
Presidential Address

FROM ELITISM TO POPULISM: A FOUCAULDIAN TRAGEDY
OF JELL-O, CELL PHONES, AND HIGHER EDUCATION

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Commodity theory tells us what many know already: an item tends to be valued more if it is less available.¹ The more available it becomes, the lower its perceived value. Jell-O, for example, was once so difficult to produce that gelatin desserts were the purview of kings and queens. Once inventors patented more cost effective processes for extracting gelatin in the 1800's, Jell-O descended in both cost and perceived social value. Cell phones, once an expensive status item, are now ubiquitous and disposable. Their prestige value has fallen with their availability, even as their use has become embedded in society. Many products have followed this same path from elite status item to utilitarian populist tool in more or less time depending on the situation—radio, television, refrigerators, telephones, and more.

CONSUMPTION SPREADS FASTER TODAY

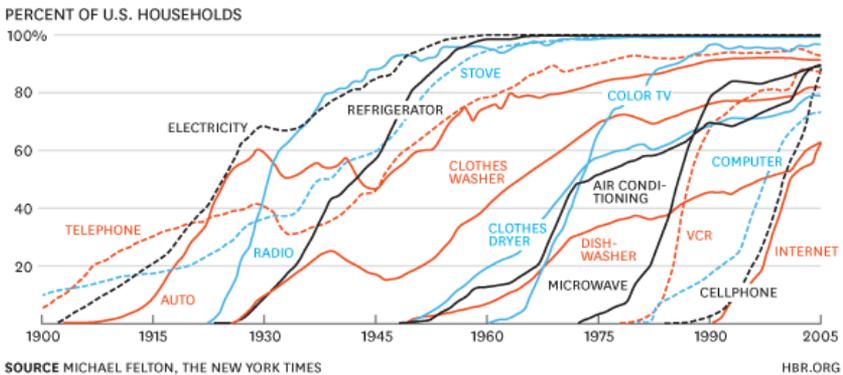


Fig. 1²

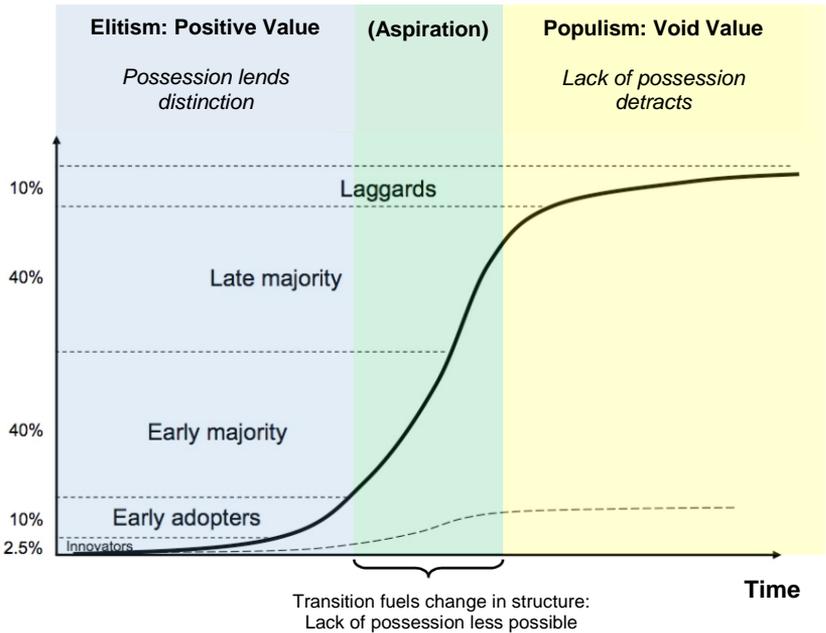
A generally s-shaped technology adoption curve describes the typical path. Underlying the theorized transformation from elitist to populist higher

¹ Theo M. M. Verhallen and Henry S. J. Robben, "Unavailability and the Evaluation of Goods," *Kyklos* 48, no. 3 (1995): 379.

² Rita McGrath, "The Pace of Technology Adoption is Speeding Up," *Harvard Business Review*, November 25, 2013, <https://hbr.org/2013/11/the-pace-of-technology-adoption-is-speeding-up>.

education is the general claim that early in the adoption of a new technology, the item has positive prestige value—few people have it and many people want it. As the item proliferates, often as pricing comes down, the aspiration of the masses drives proliferation as more people are able to attain the item. Though proliferation is initially driven by aspiration and the item may retain a “hangover” of status as it proliferates, utility takes a more prominent role. Systems change in response to the proliferation, making the item itself more necessary. In the populist phase, near full proliferation is achieved. The item may no longer have much positive social value, as it is taken for granted, but *not* having the item creates more functional difficulty and detracts from a person’s prestige—a sort of “void” value. Thus when cell phones first came out, they were associated with wealth and status. As cell phones changed the structure of communication and became more necessary—pay phones were largely eliminated, for example—they became more utilitarian and now it is more notable when someone *does not* have one.

Fig. 2³



³ Modified from “The Adoption Curve,” *Investaura*, 2016, <http://www.business-planning-for-managers.com>.

Such dynamics are not restricted to physical products. Commodity theory also applies to experiences, traits and skills, which include education.⁴ As we move from an elitist model to a populist model, higher education transforms from a highly valued mark of distinction to a social assumption. In terms of the technology adoption curve, higher education is in the aspirational proliferation phase where it still has a hangover of social status but is more and more subject to utilitarian justification. Once higher education breaches majority status, its perceived social value should decline further even as its necessity in society becomes assumed.

The idea that most people should and could attain higher education is far from where American higher education began, namely with the founding of Harvard in 1636, primarily to train ministers. Though there was always a democratic element to American higher education, which was seen as a way to rise in social station, it catered primarily to a social and intellectual elite from the seventeenth through the mid-twentieth centuries. Democratic movements such as the land grant university, historically black colleges and universities, and women's colleges widened the potential of higher education, but the system still only served the few. Access to higher education accelerated noticeably with the G.I. Bill after World War II and the Higher Education Act of 1965. Roger Geiger identifies three main purposes of higher education in American history: the transmission of elite culture for social leadership, training for careers, and the creation and transmission of knowledge.⁵ Through history these accrue, so that higher education now serves multiple populations with multiple purposes. Though one purpose may predominate at a given time, all are represented in all phases of higher education history.

FROM ELITE TO MASS TO UNIVERSAL HIGHER EDUCATION: MARTIN TROW

According to Sociologist of Education Martin Trow, the overall aim of higher education has shifted from shaping the character of an elite for leadership to training the populace for jobs and life in a rapidly changing society.⁶ Higher education, according to Trow, has parallels with the history of secondary education in many respects. Secondary education, specifically the attainment of a high school diploma, has already gone through what higher education is in the midst of: proliferation from a highly valued social good to a baseline expectation. High school degree attainment in 1910 was under 15%, but has now climbed to almost 90%, passing the 50% mark in the late 1960's. College degree attainment

⁴ Timothy C. Brock and Laura A. Brannon, "Liberalization of Commodity Theory," *Basic & Applied Social Psychology* 13, no. 1 (1992): 137.

⁵ Roger L. Geiger, *The History of American Higher Education: Learning and Culture from the Founding to World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 539.

⁶ Martin A. Trow, *Twentieth-Century Higher Education: Elite to Mass to Universal*, ed. Michael Burrage (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 556.

in 1910 was under 3%, while it is currently around 30%, which is where secondary education was in the late 1940's.

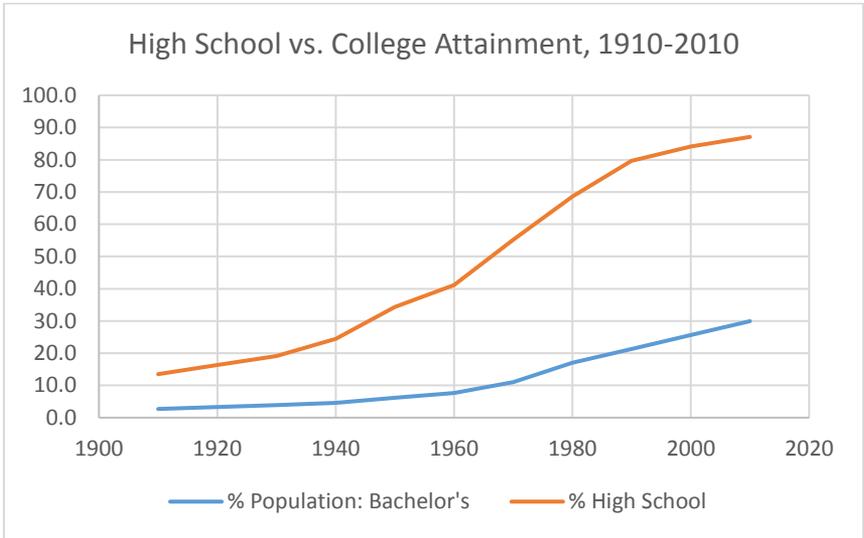


Fig. 3⁷

In the 1950's a high school degree was portrayed as a ticket to a future, much as a college degree is portrayed now. Having fully reached the populist phase, secondary degrees now have little positive perceived value, and are primarily noticed only if lacking. Far from being an end in itself, secondary education is now seen primarily as preparatory.⁸

Trow identifies this expansion of higher education as a transition from elite to mass to universal education; a transition that secondary education has already achieved. He marks the transition from elite to mass education at 15% degree attainment, and the transition from mass to universal education at 50% degree attainment.⁹ Trow points to a change in attitude toward education in this transition. While elite education was originally seen as both a privilege and *for* the privileged, it is increasingly seen as a right and then an obligation as education becomes universal. Secondary education was seen as a marker of status, but now “failure to go on to higher education from secondary school is increasingly a mark of some defect of mind or character that has to be explained

⁷ Derived from “Table 301.20. Historical Summary of Faculty, Enrollment, Degrees, and Finances in Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions: Selected Years, 1869–70 through 2011–12,” *National Center for Education Statistics*, March 2014, <http://nces.ed.gov>.

⁸ Trow, *Twentieth-Century Higher Education*, 59.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 94–95.

or justified or apologized for.”¹⁰ In the adoption scheme outlined above, this is a classic example of a void value. Though the proliferation of secondary education is certainly a success, it has direct implications for higher education. As higher education is perceived less as a privilege and more as an expectation, more students enter the system, but student motivation erodes significantly. Higher levels of degree attainment lead not only to a devaluation of the credential in the marketplace and in the mind of the public, but also to credential inflation: jobs which once required only a high school degree can now require a college degree because of a proliferation of graduates.¹¹

Trow highlights structural changes in higher education that naturally follow the switch from elite to mass to universal education. Curriculum becomes more standardized and modular as students become more mobile and fewer have the luxury to attend in a full time residential campus setting. The creation of the Carnegie Unit system facilitated standardization, and is still the model by which education is metered in credit-hour accountancy. Along with changes in curriculum, changes in instruction follow. The more students in the system, the more diverse the students, which means that more diverse methods of instruction and support are needed. With the drop in student motivation, techniques of student engagement and surveillance become critical.¹²

The growth of higher education also fuels the growth of academic administration, often at the expense of the faculty. Though “academic bloat” has been blamed for much of the cost increase in higher education, it is hard to deny that as programs become more diversified and complicated in relation to accrediting agencies, licensing boards, employers, and government bodies, administrative needs outgrow the more narrow talents of the faculty. Add in services to students that we now see as rights, such as disability services, tutoring centers, veterans’ centers and technology assistance, and the growth of non-faculty workers marks higher education’s responsiveness to real needs within and beyond the classroom.¹³

Academic standards are also impacted. In a system of elite education, standards for admission can be high and standards of evaluation rigorous. When everyone needs to get in, however, standards must be lowered for the system overall, even though a minority of institutions tout their selectivity.¹⁴ The advent of open access education and the community college movement have been central to this lowering of admission standards. Though few can get in anywhere, anyone can get in somewhere. Moving from the admission to the evaluation side,

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹¹ Nick Adnett and Peter Davies, “Education as a Positional Good: Implications for Market-Based Reforms of State Schooling,” *British Journal of Educational Studies* 50, no. 2 (2002): 198.

¹² Trow, *Twentieth-Century Higher Education*, 573.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 581.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 579.

grade inflation is more than an urban legend, driven first by reluctance of professors in the Viet Nam era to send students to war due to poor grades, and then in the 1990’s by the increasing requirement of decent grades to attain employment.¹⁵ Other less savory causes, such as the adoption of the student consumer model and a rise in part time faculty sensitive to poor evaluations, still point to a populist rather than an elitist structure—all of these things are attempts to please the masses.

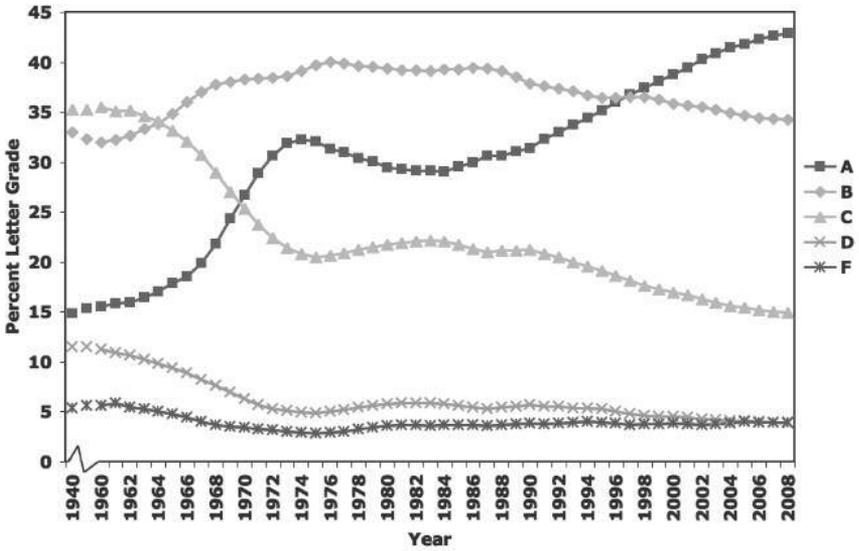


Fig. 4¹⁶

Finally, Trow points out growing attention from forces outside colleges and universities. As higher education is more available to more people, more constituencies take an interest. The more money goes into higher education, from students or from governments, the more the public has a right to know how its money is spent, and the more government will become involved in both regulating and overseeing higher education, for good or ill.¹⁷ It is ironic that the same educators who demand transparency and regulation of other industries say when it comes to higher education: “just trust us, we know what we’re doing.” That is, of course, a very elitist thing to say. As elitist education becomes populist education, the populace will naturally and rightfully want a say in the mechanisms and outcomes of higher education. Interest from the populace, along

¹⁵ Stuart Rojstaczer and Christopher Healy “Where A Is Ordinary: The Evolution Of American College And University Grading, 1940–2009,” *Teachers College Record* 114, no. 7 (2012): 12.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁷ Trow, *Twentieth-Century Higher Education*, 578.

with all of the other changing structures of higher education which Trow outlines, do not occur at the same time or in all institutions. These changes are systemic, subject to advance and retreat, but still move in a general direction and feed one another.

Where Trow sees a three part transition from elite to mass to universal, I see a two part transition from elite to populist education. In my mind, Trow's mass phase is simply the elite and populist mindsets battling for dominance in a structural shift that is moving toward populism. In addition, whereas Trow's terminology is appropriately descriptive in a sociological sense, keyed on percentages of population, my chosen terminology is prescriptive, for both elitism and populism are basic understandings about the appropriate role of higher education in human life and society. We agree that these models of transformation are comprehensively structural, composed of but not controlled by the actions of individuals, which coalesce in both expected and unexpected ways to both limit and create possibilities within the system as a whole.

ELITISM AND POPULISM AS STRUCTURES OF POWER AND KNOWLEDGE

Both elitism and populism in higher education are structures of power in Michel Foucault's sense, both creating and limiting possibilities in their given systems. Foucault focused primarily on how power works in specific modes of life such as punishment and sexuality. Foucault identifies power as

the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formation of the law, in the various social hegemonies.¹⁸

Power as a systemic fabric is founded upon the free choices of individuals, and hence "Power is exercised only over [and therefore by] free subjects, and only insofar as they are free. By this we mean individual or collective subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse compartments may be realized."¹⁹ Power is the entire

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 92.

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, "Afterword: The Subject and Power," in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 221.

network of persons, groups, institutions and their range of actions, practiced through a variety of strategies and tactics.²⁰

Whereas the Western intellectual tradition often assumes that seekers of knowledge must distance themselves from power, for Foucault it is essential to realize that “power produces knowledge; that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.”²¹ Each society is shaped by the priority of relationships which hold sway and the structures of power and knowledge that underlie the society as a whole. Foucault’s recommended response is *suspicion*: the recognition that knowledge is never disinterested. Knowledge either enables or disables individuals, supports or calls into question power relations. Power, conversely, is always active in the determination of what counts as a fact and how that fact is used.

Power, though, never comes without resistance. A form of power becomes evident where resistance allows a structure of power to show up instead of remaining unacknowledged.²² Resistance holds the potential to change the prevailing structure by calling its foundational assumptions into question. Resistance may become concentrated at points in the system, but resistance itself pervades the system at all points and in varying degrees. Resistance is not parasitic on power; it does not come *after* power. Resistance comes *with* power and is part of its creative force, for power cannot work unless it has something to push against. Resistance that claims to end power, to be above power, however, is fooling itself. In addition, changes in structures of power cannot be completely predicted by any of those within the system. All of the eventualities and outcomes of a specific course of action or a general shift in power relations can neither be foreseen nor controlled. The new system of power may be better in some ways, the same in some ways, but it will surely be worse in others. Once again, cell phones are a good example. While playing a major role in the toppling of totalitarian regimes through empowering the populace with free communication—multiple small points of resistance dispersed through a field of power—they also facilitate endless discourse on the diplomatic tensions between Taylor Swift and Katy Perry, dissipating energy that could be used to challenge the system—a new opiate for the masses.

The two overall power structures that concern us here are the basic models of elitist and populist higher education. At the heart of the power/knowledge structure of elitist higher education is the assumption of rightful hierarchy, combined with a notion of education as the crucible to forge a certain kind of person. Only a certain kind of person is admitted, drawn from a narrow minority of the population, and that elitist dynamic breeds other elitisms

²⁰ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 93.

²¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 27.

²² *Ibid.*, 52.

within the system. At the founding of American education, one can see this elitism showing itself as both a “natural kind” understanding of social classes and the notion of “calling” for the ministry. Both class status and calling were laid at the feet of God, who ordained everyone’s place in society through divine providence. Within this understanding, the goal of most students was not academic excellence, but to make social connections and achieve rightful leadership in society because of their ordained status. Elitisms of ethnicity and gender were also rooted in the essentialist assumptions undergirding elitist education.

The idea of democratic meritorious achievement was present as part of the Enlightenment mindset; a resistance fueled by the structure itself. The rigid class basis of elitist education was challenged and eventually dominated by the idea that anyone who can distinguish themselves by merit should participate, but higher education remained elitist. Though the merit mindset began to dominate, in practice the upper classes still had the upper hand, for they had the resources to achieve merit. Even after merit-based democratic elitism began to subsume class-based elitism, it continued to breed elitisms of its own. Students, for example, were the ones primarily responsible for extracurricular selective organizations such as fraternities, literary societies, debating societies, class clubs, and competitive sports.²³ Various honor societies arose to mark distinctions of academic achievement. In the great turn to research driven by the German tradition, elitism continued. Universities competed for the cream of the crop among students, faculty, and administrators. Though I argue that higher education is shifting to a populist mindset, elitism is certainly alive and well—the current phenomenon of “mission creep” in universities is still driven by the desire to join the research elite.²⁴

The primary goal of elitist higher education was ontological, not epistemological. Education was assumed to mold a different type of being, a person of improved character. The cultural trope of “the college man” illustrates this. The college man (gender bias intended) was a type, not an aggregation of competencies. We tend to see members of the military today in this way—a character type, not merely a set of competencies—and the military remains a democratic but elitist organization. In countries with compulsory military service, that is just something else everyone does, like high school, and carries little elitist connotation. In the crucible of elitist character-molding higher education, schools were, like the military, physically separate from society, had distinctive rituals and practices, and required much less administration due to their isolation from everyday life.

As opposed to elitist higher education, populist higher education is founded on the assumption that everyone should not only have access to, but

²³ Geiger, *The History of American Higher Education*, 366.

²⁴ Bruce B. Henderson, “Mission Creep and Teaching at the Master’s University,” *College Teaching* 57, no. 4 (2009): 186.

should complete, higher education. Blame for lack of achievement shifts from the students who failed to excel to the educational system that failed to adequately support them. Elitisms begin to be shunned as higher education opens to more and more constituencies of ability, interest, race, gender, and class. Priorities shift from forms of selectivity such as admission standards and “weeding out” to open access, learning assistance, and retention strategies. Academic standards, one of the primary power tools of elitist education, are modified downward and outward. Goals of higher education multiply and aggregate to meet the diverse needs of the populace and the job market.

The nature of higher education transforms with populism from ontology to epistemology, no longer creating a new state of being in the student but a set of goal-specific competencies. Higher education ceases to be primarily full time and residential—as is necessary for the elitist model—and becomes more and more part time and non-residential. However and wherever a student can learn a skill, the populist model assumes they should be rewarded for demonstrated competency. This is leading to what has been termed the “unbundling” of higher education, whereby the tasks of instruction and evaluation, among other things, are disaggregated.²⁵ Western Governor’s University is at the forefront of developing this model. Students proceed at their own pace, aided by mentors and instructors, and complete competency projects, which are evaluated separately. The competency model challenges not only the credit hour system, which is straining to accommodate the new model, but the very understanding of what it means to be educated. New models will naturally be questioned from the perspective of the old model, but those questions demonstrate the flux in accepted assumptions about education.

As elitism breeds elitism and instigates resistances, populism does the same. In the elitist model, for example, speech that distinguishes is acceptable and encouraged—and so derogatory speech based on race, gender or ability is not only tolerated but fostered. Within populism, to criticize or exclude any group is unacceptable, and so we have gender neutral language, political correctness, and micro-aggressions. Selective admissions are tempered by affirmative action, quotas, and open access models. Robust complaints follow. Populism, having absorbed elitism as one of its many constituencies, now suffers elitism as one of the resistances to the new structure. Many of the complaints of changes in higher education, in fact, are driven by embattled elitism. Faculty lament the strip-mall nature of college architecture, the rise of administration, and the failure of their unmotivated students to understand the privilege of education. Neoliberals lament the test of inclusion for concepts of free speech. Lazy administrations strive to establish elite value and to improve student outcomes by simply becoming more selective. Though possible for individual institutions, selectivity is no longer a valid strategy for the system as a whole. Whether any of these changes are seen as good or bad from different

²⁵ Ryan Craig, *College Disrupted: The Great Unbundling of Higher Education* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 101.

perspectives, they are all understandable within the shift from elitist to populist ideas of education.

As far as the social status of academic credentials, in the populist model, because everyone can get in somewhere, the degree itself will no longer be a distinguishing characteristic. Cell phones were also once an elitist mark of superiority. Now they are not, but prestige brands proliferate within the market—Apple for the self-styled elite, Android for the masses, track phones for the dispossessed. This nicely parallels the scope of higher education, from the Ivies and top tier research institutions down through four year universities, community colleges and various online endeavors. Difficulties of access will eventually be solved and difficulties of completion will predominate.

Despite the elitist model continuing as an element within higher education, as more and more people attain higher education, its status value declines. The link between scarcity and perceived value is in fact labeled the “scarcity effect.”²⁶ Scarcity draws attention to an object, and appeals most to individuals with a psychological need for uniqueness. In an analogous manner, “positional goods” as status markers distinguish the holder from the non-holder. Positional goods include items with little utility value, or so-called “Veblen goods,” after economist and education critic Thorstein Veblen, who coined the term “conspicuous consumption.”²⁷ Positional goods also include things of more utility value, such as clothing, cars, and homes. Education qualifies as something which distinguishes someone and thereby ascribes status value. As more people achieve education, however, the less of a distinguishing mark it becomes. A trio of Spanish authors examining education through the World Values Survey, for instance, found that although *life satisfaction* is increased by education through its effects on income and health, educational attainment itself is valued less as more people share it.²⁸ Higher education, increasingly subject to utilitarian justification through its instrumental benefits, loses the intrinsic status value it had in the elitist phase.

The transformation from elitist to populist education does not take place evenly. There are inevitable eddies and resistances that seem to go counter to the overall trend. Perhaps the most jarring eddy in the flow is the mounting cost of higher education, which is hampering enrollments and threatening to undo strides in access to higher education. Student loan debt is a major culprit here, along with the amenity wars between colleges and universities competing for students. The cost problem can be traced directly to unintended consequences of the populist model. While the original impetus of student loans was to make college more accessible, for example, all of the money flooding into the system

²⁶ Verhallen and Robben, “Unavailability and the Evaluation of Goods,” 376.

²⁷ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Macmillan, 1899).

²⁸ M^a del Mar Salinas-Jiménez, Joaquín Artés, and Javier Salinas-Jiménez, “Education as a Positional Good: A Life Satisfaction Approach,” *Social Indicators Research* 103, no. 3 (2011): 423.

contributed to rising costs as universities sought ways to spend the influx without much motivation to control costs on the back end. State support eroded partially because the existence of student loans allowed it and partially because of rising cost pressures from entitlement programs such as Medicare—another facet of the populist impulse. But, despite the reduced percentage of college costs funded by state and federal governments, overall public spending on higher education has continually increased over the last fifty years.²⁹

Recent efforts to achieve a different cost structure for higher education have largely fallen flat. The smoke and mirrors promise of populist MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) has gone as quickly as it came. The bloom is off the rose for online for-profit education as well. Many schools have gone out of business or seen their enrollments plummet, having been largely parasitic on federal student loans and wishful but vulnerable students. Having taken their profits, investors are off to some other money making scheme. This does not say, however, that these models are dead. There is no reason that some form of mass-media education is not possible when coupled with more robust competency measures, or that online education needs to be very expensive at all. It just hasn't happened yet. But it will. We shall see if new initiatives, such as the partnership between The History Channel and the University of Oklahoma beginning in 2015 to offer college credit courses, or Harvard's televised interactive classes, fare any better.³⁰

Though there are eddies in the transformation from elitism to populism, populism is driving new forms of knowledge and power. Assessment culture is a good example. As we move more to a diverse, populist competency model, it is natural to want to assess educational outcomes. Accrediting agencies are pushing outcome assessment from within the higher education universe, and government agencies are pushing from the outside. As the public focuses more on the aggregated utilitarian value of higher education instead of seeing it as a unified character-molding experience, they support outcome measurements. State funding is more and more driven by retention and graduation, not by enrollment, and lawmakers focus on increasing teaching loads and monetizing research. Increasing demands for credit transferability drive course standardization, with the individual professor less and less free to make course content and outcome decisions. Textbook companies are major actors in this transformation. Having made deals with many universities for ready-made course delivery, they are poised to increase their power in a competency-driven environment. Even more mundane details of colleges and universities reflect a populist rather than elitist mindset—university architecture, for instance, is often modeled more on strip malls than cathedrals. All of these developing structures of knowledge and power are part and parcel of a populist mindset. This makes sense in a society that wants to make education accessible to a more itinerant

²⁹ Goldie Blumenstyk, *American Higher Education in Crisis? What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 49.

³⁰ See <https://historychannel.ou.edu> for more information.

populace. The populist dream of higher education solidified by fifty years ago, and the complete transition may take another fifty, but the transition itself is well under way. Higher education now is exactly where cell phones were in 1999.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PROFESSORIATE

In the midst of this pervasive transformation from elitist to populist higher education, what is the professoriate to do? If the professoriate believes the house of higher education is aflame, then I suggest we stop, drop, and roll. First of all, we must stop harkening back to a golden age of higher education that never existed. Those who wish to reduce higher education to one “true” purpose, including professors who delude themselves into thinking education was ever primarily the disinterested search for knowledge, would do well to look at the historical evidence. There never was a time, going back to the middle ages and beyond, that professors didn’t complain that higher education was broken. There never was a time when students were adequately prepared. There never was a time when most students were in school primarily to learn. There never was a time when resources were flush. There never was a time when professors overall had a large degree of job security.

Even if there was a brief shining mythical moment of professorial power around 1970, much of that was driven by the fact that there were more jobs in the expanding populist higher education system than there were people to fill them. And lest we forget, the 1970’s was the time when professors were so disgruntled that the higher education collective bargaining movement finally took off. Since then, populist higher education has created a glut of PhDs, enabling the erosion of secure full time and well paid positions in favor of disposable and transient labor. I will admit one way in which the golden age may have existed to a degree—students may indeed have been easier to teach. With selective higher education, schools can restrict themselves to motivated and able students. These students learn *despite* the professor. The populist world of higher education presents a much different challenge in the classroom

After ceasing the golden age mentality, professors must drop the ego. It is very tempting to yearn for much of what elitist education offers: social prestige as an elite teaching an elite, distinctive architecture, motivated and able students, a high degree of unquestioned autonomy as trusted practitioners of esoteric arts. We have to admit that by the time they let most of us into the club, however, it’s not so exclusive any more. Elitism has troubled the professoriate since it began organizing itself in earnest in the early twentieth century. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP), founded one hundred years ago in 1915, shunned the labor movement as beneath it, and restricted membership to upper tier universities.³¹ Even John Dewey, one of the progressive founders, supported the AAUP’s separation from the union movement specifically because

³¹ Timothy Reese Cain, “The First Attempts to Unionize the Faculty,” *Teachers College Record* 112, no. 3 (2010): 879.

of the prestige issue, though he later became the holder of union card #1 in the American Federation of Teachers.³² Higher education unions in the first half of the twentieth century foundered in large part due to the elitist attitude. Even after faculty unionization began full force in the 1970's, the divide continued, and continues still in the AAUP, for instance, as it struggles to integrate an increasingly necessary blue collar political attitude with its more original elitist concerns.

Due to its elitist roots, higher education also distanced itself from secondary education from the beginning. The junior college movement, in fact, was conceived of as a way to keep preparatory education away from “true” and “higher” education.³³ The professoriate, however, has much to learn from K-12 educators, the most thoroughly unionized segment of the U.S. workforce, who long ago lost most pretense to elitism and saw the requirement to band together as fellow workers in the field rather than as hermit scholars on a hill. The professoriate should also dispense with the notion that labor arrangements must remain static—the class of twenty, for instance—to uphold educational quality. As Alexander Sidorkin points out, the current labor arrangement, which he calls “Education 3.0,” was invented in a specific context, bent more on efficiency than pedagogy.³⁴ A class of twenty is, after all, a lot cheaper than apprenticeship or individual tutoring as more students enter schooling in the move to populism. In addition, the power dynamics of students neatly obedient in rows subjected to the same curriculum is certainly an example of Foucault’s power inscribing itself on the very bodies of those in the system. The professoriate is right to criticize new labor arrangements for their tenuous support of the teacher and the needs of the student, but we would be wise to remember the poor pedagogy we perpetuate simply because it is what we are used to. The most unbundled online for-profit competency-driven educational experience can often beat many of the lecture halls I’ve been in.

In the coming system of populist education, ego has its niche, but will remain a luxury for the few. Even currently, almost half of students start college at very un-prestigious two year colleges, and the vast majority graduate from non-prestigious four year institutions. This means that the vast majority of professors *already* work at undistinguished institutions. Those who perform the task of higher education will continue to diminish in prestige, joining the ranks of car mechanics, computer programmers, Jell-O gastronomes, and all the other once prestigious facilitators of elitist products. Sidorkin aptly comments, “Most professors are in political solidarity with the working class and are happy to march together in support of its causes, as long as they do not have to be a part of it. However, proletarians can have wonderful lives and careers, fully

³² Ibid., 886.

³³ Geiger, *The History of American Higher Education*, 430.

³⁴ Alexander M. Sidorkin, “On the Essence of Higher Education,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 30, no. 5 (2011): 522.

compatible with academic freedom, decent wages, and the pursuit of scholarly interest.”³⁵

After we stop hearkening back to a golden age and drop the ego, we can roll with the transformation to populist higher education. Though there are faculty who support the notion that college should only be for the elite of some sort, many do support the overall goal of universal access to higher education. That does not mean that faculty should not fight for a certain vision of higher education founded on the critical search for knowledge. The attitude faculty should take to power structures of education, following Foucault, is indeed suspicion. If faculty believe that education should not be reduced to demonstrated competencies on questionable assessment devices, for instance, they should fight—but fight with populist tools: outcome data. Since the General Education Development (GED) exam has been long used as an equivalency for secondary education, it can be pointed out that even when non-high-school graduates and high school graduates have equivalent GED scores, life outcomes for GED graduates still match that of high school dropouts.³⁶ Testing does not equal education.

The professoriate can also roll with the changes by driving the transformation. Simply scaling up higher education as it exists now to include the entire population is a doubtful possibility even logistically, but certainly not politically. The stale answers for scaling up usually involve more money, usually involving taxes; so faculty are often no more creative than administrators who just want more money on the front end without creating cost efficiencies on the back end. When the professoriate is obstructionist and refuses to become a part of the process, they leave it to wheeler-dealer investors or textbook companies, who can hire equally qualified graduates on the cheap because of the glut of degrees that populist education has produced.³⁷ Despite what many want to be true, answers will inevitably involve the use of technology specifically tailored to the individual learner, which Sidorkin calls “education 4.0.”³⁸ Faculty are the ideal persons to create these new learning experiences, but faculty resist the unbundling of educational tasks and hold to their questionable desire to create everything from scratch all the time for themselves alone. Given the fact that few professors do everything well, however, unbundling would allow teachers to focus on their strengths. The challenge is to unbundle the tasks while supporting wages and job protections.

³⁵ Alexander M. Sidorkin, “Mad Hatters, Jackbooted Managers, and the Massification of Higher Education,” *Educational Theory* 62, no. 4 (2012): 489.

³⁶ James J. Heckman, John Eric Humphries, and Nicholas S. Mader, “The GED,” in *Handbook of the Economics Of Education, Volume 3*, eds. Eric A. Hanushek, Stephen Machin, and Ludger Woessmann (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 2011), 423–84.

³⁷ Even if academia mitigates the overuse of part time professors, it is unlikely that the excess teaching labor could be absorbed into the system.

³⁸ Sidorkin, “Essence of Higher Education,” 523.

A key part of driving change is to be involved in policy matters involving education, which requires descent from the ivory tower into the sullied world of politics, media and academic administration. Many of the problems education faces come from the political side, where politicians are trying to improve education for the masses. Without faculty input, these efforts often cause more trouble than they solve. The federal requirement from the 2008 Higher Education Opportunity Act to choose textbooks for classes six months out is a good example. The valiant intent is to allow students time to get cheaper books, or to choose classes that will control costs, but this solution shows no understanding of the reality of how higher education works. The more faculty are involved in lobbying and advising lawmakers, the better policy will become. Administrations, textbook companies and for-profits already have a profound influence. Faculty need to catch up.

Faculty need to become more proactively media savvy as well. To connect with a populace that is more and more expected to participate in higher education, faculty need to get their messages out through the media avenues that the populace uses, and in a way the populace can understand. Faculty must learn to communicate effectively in sound bites, though this goes against faculty training for nuance and elaboration, or the public will not hear the faculty side of things. Voice is power. To speak in a way guaranteed not to be understood squanders that power.³⁹

Finally, the more policy is changed above the level of the faculty, the more faculty need to join the ranks of those making the decisions. Though administrative bloat is indeed a problem, administration becomes a necessity as more services are offered internally and more constituencies and oversight bodies are dealt with externally. The more professors join the administration with pure hearts and pedagogical intent, the better. Many of the challenges faculty face, the administration also faces. Faculty can innovate, faculty can advocate, but none of this changes the fact that higher education will be unappreciated as more people achieve it, and faculty social status will decline as a result.

I would like to acknowledge two key limitations to the current study. First, I have drawn too big a picture and have not had time to trace specific examples of the transformation from elitism to populism in detail. More specifics would certainly help outline what I see as the systemic nature of the change that is just now picking up steam. Second, I admit a thorough bias toward Foucauldian meta-narratives of power. My temptation, and Foucault's weakness as well, is to force every detail of life into the narrative, whether it fits or not. I now see populism behind every tree in the academic forest, despite critics such as Suzanne Mettler, who claim that higher education is exacerbating inequality in our society, not levelling it.⁴⁰ All I can say is that if narrative tends to play

³⁹ See Greg Loving and Jeff Cramerding, "Five Rules for Dealing with the Media," *Academe* 102, no. 1 (2016): 24–27.

⁴⁰ Suzanne Mettler, *Degrees of Inequality: How the Politics of Higher Education Sabotaged the American Dream* (New York: Basic Books, 2014.)

heavy handedly, editing and interpreting data to fit the story, data wonks often refuse to admit their biases and miss the grand trends that control the data. I simply and naively trust that there may be balance fostered by robust discussion between the two extremes.

ELITISM, POPULISM, AND TRAGEDY

One loose end—why is all this a tragedy? For ethicist Stanley Hauerwas, tragedy is the recognition that sometimes evil happens despite the best intentions and efforts of all involved. Sometimes goods conflict, or resources are not enough to do the good desired. Such is the nature of tragedy in human life—“the possibility of irresolvable moral conflict.”⁴¹ The recognition of tragedy highlights the importance of humility. Tragedy as a reminder of the basic human inability to solve all problems combats “the deceptive story that we can be—or at least should strive to be—free from fate.”⁴² The recognition of tragedy does not mean surrendering in the face of evil, is not the acceptance of helplessness, but is the call for humble vigilance.

Many of the problems that come with the transformation from elitist to populist higher education, not the least of which will be its cultural devaluation, result from a conspiracy of good intentions to make higher education not only available to, but achievable by, all. There will be major changes and real losers. Nothing can be gained without something lost, and any Foucauldian story at best takes place in a moral universe of competing narratives. As higher education proliferates and more constituencies stake their claims, the faculty voice fights to compete, but will never be unimportant. The faculty may decline in social prestige, but not necessarily in trust and respect. Despite losing perceived value, higher education itself will never be unimportant.

Jell-O is perhaps a shaky analogy, for no one truly needs Jell-O (sorry, mom.) Cell phones are a more appropriate metaphor. They have elevated the lowly and brought down the mighty, opened up new possibilities and new insanities. They have restructured existence to make themselves necessary, and yet their ubiquity has made them simply another disposable utilitarian tool. Higher education is traversing the same arc from elitism to populism, aimed not at creating a new state of being in the few, but providing basic competency to the many in a more complicated world. And the many will take it for granted. Resistance is inevitable.

⁴¹ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 22.

⁴² Stanley Hauerwas, *Truthfulness and Tragedy: Further Investigations into Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 200.
