

SUFFICIENTARIAN JUSTICE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I argue for a sufficientarian conception of justice in higher education. I discuss the goods that higher education confers to its graduates, what a just distribution of those goods entails, and some reforms that would help the American system of higher education better adhere to the requirements of justice. Currently in the United States, institutions of higher education confer their benefits to those who are already advantaged at a disproportionate rate. This disables social mobility and serves to help the rich get richer. Primarily using sufficientarian frameworks outlined by Debra Satz and Elizabeth Anderson, I argue in favor of expanding higher education's accessibility through several potential reforms. Alongside this argument, I refute economist Bryan Caplan's view that higher education teaches very little that is useful to its students and should have its enrollment decreased, as well as Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift's egalitarian view of justice in higher education.

In the United States, institutions of higher education are linked to many tangible benefits for their graduates. These include high-paying jobs, higher rates of job satisfaction, and better health outcomes. Though, at an increasingly high rate, they grant these advantages to the previously advantaged.¹ With tuition prices at public and private American universities increasing on a yearly basis, a degree is becoming less accessible for those not born into the economic elite. In fact, data from the United States Department of Education shows that average tuition and fee rates at four-year universities rose from \$12,052 during the 1985-1986 academic year to \$26,120 during the 2015-2016 year.² So, it is no surprise that, in 2014, the Pell Institute observed that students in the top quartile of family income made up 54% of those who obtained bachelor's degrees by the age of 24, while the bottom quartile made up only 10%.³ This is occurring despite that, over the last century, American universities have transitioned from being finishing schools for the elite to being prerequisites for middle-class comfort.⁴ Without a four-year degree, one has very few opportunities to raise themselves out of poverty, and this is not due to their individual talents and motivation; it is the current system of American higher education that disables social mobility in this way.

Despite these characteristics of higher education, some, including economist Bryan Caplan, argue that the United States should attempt to reduce enrollment in higher education in order to increase the number and quality of jobs available to non-degree holders, claiming that higher education teaches its students very few useful skills anyway. However, I will argue that institutions of higher education do teach useful skills and lessons to their students. These skills

¹ Gina Schouten, "Higher Education, Distributive Justice, and Positional Goods: Should we be the Professors our Republican Dads Warned us about?," Draft, (2017).

² "Fast Facts: Tuition Costs of Colleges and Universities," National Center for Education Statistics, 2018.

³ "Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States: 2016 Historical Trend Report," The Pell Institute, Accessed November 25, 2018.

⁴ Robert Fullinwider and Judith Lichtenberg, *Leveling the Playing Field: Justice, Politics, and College Admissions*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004), 43-44.

gained and lessons learned are the intrinsically and instrumentally valuable goods that institutions confer upon their students. I then go on to outline what a just distribution of these goods entails. I argue for a sufficientarian standard of justice in higher education, while refuting competing egalitarian views as well as Bryan Caplan's perspective on the issue. I then conclude my argument by offering several government and university policy reforms that would change the system of higher education into a more just social institution that promotes social mobility, ensures that elite positions are filled by individuals from all sectors of society, and raises the most disadvantaged individuals to a level of education that is sufficient to allow them to act in society on equal ground.

The Goods of Higher Education

As stated above, higher education confers numerous benefits to its students, including high-paying, high-status jobs. However, why graduates of four-year universities are almost exclusively the recipients of the high-paying jobs in the United States is more complicated than it may seem. Economist Bryan Caplan suggests that there are two possible models that could explain why employers care about their potential employees' education level: the *human capital model* and the *signaling model*. Those who adhere to the human capital model claim that education teaches useful skills, which employers desire, and that this is why university graduates are the recipients of high-paying jobs. Under this understanding of the goods of higher education, college builds the skills needed to perform jobs after graduation, and this is why employers prefer applicants with degrees. The signaling model, on the other hand, says that education does not build a significant amount of human capital. Caplan, arguing in favor of this model, claims that higher education is useful for obtaining a high-paying job only because a degree signals to employers that one holds the personal characteristics that lead to academic

success, which are the same characteristics that lead to job success. For Caplan, what one learns in college is irrelevant to employment and income outcomes; what matters is that a degree from an institution of higher education signals intelligence, conscientiousness, and conformity to employers, and that these traits are valued by employers. The signaling model does not say that college builds these traits into its students. It says that they already hold these characteristics and that obtaining a degree is how they signal this to employers.⁵

While one could think of ways other than attaining a degree that an individual could signal intelligence, conscientiousness, or conformity, Caplan says that higher education is an important signal to employers because it signals that one holds the whole package of these desirable traits. If one attempts to signal their intelligence by showcasing a high SAT score or by blogging about world affairs, yet they did not go to college, an employer might assume they are lacking conscientiousness and conformity. Similarly, if one signaled their conscientiousness by working hard on something other than their education, an employer might assume that the individual did not have the intelligence or conformity to make it through college, despite their work ethic. By obtaining a degree, one signals to employers that they hold all three characteristics. Caplan concedes that there are exceptions to this. Intelligent, conscientious, and conformist individuals may pass on college for other reasons, such as a lack of finances for tuition, but he claims that “as long as the exceptions remain exceptions, signaling works. Employers are running businesses, not logic classes. Hiring decisions, like all business decisions, are about prudence, not proof.”⁶ Under the signaling model, it is more efficient for

⁵ Bryan Caplan, *The Case Against Education: Why the Education System is a Waste of Time and Money* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 50-56.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 55-60.

employers to rely on education credentials to signal these traits, rather than to look into the other reasons that one may not have completed higher education.

Caplan furthers his argument in favor of the signaling model by claiming that most subjects studied at universities are not very useful in the sense that the lessons learned in those courses will not be applicable to their career. He separates college majors into three categories according to what he considers to be their usefulness. He defines majors of “high usefulness” as those that “explicitly prepare(s) students for well-defined technical careers...” Caplan places engineering, architecture, agriculture, and health profession majors among a few others into this category.⁷

He defines his second category, “medium usefulness”, as majors that are “vaguely vocational and funnel students toward predictable occupations after graduation. At the same time, they teach few technical skills, and nonmajors readily compete for the same jobs.” In this category he places majors such as business, education, mathematics, and public administration. He explains this standard, writing “you don’t need a business degree to work in business, but perhaps your coursework gives you an edge. You don’t need an education degree to land a teaching job, but explicitly studying education could enhance your teaching down the road.”⁸

The most studied category according to Caplan is “low usefulness”. He states that majors in this category do not prepare students for the job market at all or only prepare students for specific jobs of which there are few available. For example, one may say that history teaches students the skills needed to be historians, but Caplan counters that far more students study history than there are historian positions available. He classifies liberal arts, fine arts, and foreign language majors as having “low usefulness.” From these categorizations, he claims that

⁷ Ibid., 90-92.

⁸ Ibid., 92-94.

24.1% of American students major in highly useful subjects, 35.3% in mediumly useful majors, and 40.5% in low usefulness majors.⁹

Caplan also claims that *fadeout* is a problem for the human capital model. The phenomenon of fadeout is that humans poorly retain knowledge that they rarely use. He evidences this phenomenon with a study of people's knowledge of algebra and geometry. Some of the participants were still in high school and the rest were between the ages of nineteen and eighty-four. Controlling for individual subject's full education in mathematics, the study found the majority of people forget around half of what they learned in high school math classes within five years and forget almost everything by the twenty-five year mark.¹⁰ Caplan also cites studies on the retention of knowledge in history, science, and foreign language, which have similar results.¹¹ He also uses data on adult literacy gathered by the Department of Education to show that under one-third of college graduates have the literacy expected of first-year college students. For Caplan, this indicates a problem with the human capital model because employers make hiring decisions based on one's knowledge at the time they are hired, not on graduation day.¹²

Caplan's characterization of what is learned in college is severely critical of the goods that higher education confers to its students. However, it is made under a limited conception of what is useful for graduates of institutions of higher education. While it is my view that Caplan understates the effectiveness of the vocational education taught in college, for the purposes of this paper, the exact extent to which institutions of higher education effectively teach vocational education is irrelevant. It is much more than just that specific vocational instruction that is valuable for graduates anyway. Many other theorists claim that higher education confers

⁹ Ibid., 92-97.

¹⁰ Ibid., 98-101.

¹¹ Ibid., 109-119.

¹² Ibid., 101-107.

intrinsically valuable benefits to students in addition to the vocational goods that Caplan thinks are overstated. Theorist Gina Schouten claims that an intrinsically valuable good of higher education is “the enjoyment of developing and exercising a skillset, and the imaginative thinking through of how one might apply it to self-chosen, meaningful, and socially-valued projects.”¹³ This is not only enjoyable in itself for individuals. Being able to develop and apply a skillset is valuable and applicable in many professional jobs.

The intrinsically valuable goods conferred through higher education are many. And within these intrinsic goods, there are goods which can be good for anyone who attains them but may be thought of as having instrumental value rather than intrinsic value because, while they are useful for nearly all occupations, they are not necessarily good in themselves. Theorist Robert Fullinwider separates these goods into three main categories: education for work, education for citizenship, and education for living. Not to be confused with the vocational skills gained in higher education, the goods of education for work have instrumental and intrinsic value. They include the building of mental processes that help students think, analyze, communicate, and make decisions better. These benefits are good for graduates no matter the career field they enter.¹⁴ While the majors categorized by Caplan as having “low usefulness” may not teach the technical skills that are required for a certain job, one’s ability to perform that job will no doubt be improved by having developed these attributes. Take, for example, a philosophy major who works in business management. They will be better able to analyze information that could potentially benefit the company, make better and more ethical decisions regarding that information, and be better able to communicate that information to their colleagues than someone without the benefit of having attended an institution of higher

¹³ Schouten, “Higher Education, Distributive Justice, and Positional Goods.”

¹⁴ Fullinwider and Lichtenberg, *Leveling the Playing Field*, 50.

education. This will benefit them in their career despite that their specific focus of study did not teach them the technical skills utilized in business management. Most entry-level jobs teach the necessary technical skills to their new employees in their job-training programs for before beginning work anyway.

The second category, education for citizenship, encompasses the understanding and appreciation gained through higher education that enhances one's role as a citizen of their nation and of the world. Through higher education, students develop their ability to "understand complex public issues, evaluate arguments and information and those who purvey it, and appreciate the points of view of those with different or even alien outlooks."¹⁵ Every individual could benefit from developing a greater understanding of their role as a citizen in society. This not only benefits individuals, but society in general as well. A nation with citizens who have a more full understanding of their role in it will function better and make better democratic decisions. Moreover, in this age of misinformation, being able to evaluate information, arguments, and the sources from which they flow is an instrumentally valuable tool for everyone.

Fullinwider's third category is education for living. The goods in this category are the development of one's taste, judgement, and mind in such a way that it "opens doors to valuable aesthetic, intellectual, and emotional experiences and that these enhance one's life."¹⁶ Higher education builds one's capacity for appreciation of the world's cultural products, important philosophical concepts, and many other human achievements. In John Stewart Mill's classic book, *Utilitarianism*, he wrote of the higher and lower pleasures which are derived from the higher and lower faculties of the mind. He considered mental pleasures derived from the higher faculties of the mind to be more intrinsically valuable than other pleasures. Mill's point from

¹⁵ Ibid., 50-51.

¹⁶ Ibid., 51.

Utilitarianism displays this. “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, are a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question. The other party to the comparison knows both sides.”¹⁷ Higher education’s development of the goods of education for living allows graduates to more fully realize these higher pleasures and, thus, enhances their lives.

Caplan, on the other hand, argues that if education is what he calls a “merit good,” an economic term similar to an intrinsically valuable good, then the internet is the “merit machine.” According to Caplan, the internet can provide all the knowledge that an institution of higher education can, but for free. He concedes that a strong majority of people do not use the internet for “spiritual enrichment,” but claims that this shows that people just are not interested in attaining this knowledge. So, he claims, if enlightenment is still scarce when the price is zero, people must not be interested in the enlightenment offered through higher education either. He argues that if students are not eager to learn, they will not.¹⁸

In claiming that internet could provide the same goods that higher education does, Caplan overlooks the importance of the way in which institutions of higher education confer their goods. Though people may be able to learn the same concepts on the internet as they would at a university, they do not have the same engagement with others over that material that produces critical thinking. Discussing ideas and culture with individuals from a wide range of backgrounds encourages critical thinking in students and also improves their ability to communicate their thoughts with others. The communities and chat rooms available online do not produce the same outcomes as a room of people who must look at each other face-to-face

¹⁷ John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 1863, Reprint, Kitchener: Batoche Books, 2001.

¹⁸ Caplan, *The Case Against Education*, 520-528.

while communicating. Furthermore, higher education does not attempt to force enlightenment on its students as Caplan claims. Perhaps the reason that very few people engage with valuable knowledge on the internet is that no one has attempted to pique their interest in these subjects. Having professors who are passionate about a subject is important for getting individuals interested in learning intrinsically valuable lessons.

Higher education also confers intrinsically valuable goods to society as a whole. Theorist Debra Satz describes how everyone benefits from higher education's building of skillsets and talents in its students, writing "these talents may make life more interesting and stimulating, may give us a new sense of what human beings can achieve, and may be valuable for their own sake."¹⁹ When one attains knowledge or skills at a university that propels them to start a business or create something that helps society function more efficiently or more justly, everyone benefits.

The outcomes of the research done at institutions of higher education benefit all of society as well. The artistic achievements and scientific advancements produced through research provides benefits beyond the individual.²⁰ Research into renewable energy, for instance, will benefit global society for generations. Universities' service missions also benefit all of society. Certain programs within universities often make efforts to improve their surrounding community through volunteer work and community leadership programs. Both the research and service missions at these institutions attempt to solve the problems of contemporary society, thus benefitting everyone.²¹

¹⁹ Debra Satz, "Equality, Adequacy, and Education for Citizenship," *Ethics* 117, no. 4 (July 2007): 632-633.

²⁰ Schouten, "Higher Education, Distributive Justice, and Positional Goods."

²¹ Fullinwider and Lichtenberg, *Leveling the Playing Field*, 51-52.

I have argued that higher education confers these intrinsically valuable goods to its graduates and to all of society, which go beyond the tangible goods that it offers to individuals, such as high-paying jobs. While these goods of higher education are plentiful, there is at least one good conferred to graduates that has positional effects: a degree. There is no doubt that a four-year degree confers higher-paying jobs and social status to those who obtain one.

Positional goods, like a degree, are “goods with the property that one’s relative place in the distribution of the good affects one’s absolute position with respect to its value.”²² While the intrinsically valuable goods of higher education that I have discussed are always good no matter who else has acquired them, a degree’s value depends on how well it equips its holder to obtain subsequent scarce goods, such as jobs. More students obtaining four-year degrees does not mean that there will be more high-paying jobs available for them upon graduation. The more people there are that get a leg-up in the competition for these jobs, the less advantageous that leg-up will be. This means that as degree attainment grows, its relative value will decline. Thus, through its positional properties, its absolute value will also decline. This is called *credential inflation*.²³

However, credential inflation does not necessarily mean that the prospect of expanding access to higher education is detrimental to justice. If access is expanded and more credentialed individuals are competing for a constant number of jobs, employers will have to find something else with which to differentiate between candidates. Rather than that something being a four-year degree alone, which disproportionately goes to those born into privilege, employers may turn to their analysis of graduates’ performance in interviews, academic courses, previous jobs and internships, and leadership roles in campus groups to decide whose experiences qualify them for a high-income and high-status job. More people competing for jobs makes obtaining those

²² Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift, “Equality, Priority, and Positional Goods,” *Ethics* 116, no. 3 (April 2006): 472.

²³ Schouten, “Higher Education, Distributive Justice, and Positional Goods.”

jobs more difficult, but it also means that individuals from low-income backgrounds, who do not have the opportunity to compete for well-paying jobs under the current circumstances, will be on a more level playing field when competing for these subsequent goods. Additionally, this expanded access is only harmful for an individual that does not succeed in obtaining a high-paying job after graduation if they need that high salary to pay off their student-debt. I will discuss reforms to universities' tuition policies that mitigate this problem later in this paper. Expanding higher education access at the expense of a four-year degree's value is not bad in itself. In addition to increasing the number of individuals who hold the intrinsic goods of higher education, expanding access would allow individuals from low-income backgrounds to compete with privileged individuals for high-paying jobs at a more proportional rate than is currently the case in the United States. I will expand this argument further when discussing the requirements of justice in higher education.

The goods that higher education offers to its graduates and to society are plentiful and diverse. While Bryan Caplan claims that universities teach very few of the technical skills needed in the labor market, it is much more than vocational instruction that benefits students. His "usefulness" categorization mischaracterizes the knowledge and talents gained in higher education that are important for future careers. The goods conferred through higher education, such as those included in Fullinwider's education for work, education for citizenship, and education for living categories, are intrinsically valuable for the individual and are broadly useful in the labor market. These aspects of a liberal education not only benefit individual graduates, but also society as a whole. Higher education's research and service missions work to solve the contemporary issues in society and, thus, benefit everyone as well. While the positional aspects of a college degree seem to pose a problem for expanding access to higher education, they are

not detrimental. Credential inflation lessens the value of a degree, but expanding access still creates a more level playing field in the competition for scarce jobs than is currently the case.

When taking this in conjunction with higher education's intrinsically valuable goods, expanding access may be considered better for individuals, better for society, and better for justice.

The Requirements of Justice

Now that I have established what are the goods conferred through higher education, I turn to the question of what justice requires with respect to the distribution of these goods. This issue is complicated by the lack of justice in the institutions surrounding higher education. Gina Schouten writes, "In an ideal educational division of labor, institutions of compulsory education would distribute merit fairly... and family support networks would ensure that all students enter compulsory schooling prepared enough to learn that educational institutions really can distribute merit fairly." But, she claims "this justice-preserving division of labor does not obtain. Students do not reach the point of applying to college having enjoyed equal opportunities to become meritorious. They enter compulsory schooling profoundly unequally prepared to learn, and they exit profoundly unequally equipped with the kind of merit that influences higher education admissions. Meanwhile, we lack the institutional support for basic needs that would ensure that all can live a good life whether or not they attain a college degree."²⁴

Some argue that institutions of higher education have no responsibility to promote justice beyond what would be required of them if the other sectors in the educational division of labor performed their role justly. They claim the system of higher education only must be *internally* just, meaning it performs its role in promoting justice with the assumption that all other institutions are also doing so adequately. Yet, this would do little to promote justice more

²⁴ Schouten, "Higher Education, Distributive Justice, and Positional Goods."

broadly. So, the first question of justice in higher education is this: does higher education have the *compensatory obligation* to promote justice while recognizing that compulsory education does not justly distribute the goods that it confers upon its students? The answer is yes; promoting justice and enabling social mobility is one of main purposes of higher education. This is not a controversial claim either. Enabling social mobility is what is already used to justify the current arrangement of government spending on higher education.²⁵

With higher education's compensatory obligation established, I turn to the other principles of justice required of higher education. Bryan Caplan bases his higher education reform proposal on libertarian principles and calls it "full separation of school and state." Founded upon his argument that education is useful for signaling more so than learning valuable skills, he claims that we would be better off eliminating public funding of higher education. He analogizes his argument, writing "suppose I prove your toenail fungus cream doesn't work. I counsel, 'Stop wasting money on that worthless cream.' Would you demur, 'Not until we find a toenail fungus remedy that works?'" No way. Finding a real remedy could be more trouble than it's worth. It might take forever. Continuing to waste money on quackery until a cure comes into your possession is folly."²⁶ He adds to his argument that eliminating spending on higher education would free up resources that could be used to benefit society in other ways. Caplan concedes that this would decrease educational attainment, yet he argues that this is a positive. He says that if educational attainment rises, workers will need more education for the same jobs, and since education is almost all signaling and not human capital-building, this is a waste. Whereas, if educational attainment decreased, workers would need less education for the same

²⁵ Schouten, "Higher Education, Distributive Justice, and Positional Goods."

²⁶ Caplan, *The Case Against Education*, 436.

jobs, thus lessening the waste of resources on education.²⁷ However, for this argument to succeed, one must accept his critical view of what goods higher education confers to its students, and as I have already shown, Caplan's view is limited in its conception of what is useful for college graduates.

Decreasing enrollment in higher education would have a negative social impact, not a positive one as Caplan suggests, given higher education's intrinsic and instrumental value that he overlooks. Robert Fullinwider's three categories of education for work, education for citizenship, and education for living exemplify this overlooked value. While individuals without higher education could learn the technical skills needed for a job during the training period that most entry-level jobs require, they may not have the more broadly useful education for work that Fullinwider says benefits an individual in any career field "by helping them think better, analyze better, communicate better, make better decisions."²⁸ This education has instrumental value for graduates of higher education, and by decreasing the quantity of employees who hold these instrumental goods, eliminating higher education funding would decrease the efficiency and effectiveness of those workers and their companies.

Additionally, Caplan's proposal would create negative social effects due to its decreasing the amount of citizens which have the knowledge and skills attained in higher education, which Fullinwider categorizes under his education for citizenship category. If this proposal became reality, there would be an even larger sector of uninformed voters. Having less individuals that can accurately evaluate political arguments and the members of the government and the media that convey them would result in a less-informed citizenry and, thus, a decreased ability to make good democratic decisions and a less effective democratic government.

²⁷ Ibid., 420-440.

²⁸ Fullinwider and Lichtenberg, *Leveling the Playing Field*, 50.

Moreover, the intrinsically valuable goods included in Fullinwider's education for living category are good for everyone, whether they are a janitor or a doctor, analytical or creative, employed or unemployed. Potential negative effects on society due to a decreased number of individuals holding these goods may include a culture more centered around lower faculties of the mind that J.S. Mill refers to in *Utilitarianism*. Yet, perhaps more importantly, these goods are good for everyone and have no positional properties. So, no one is hurt by more individuals attaining these goods. In fact, none of the goods in Fullinwider's three categories contain goods with positional properties. So, in reference to these goods, no one is negatively affected by an increase in higher education enrollment.

On the other hand, I have previously conceded that a degree from an institution of higher education is a positional good. Yet, Caplan's proposal to eliminate funding for higher education would not contribute to a just distribution of this good. While decreasing funding and, thus, decreasing enrollment may increase the value of this good, it would not stop affluent Americans from continuing to use it to obtain the most high-paying jobs. Instead, it would result in this good being distributed almost exclusively to those who can afford it, keeping lower-income families from achieving social mobility. The jobs available to those without a four-year degree would be more numerous and better paid, but it would strengthen the advantage that those born into wealth have over those who were not when competing for the highest-paying jobs. The highest-paying jobs' employers will still use higher education credentials to determine the qualifications of a certain job. Whether this is due to the human capital model or the signaling model, the same logic applies. It does not change only because there would be less degree holders.

Bryan Caplan's proposal only worsens the problems for justice in higher education that are present under the current system. His reforms would further the extent to which universities provide advantages to the already advantaged and worsen class stratification. Anyone who has attended a university, especially a private university, knows someone whose wealth and family background allowed them to put forth little effort and still receive admission to a university and ultimately come away with a degree and a well-paying job, despite spending more time drinking than studying. These individuals have a leg-up in the competition for these jobs not because of superior talent or motivation, but because of their family's wealth. Meanwhile, there are many who have the talent and motivation to succeed in higher education but lack the financial resources, the time, the support network, or all three. Caplan's proposal would increase the number of students who lack the financial resources because it eliminates government funding that allows low-income students to receive federal and state grants and loans. This would mean that more space would be available in institutions of higher education for students who can afford tuition but may lack talent or motivation.

Put another way, Caplan's proposal seeks to open a new gateway to well-paying jobs, one that does not require a four-year degree. However, this gateway for non-degree holders does not lead them to the most high-paying and high-status jobs, only to better jobs than are currently available. While, in this way, low-income non-graduates' job opportunities would be improved, their ability to reach the most influential and highest paying positions would be profoundly worsened. This is because, as I stated, employers for these elite positions will still choose the candidates with the best credentials even though there would be fewer of them. And, these fewer candidates would undoubtedly be from affluent family backgrounds since Caplan's way of decreasing higher education's enrollment is to eliminate the government funding that currently

allows some low-income students to pursue a degree. Thus, Caplan's "separation of school and state," while perhaps opening the door out of poverty for some individuals, effectively shuts their door to the more elite positions that allow the individuals who hold them to influence society. This would result in an even worse outcome of justice for the American system of higher education than is currently the case; it would create a society in which everyone who is born into lower-income situations stays there and individuals of affluent backgrounds would have an even easier path to staying that way. It is this generational impact on status that justice seeks to eliminate.

In sum, Caplan's proposal would decrease the number of individuals in society who hold the instrumentally and intrinsically valuable goods conferred through higher education that are always good for everyone who attains them, no matter how many other individuals have also attained them, and allow only the rich to educate themselves and compete for high-paying jobs. So, while it may increase the value of a four-year degree for those who can attain one, Caplan's vision of the system of higher education would create an aristocratic society with a large and uneducated working class.

I now turn to my conception of a just distribution of the goods in higher education. Keep in mind that these goods include intrinsic and instrumental non-positional goods as well as one positional good, a degree. This conception is drawn from principles of sufficientarian justice, with the core principles being Elizabeth Anderson's principle of a democratically qualified elite and Debra Satz's principle of equal citizenship. As I have already stated, a degree from a four-year university has become a prerequisite for reaching middle-class comfort, and is especially necessary to become a member of the economic elite. Elites are "those who occupy positions of responsibility and leadership in society: managers, consultants, professionals, politicians, policy

makers.”²⁹ A just composition of elites must serve and be responsive to the needs all classes in society, not only their own. Elizabeth Anderson gives four relevant requirements for a democratically qualified elite: “(i) awareness of the interests and problems of people from all sectors and (ii) a disposition to serve those interests. Effective service of those interests requires (iii) technical knowledge of how to advance these interests and (iv) competence in respectful interaction with people from all sectors.” She argues that “An educational system suitable for a democratic society must cultivate all four qualifications in its elite and must select individuals for elite education with a view to how effectively an elite so composed will manifest these qualifications as a group.” In order for a composition of elites to meet these requirements, its membership must come from all social classes and must be educated in an integrated environment, so that the group can build respect and competence in their interactions between social-groups. Anderson builds on the qualifications with a sufficientarian principle: “every student with the potential and interest should receive a K–12 education sufficient to enable him or her to succeed at a college that prepares its students for postgraduate education.”³⁰ However, the scope of my argument reaches only the sector of higher education, while assuming that compulsory education unequally and unjustly distributes its goods. But, higher education does have the compulsory obligation to promote justice when the sectors surrounding it are not adequately performing their role. So, Anderson’s qualifications of an elite class still apply, and it is still the case that every student should have the sufficient opportunity to succeed in higher education and, thus, compete for elite positions. For the purposes of this paper, I will not assume reforms in compulsory education will take place. Instead, I will seek a sufficientarian solution

²⁹ Elizabeth Anderson, “Fair Opportunity in Education: A Democratic Equality Perspective,” *Ethics* 117, no. 4 (July 2007): 596.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 596-598.

for reforming only the sector of higher education. A just distribution of the goods of higher education will allow individuals from all sectors of society the opportunity to attain higher education's goods and compete for its subsequent goods alongside individuals from the other sectors.

While Anderson's second and third elite qualifications are achievable by an individual alone, the first and fourth require interaction between social classes. This requires an integrated educational environment, with members of all socioeconomic classes present.³¹ This would entail allowing students without high levels of family income to learn in the same environments as high-income students. Under the current system, this is rarely the case. At highly selective universities, those in the bottom 28% of income make up only 3% of the student body.³² Justice requires that the opportunity to obtain a four-year degree is proportional for all members of society, irrespective of all factors that are not related to natural talent or motivation, especially family income.

Debra Satz looks at sufficientarian educational justice, or educational adequacy, from a different, but equally applicable, perspective. She links educational adequacy with equal citizenship. Satz claims that an education is necessary for equal membership in one's society and that it is the "foundation of good citizenship." Citing T.H. Marshall's understanding of equal citizenship, she writes, "As full members of society, citizens (1) have equal basic political rights and freedoms, including rights to speech and participation in the political process; (2) have equal rights and freedoms within civil society, including rights to own property and to justice; and (3) have equal rights to a threshold of economic welfare and to 'share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in the

³¹ Ibid.

³² Satz, "Equality, Adequacy, and Education for Citizenship," 624.

society.”³³ She derives her conception of what educational adequacy requires from this understanding of equal citizenship. This citizenship requires “a threshold level of knowledge and competence for exercising its associated rights and freedoms—liberty of speech and expression, liberty of conscience, and the right to serve on a jury, vote, and participate in politics and in the economy.” This threshold depends on the distribution of knowledge in society as a whole. To competently serve on a jury, an individual must be able to understand concepts such as “reasonable doubt” and “negligence,” but they must also be able to competently respond to other jurors and their arguments.³⁴

Through her conception of what equal citizenship requires, Satz responds to critics of educational adequacy that say that it allows for unjust inequalities due to prioritization of sufficiency for the least advantaged. She argues that equal citizenship entails that those with few opportunities must not be relegated to second-class citizenship by cutting them off from the prospects of social mobility, eliminating their ability to form relationships on equal footing, and offending their self-respect due to their relative position in society.³⁵ Aggregating the sufficientarian views of Anderson and Satz paints a picture of an educational system which would integrate university campuses among socioeconomic classes, educate all citizens to a level of sufficient knowledge to allow them full social participation, and ensure that no one suffers from such little opportunity that their self-respect and dignity are harmed, and it does all these things without the prospect of *leveling down* the academic achievement of more advantaged students.

³³ Ibid., 636.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 635-638.

The opposition to leveling down is what separates sufficientarian views on education from the opposing egalitarian views. Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift, proponents of egalitarianism in education, concede that there are reasons for leveling down the educational prospects of the most advantaged.³⁶ It is a fact that no society has the resources to supply all low-income students with the same opportunities that the wealthiest students have due to their high levels of resources. So, in order to reach the egalitarian conception of justice, the opportunities for the educational achievement of the most advantaged would have to be leveled down to what the government could afford to grant to the least advantaged students. Hurting the prospects of advanced educational achievements has a negative impact on society. Satz writes, “There are numerous ways a person can benefit from the cultivation of other people’s talents beyond the levels provided for by public funds: these talents may make life more interesting and stimulating, may give us a new sense of what human beings can achieve, and may be valuable for their own sake.”³⁷ These high academic achievements often progress society as a whole and are intrinsically good for everyone, beyond just the achieving individual. Additionally, more highly educated people, in social positions, are more capable of serving the needs of others.³⁸

Brighouse and Swift object to this condemnation of leveling down in all circumstances. They claim that there are just reasons to level down the achievements of the most advantaged. To them, objecting to leveling down means allowing for large inequalities between those with the most and those with the least so long as the least advantaged meet a threshold of sufficiency.³⁹ Yet, Satz’s conception of equal citizenship means that sufficientarian justice does have relational elements. The “threshold level of knowledge and competence for exercising

³⁶ Brighouse and Swift, “Equality, Priority, and Positional Goods,” 474-475.

³⁷ Satz, “Equality, Adequacy, and Education for Citizenship,” 632-633.

³⁸ Anderson, “Fair Opportunity in Education,” 596-599.

³⁹ Brighouse and Swift, “Equality, Priority, and Positional Goods,” 474-476.

[equal citizenship's] associated rights and freedoms" depend on one's position within the distribution as a whole. So, in fact, large inequalities, are not permitted under sufficientarian justice, and this does not require leveling down.⁴⁰ However, Brighthouse and Swift argue that some instances of inequality do call for leveling down. They claim that previous unjust distributions of goods play in to this. For example, when a wealthy parent uses their resources to further benefit their already advantaged children in their pursuit of higher education, it may be unjust to use these resources on them, rather than less-advantaged individuals. In a direct response to Anderson and Satz's views, they argue that these inequalities in resources among parents are often a product of the unjust distribution of goods the generation before, so it would not be just for these parents to use their resources only to benefit their own already advantaged children. Brighthouse and Swift analogize this situation to a bag of stolen money falling into one's lap. They ask if spending this money on one's children would be just.⁴¹

While, clearly, it would not be just to use stolen money to provide for one's education, the unjust distribution of goods described here by Brighthouse and Swift is not a product of illegal acts. It is a product of the current unjust system, which sufficientarians seek to replace by promoting justice within that system. Not leveling down means not offending parents' rights to use their resources on their children in the way that they see fit. Once the system becomes more just through sufficientarian reforms, this distribution of goods will correct itself within a few generations. Justice does not require that we alter the way wealthy families parent their children in the current distribution of goods. Though, it will alter the distribution of these goods down the road.

⁴⁰ Satz, "Equality, Adequacy, and Education for Citizenship," 636.

⁴¹ Harry Brighthouse and Adam Swift, "Educational Equality versus Educational Adequacy: A Critique of Anderson and Satz," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (May 2009): 123-124.

The condemning of leveling down of highly-advantaged students' opportunities also allows institutions of higher education to promote justice while still adhering to their various institutional missions, which include more than just the liberal education mission. For example, research missions at universities necessitate professors to seek the most highly talented students to help them discuss and apply their ideas.⁴² This is one aim of universities which does not benefit from increasing the opportunities of the least advantaged. However, the system of higher education can adhere to their missions while promoting a sufficientarian conception of justice, which would ensure that all individuals, regardless of socioeconomic status, have a sufficient opportunity to attain the goods of higher education, participate in public activities as an equal citizen, compete for elite jobs that require a four-year degree, and not have their self-respect diminished by large inequality of opportunity.

Sufficientarian Reforms

Having outlined what sufficientarian justice requires of the distribution of the goods of higher education, I will now propose several potential reforms that would help American institutions of higher education better adhere to the sufficientarian standard of justice. Some of these reforms will need to be enacted through government legislation; others will require action by universities themselves. These reforms all have an intended positive effect, whether direct or indirect, on the accessibility of a four-year degree for demographic groups which are currently underrepresented in degree attainment and elite positions. These demographics include, but are not limited to, racial minorities and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Expanding access to these demographics will help institutions of higher education to enroll student body populations comprised of individuals from all sectors of society and, thus, create a just

⁴² Fullinwider and Lichtenberg, *Leveling the Playing Field*, 51-55.

constitution of elites in society, as defined by Elizabeth Anderson. My reform proposals will also ensure that each individual has the opportunity for an education that is sufficient to ensure that they can act as equal citizens, as defined by Debra Satz.

The first set of reforms that I will outline are those which require government action. In order for any progress to be made in promoting justice, federal and state funding for higher education must increase. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss where that money might come from, however several countries, including Sweden, Norway, Germany, Finland, Denmark, and Iceland, have eliminated tuition costs for citizens at public universities entirely, without upending their national budgets. And, as Gina Schouten points out, “enabling social mobility is one of the social projects that justify public expenditure for higher education in the first place.”⁴³

Three potential government reforms for the American system of higher education come from the 2004 Higher Education Act in England, which sought to mitigate that country’s problem of unequal access to its colleges and universities. The first of the reforms from this act requires that universities charge a “variable fee between 0 and £3,000 per year. Within those limits each university can set the fee for each of its courses.” This range should be altered to reflect fair prices in the United States over a decade later, but the concept itself remains applicable. This reform creates a cap on how much universities can charge for tuition, putting lower-income students at less of a disadvantage, while still allowing for differences in prices between small local schools and highly prestigious schools. This allows prestigious universities to charge more than small local schools, while still creating a cap on tuition costs, limiting the disadvantage of low-income students.⁴⁴ This could also be expanded to allow universities to

⁴³ Schouten, “Higher Education, Distributive Justice, and Positional Goods.”

⁴⁴ Nicholas Barr, “Higher Education Funding,” in *Taking Public Universities Seriously*, edited by Frank Iacobucci and Carolyn Tuohy (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 466.

charge people of different economic backgrounds different tuition costs. A student whose parents make \$500,000 per year may have to pay the maximum cost, while a student whose parents make \$30,000 per year may pay near the minimum. This would shift the costs of higher education to well-off students who can afford it and allow those who could not afford a flat fee more accessibility.

The second reform from the Higher Education Act in England creates *income-contingent loans*. This reform could be supplemental to, or a replacement for, my expansion of the first reform. This section of the act allows for two ways in which students can pay their tuition fees. First, they can choose to pay the cost upfront if they can afford it. Or, they can choose to receive an income-contingent loan. This means that the rate at which the loan is paid back is dependent upon the annual income of the loan-recipient after graduation.⁴⁵ This would allow low-income students to enroll in universities without fear of being overcome by debt. This reform may also allow all students to choose a field of study in which they are interested, rather than one that they need to get a high-paying job to pay off their debt. With low-income students given a better opportunity to enroll in a four-year university, this will increase the diversity, especially socioeconomic diversity, of campus communities throughout the nation.

The third reform of this act entitles students under a certain threshold of family income to grants in addition to the income-contingent loans. This too strengthens the likelihood that low-income students will have access to higher education by providing them with the means to pay for the cost of living, in addition to tuition. Furthermore, this section of the legislation creates a position of “Access Regulator,” whose responsibility is to “ensure that institutions have satisfactory plans to widen access as a quid pro quo for charging higher fees. Those plans can

⁴⁵ Ibid., 466-467.

include scholarships for students from poor backgrounds; importantly, they can also include outreach to schools to improve the information available to schoolchildren.”⁴⁶ The task of the Access Regulator is an important one. They allow universities to increase the price of their tuition, but only if, in turn, they benefit low-income students. Here, again, the reform strengthens accessibility for students of low socioeconomic background, contributing to creating a qualified elite that is constituted of members in line with Elizabeth Anderson’s standard.

In the United States, these reforms from the English Higher Education Act of 2004 could be applied successfully and in a way which promotes sufficientarian justice. They would increase accessibility for low-income students, while not leveling down the ability of higher-income students to flourish academically. Under these reforms, prestigious universities will still be allowed to increase costs for high-income students and, thus, maintain the resources needed to create the highest quality educational environment, but only after creating substantive plans that ensure that the student body is made up of students from all sectors of society. Thus, it would give members from all sectors of society the opportunity to join the elite and, thus, create a democratically qualified group of elites.

I envision the next set of reforms that I will propose as reforms that university officials must make. However, they may take the form of the plans that universities must indicate to the Access Regulator in order to raise their costs. The first that I propose is affirmative action, not only on the basis of demographics traditionally thought of like race, gender, and religion, but also, and perhaps most importantly, socioeconomic status. This would serve to directly attack the current constitution of student bodies in America, in which students from the top quartile of family income disproportionately make up 54% of those who obtain a bachelor’s degree before

⁴⁶ Ibid.

the age of twenty-four.⁴⁷ This would also further Anderson's qualifications for a democratic elite by ensuring it is made up of a more proportional number of individuals from low-income backgrounds.

Another university reform, which Nicholas Barr mentions in his analysis of the Higher Education Act of 2004, is to increase the prominence of college outreach programs. Informing young children, who come from low-income or disenfranchised backgrounds in which higher education is not thought of as a realistic option, of the opportunities for higher education attainment will boost their effort and help them to see ways to climb out of poverty. This will enable social mobility and, in the long-run, allow them to affect their communities as members of the elite. Some colleges already have similar programs, including the City University of New York's GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs).⁴⁸

Universities could also increase accessibility for low-income students by having a more personalized admission process. If the goal of admissions is to select students who are likely to succeed and contribute to a productive educational environment, then the admissions process should include more than only written questions and answers. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds systematically have worse scores on standardized tests, in compulsory school grades, and in class ranks, and this is due to a variety of factors not related to their individual talent or motivation, such as less resources, less educated role models, or needing to have after-school jobs to support themselves.⁴⁹ So, if admissions decisions are made solely on the basis of these scores, a school will most likely end up selecting students only from advantaged backgrounds. In order to truly see if an individual possesses the talents and motivation to

⁴⁷ "Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States," The Pell Institute.

⁴⁸ Fullinwider and Lichtenberg, *Leveling the Playing Field*, 74.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 75-76.

succeed at a university, more qualitative factors must be considered. One way that this process could become more personalized is by requiring interviews for applicants. This would allow admissions personnel to observe first-hand whether an individual's scores are a result of their disadvantaged background. Additionally, as some entry-level jobs require of their applicants, admissions teams could have groups of applicants come to campus and perform team-oriented and individual tasks and observe how they perform. These trips to campus should be subsidized for low-income students either by the government or by the university to ensure that they participate even if they cannot afford to travel to a campus with their own finances.

The reforms outlined above, if adequately funded, will promote the emergence of a democratically qualified elite. They also serve to educate more low-income individuals at four-year universities, thus, moving many up to and beyond the threshold level of education needed for what Satz defines as equal citizenship. They will rid family income from the factors that go into whether one enrolls in higher education or not. And by personalizing the admission process and using socioeconomic affirmative action, it should be only those who lack the natural talent and motivation to succeed at a university that do not obtain a spot at a four-year university. Yet, these individuals are entitled to an education which qualifies them for equal citizenship as well. So, these reforms must go further to raise all individuals to a sufficient level of education. I will outline two more potential reforms which will help higher education to reach this standard of justice.

First, undergraduate course credits should be given for students to teach instrumental and intrinsic goods in free classes that are open and advertised to the surrounding community. By offering credit for their work, students will be encouraged to help individuals in their community that do not have higher education credentials to learn the instrumental and intrinsic goods that

allow them to act as equal citizens in society. These community classes should teach the goods which Fullinwider classifies in his categories of education for work, citizenship, and living. Different classes should teach different skills: general business skills, ability to exercise political and legal rights, and appreciation of culture. With this knowledge, even those who did not attend a university will be able to form social relationships and act within civil society as equal citizens. These community classes should be advertised heavily to the surrounding community, emphasizing the instrumental and intrinsic benefits and providing incentives for attendance, such as food catered by local food banks.

Additionally, in order for those who do not obtain higher education to qualify as equal citizens, they and, thus, their views must be respected by the elites who are responsible for making decisions that affect everyone. Having a democratically qualified elite plays a large role in this, but it must go further. In educating future members of the elite from all backgrounds, universities must educate for an *ethos of justice*. Educating for an ethos of justice is defined by Gina Schouten as “teaching to promote an egalitarian ethos, or culture, of justice, by preparing and inclining students to bring about reforms in public education, labor markets, the tax structure, and other institutions.”⁵⁰ She argues that, in this way, higher education can promote external reforms that will raise up the most disadvantaged. This requires curriculum reform that prioritizes courses which teach the generational consequences of social inequality. Students “must be exposed to learning experiences that dispose them to want to change things.”⁵¹ As a result, the elite that will have been educated for an ethos of justice will reform society to better reflect the interests of all sectors of society and ensure that those without higher education credentials can still act equal citizens.

⁵⁰ Schouten, “Higher Education, Distributive Justice, and Positional Goods.”

⁵¹ Ibid.

Conclusion

These reforms advance sufficientarian justice in higher education by increasing the accessibility of a four-year degree for individuals from low-income backgrounds and ensuring that even those who will not obtain a degree have the opportunity to attain the intrinsic and instrumental goods that allow them to act as equal citizens. As I have shown, higher education confers these goods that help all individuals to live a better life, no matter their circumstance. While Bryan Caplan would argue that increasing this accessibility is bad for the value of a degree, I have shown that his view would be detrimental for justice in society because it would decrease the amount of people who hold the intrinsically valuable goods conferred through higher education and serve only to further benefit those born into advantaged positions. Instead, the correct view of justice in higher education is a sufficientarian view, which ensures that members of the elite are made up of individuals from all backgrounds and that all members of society possess the sufficient education to act as equal citizens in society, while not leveling down the achievements of the most advantaged. This system of higher education that I have prescribed would increase social mobility and promote a more just society for all.

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