill formation the tradition of apprenticeship training, organized through social partnership, has not only survived but still forms one of the two central pillars of the educational system, along with general academic education. In Germany, these two pillars are separated by an “educational schism,” which refers to the marked differences between the respective instruction principles, governance and financial models, status of learner and staff, and educational norms and ideals (Baethge 2006).

Because this institutional separation is deeply rooted in both social stratification systems and national production models (prominently associated with diversified quality production in the German case), the institutional cores of both vocational training and general academic training have remained relatively stable. Still, the “Educational Gospel” (Grubb and Lazerson 2004) has had a significant impact on these countries. For example, the persistence of the educational schism is increasingly challenged by developments related to the structural change toward the service and knowledge economy, rising educational aspirations of youth and their parents, and influential European educational policies.

Rather than dissolving the educational schism altogether, these countries’ response has been to create institutional linkages and pathways between vocational training and academic general education. This has involved numerous measures, including the admission to universities on the basis of vocational training certificates and also the creation and expansion of hybrid organizational forms – like dual study programs in Germany or vocational colleges in Austria – located at the nexus of otherwise still strongly path-dependent fields of vocational training and academic general education (Graf 2013). More generally, the debate in these countries problematizes not only the opportunities and risks related to the vocationalization of higher education but also those of the increasing academization of vocational training.

### **Vocationalism and social stratification**

Many critics of vocationalism are concerned with the potential of vocationalized schooling and the early tracking often associated with it to reproduce or exacerbate educational and socio-economic inequality by diverting lower SES students from tertiary education and more prestigious labor market positions. In the German-speaking countries and Great Britain, vocational track graduates have traditionally been ineligible to attend higher education. In France where many vocational students are eligible, their likelihood of continuing with tertiary education is low (Shavit and Müller 2000). We are currently observing the same pattern for Germany where eligibility criteria have been recently relaxed. Ainsworth and Roscigno (2005) report for the US too that participating in vocational education puts students at a disadvantage. They observe especially detrimental effects for women, minorities, and lower SES students, even controlling for prior achievement and educational expectations. On the other hand, Shavit and Müller (2000) show that at the same level of schooling, vocational education offers a safety net against

unemployment and badly paid jobs (with the US and Great Britain being exceptions). Vocationalism can have protective effects, particularly in countries with highly vocational specific education and training systems with strong institutional linkages with the labor market. In this context, for example, in Switzerland, which leads the group of collective skill formation systems in terms of the proportion of youth participating in apprenticeship training, the strong labor market position of apprentices builds on a normative principle deeply embedded in Swiss society, namely that vocational education and training and general academic training are considered as “different but equal” (“andersartig, aber gleichwertig”). The EU Commission, in reaction to the recent recession, is promoting apprenticeships as an important strategy to tackle youth unemployment – serving the needs of both the labor market and individuals.

While Dual apprenticeships in the German-speaking countries, Denmark, and the Netherlands are still seen as a viable alternative to an academic degree, less attention has been paid to social stratification within the Dual systems and across different types of vocational education. In Germany, for example, employers evaluate students applying for apprenticeships based on their educational credentials previously earned in school. School achievement, on the other hand, strongly correlates with parents' SES and ethnicity. As a result, disadvantaged youth are disproportionately trained in less attractive occupations with inferior labor market prospects. Moreover, one-third of those starting vocational tracks are placed in low-level courses which are not recognized by the labor market (Protsch and Solga 2015). The Wolf Report (2011:71) observes an even stronger disconnection of vocational education and the labor market in Great Britain. Accordingly, a major part of what is offered to 16–18 year olds is lower-level vocational qualifications with no labor market value.

Overall, the empirical evidence provides a mixed picture. For Ainsworth and Roscigno and others, vocationalism is a story of blocked opportunities and foregone alternatives. Proponents of vocationalism maintain that it can provide a ladder out of otherwise constrained life chances. Even such a perceptive critic as Ryan (2003) argues that vocationalism raises the educational attainments (and thus socioeconomic attainments) of those of lower ability, motivation, and prior achievements. As these opposing assessments show, we still need a great deal more research on the stratifying effects of vocational education more narrowly and vocationalism more broadly.

### Research agenda

The focus of probably most research on vocationalism has been primarily on the individual-level effects of participation in vocational education. This research has focused usefully but perhaps too narrowly on the question of whether or not vocational education is a good investment as a means of enhancing one's income and employment stability. There is also a substantial body of program evaluation of vocational education. In some ways these two strands of research are asking the same questions – to what extent does vocational education pay off in terms of employment and income prospects? What is the ratio of costs and benefits in vocational programs?

The current chapter has been concerned with a set of related and more qualitative questions. For example, what does the trend toward vocationalism do to the shape and composition of the high school curriculum? How does it influence the postsecondary curriculum? Grubb and Lazerson (2004) have criticized the trend toward vocationalism as leading to the “degradation of secondary education” while Labaree believes that vocationalism “has reshaped education into a commodity for the purposes of status attainment and has elevated the pursuit of credentials over the acquisition of knowledge” (1997:39). But advocates of The New Vocationalism say the curriculum has been strengthened and enriched through its Deweyan union of academic and vocational values. Empirical research is needed to settle these issues.

Finally, to a great degree the concept of skills provides the foundation for all conceptualizations of vocationalism, but despite the centrality of skills we still fail to understand fully the role they play in postindustrial labor markets and occupational preparation. Much human capital theory to the contrary, skill is not the same thing as education, and in fact the relationship between the two can vary over time. Further, sometimes it is best to think of skills as characteristics of individuals, and at other times to think of skills as characteristics of work tasks, jobs, or even of groups of workers.

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