

# SHORT-TERM HIGHER EDUCATION: THE UNITED STATES' COMMUNITY COLLEGES' EXPERIENCE

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## ABSTRACT

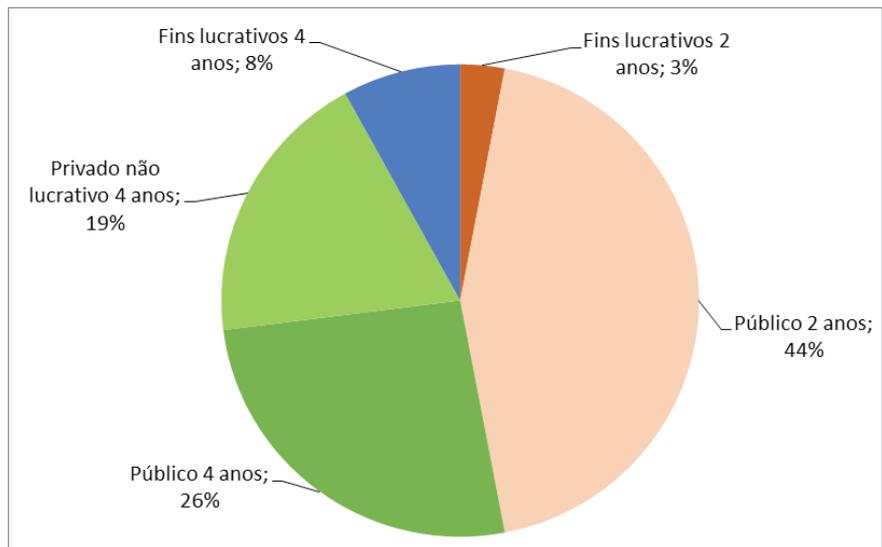
*Initially, this article seeks to outline the place of Community Colleges in the American higher education system. It describes their origin, growth, sources of revenue, and relationship with other higher education institutions. Next, it shows some of the educational system's shortcomings – despite having afforded increased access, analyses have also pointed to the fragility of the achievements made, namely, of students' performance, and of equity, that is, of the strong stratification and hierarchization of the American educational system. Accordingly, it is argued that the dilemmas and problems faced are not strictly related to the school system but, instead, to a social formation in which inequality is particularly high.*

This article is the result of a research study funded by the São Paulo Research Foundation (Fapesp) on the role of community colleges in the U.S. higher education system and the role of their educational process in the U.S. development. A book, a by-product of our research, has already been published (MORAES; SILVA, 2014).

COMMUNITY COLLEGE • HIGHER EDUCATION • EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM • UNITED STATES

**C**OMMUNITY COLLEGES, American short-term colleges, are barely known in Brazil, despite their constituting a decisive part of the comprehensive and influential United States higher education system. Community colleges account for more than 40% of all post-secondary enrollments each year, and are especially important for traditionally excluded segments, such as blacks, Latinos, women, and poor workers, whose distribution is summarized in Graph 1 below.

**GRAPH 1**  
**UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS BY TYPE OF INSTITUTION, 2009**



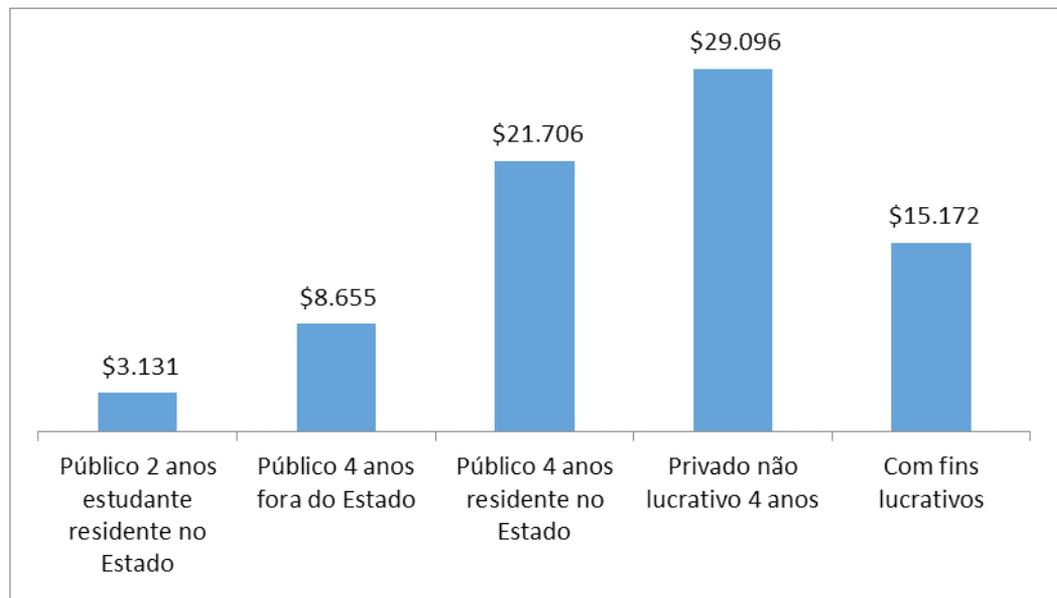
Source: Baum, Little & Payea. (2011).

Today, in addition to ethnic minorities and “poor whites”, even the “struggling to make ends meet” middle class has realized that the community college is an alternative to reduce the cost of graduation. It is worth noting that all forms of higher education in the United States are paid for, even those offered by public institutions.

The strategy of reducing costs through the community college is quite obvious and simple – students start in community colleges, which are much cheaper. (Graph 2) Students enroll in a community college, attend the two first core curriculum years, and are awarded an Associate Degree. They then complete their studies in a 4-year college or state university to, for instance, get a Bachelor’s Degree. A number of states have laid down provisions regarding articulation agreements between the community college network and state universities, which allow for transfers and supplemental studies – the “transfer” policy.

#### GRAPH 2

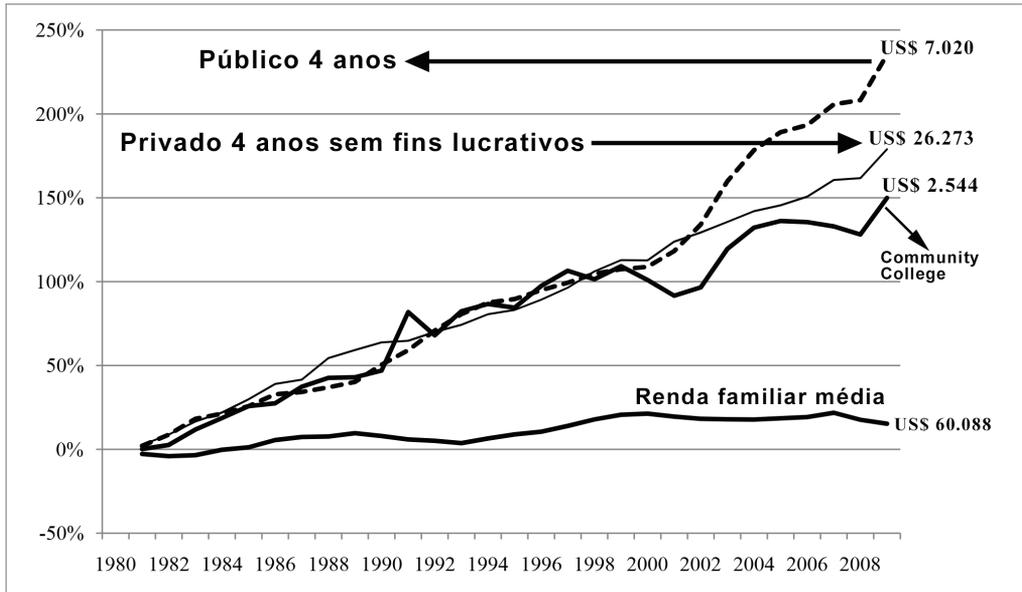
PUBLISHED AVERAGE TUITION BY TYPE OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION IN 2012 US DOLLARS



Source: Based on data by The College Board, *Trends in College Pricing* (2012).

This has become the most frequent strategy to face college tuition price hikes, in stark contrast with household income stagnation. See Graph 3 for a comparison of the evolution of tuition prices and median household income.

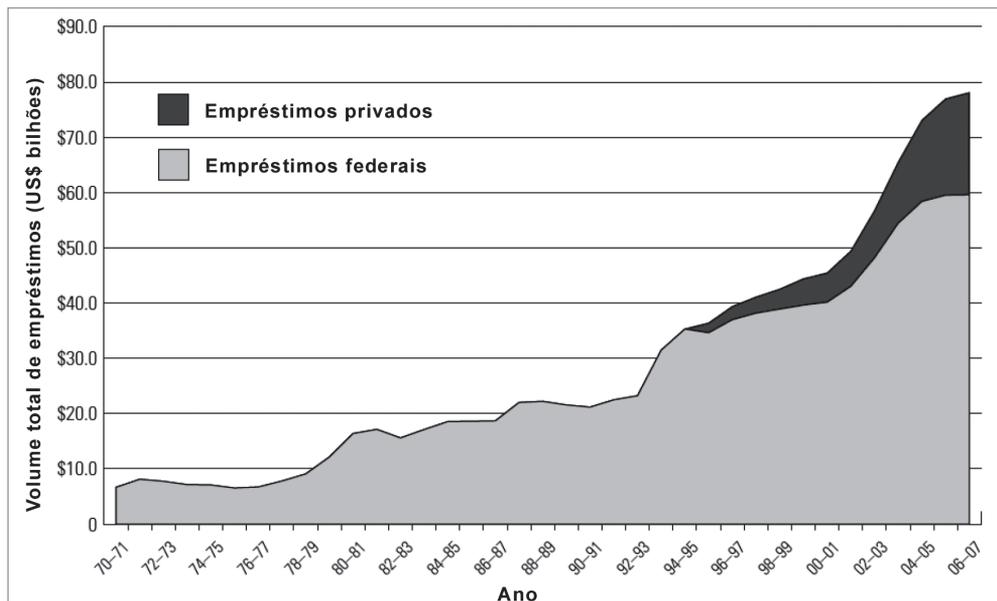
**GRAPH 3**  
**INCREASE IN TUITION PRICES FROM 1980 TO 2008**



Source: Geiger & Heller (2011, p. 3).

This situation has crunched household budgets. There are wide-reaching public full and partial tuition aid programs, mostly federal. There are also significant federal student loan programs. Still, the amount to be paid by households is of critical importance, which is why the American society is alarmed now by the enormous volume of student debt. Some analysts estimate student debt to be the second largest household debt in the U.S. The first is the sadly notorious mortgage-related debt. Credit card debts rank third. Graph 4 shows the evolution of student loans, which rose sharply especially after 1990.

**GRAPH 4**  
**VOLUME OF FEDERAL AND PRIVATE LOANS, 1970-2006, IN US DOLLARS**



Source: Geiger & Heller (2011).

## ORIGIN, GROWTH, AND IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Community colleges descend from an institution that was born more than 100 years ago, the junior college. These were conceived by the then academic leadership as a sort of bridge between graded school education and the “true university”, a gap they believed not to be bridged by the high school. The junior college should be the provider of the general education and propaedeutic required to prepare students intellectually for university. These academic leaders equated the two first years of undergraduate study to the French *lycée* and the German *Gymnasium*, which, from the curricular point of view, makes much sense even today.

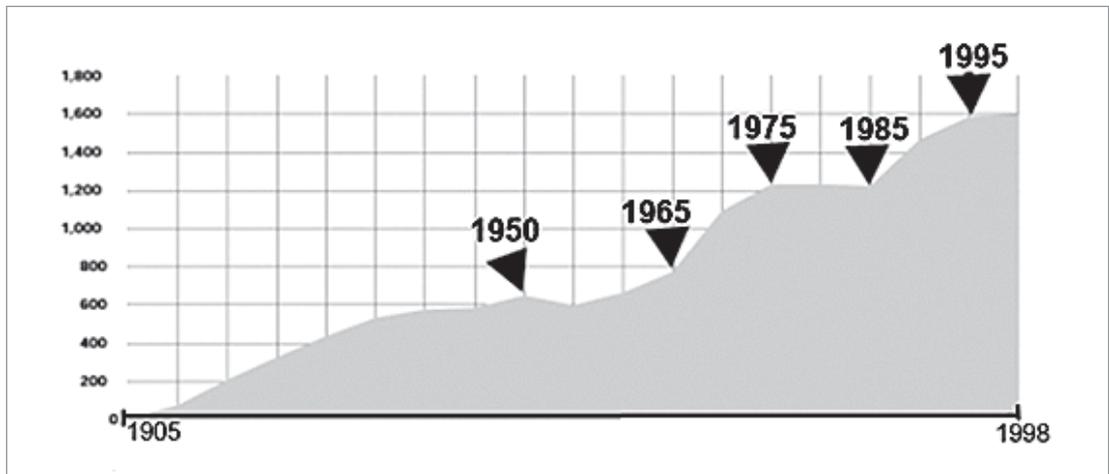
The community college is heralded by its historians and analysts as “an American invention”, which is largely true. Yet, short-term mass higher education is far from being unique only to the United States. We cannot develop this theme in this article, but it would be instructive to compare the expansion of the community college with that of other institutions like the *Sections de Techniciens Supérieurs* (STS), which rose to prominence after 1980 in France.

Early on the junior college started to acquire another dimension, besides the academic, preparatory for the university, a dimension inherited by today’s community colleges. This is focused on vocational, industrial training in the so-called “semi-professions”, niches demanding

more than technical education yet less than, say, economics, medical, or engineering schools or than a bachelor's degree in, for instance, chemistry and biology.

As with all the American higher education system, this “junior” segment experienced the decisive impact of the post-war policies. When we compare the U.S. higher education system before and after the war, we get the impression that we are dealing with two quite different things, as it shifts from being predominantly private to predominantly public, particularly with regard to undergraduate programs, with the ever-increasing role of public community colleges. Graph 5 shows the increase in the number of schools, including those with more than one campus.

**GRAPH 5**  
**NUMBER OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES, INCLUDING BRANCH CAMPUSES, 1905/1998**



Source: Data from the National Center for Educational Statistics (2012) and AACC (2012).

Although management of educational systems in the United States is primarily incumbent upon local and state governments, the influence of the federal government in modeling and expanding the system was decisive, especially in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Soon after the Civil War, the Morrill Act started granting land to the states provided they created and expanded higher education schools in the fields of engineering and agriculture. This policy led to a network of land-grant colleges and universities, largely laying the groundwork for the future state universities. The federal initiative was a great boost to the states. Another expansionist wave took place after World War II, when the G.I. Bill, a transition program for returning veterans, awarded millions of full-tuition grants and revolutionized the higher education system, including the community college. A third momentous wave occurred in the 1960s, when a range of policies designed to reach out to

minorities turned community colleges into a gateway for blacks, Latinos, and poor whites. It is worth noting that the 1960s was a critical time as regards the so-called civil rights and federal desegregation policies.

In each of these moments, the federal policy's role was decisive toward expanding and modeling the system, as mentioned. Yet, the administration and even the schools' maintenance costs relied heavily on state budgets. In the case of the community college, state funding has always been outstanding (Table 1).

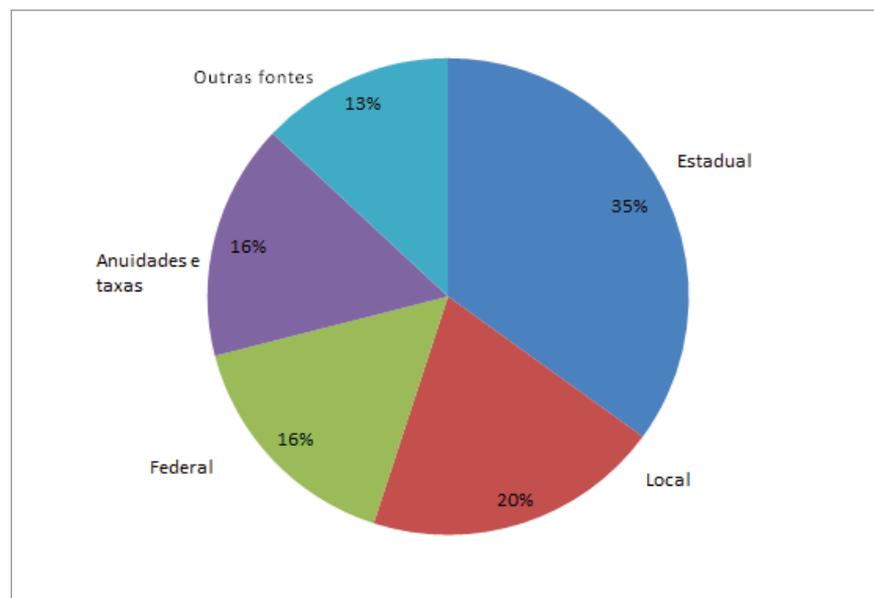
**TABLE 1**  
**STATE GRANTS TO COMMUNITY COLLEGES - 1920 TO 1990**

PERIOD	1920	1949-1950	1957-1958	1969-1970	1978-1979	1989-1990
Grants in US\$ millions		26,3	47,7	755,9	3100	
% of community colleges' total revenues	5%	30%	30%	41%	49%	49%

Source: Reproduced from Dougherty (2001, p. 146).

In Graph 6, this is viewed from a different perspective.

**GRAPH 6**  
**SOURCES OF REVENUE OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES: APPROPRIATIONS, GRANTS, CONTRACTS - 2008/2009**

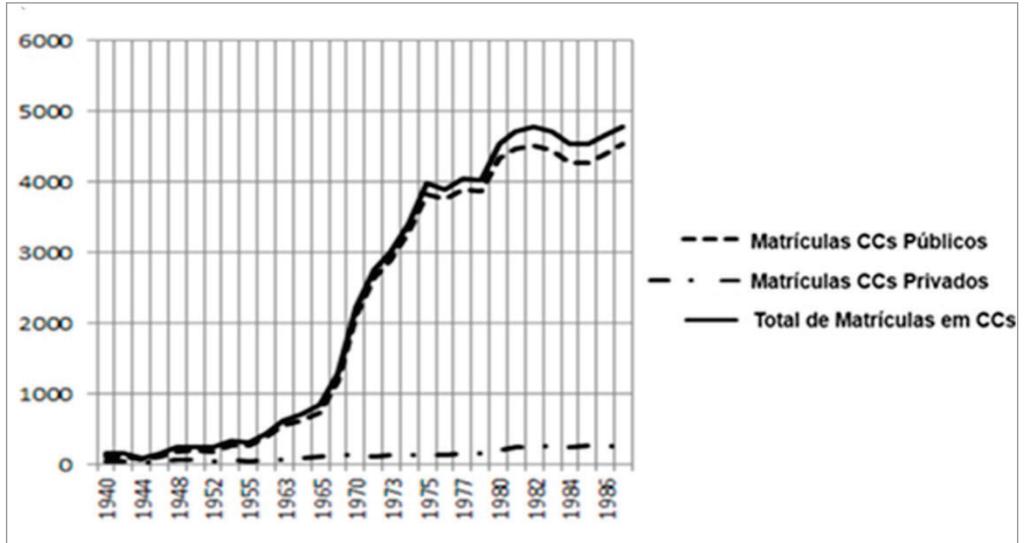


Source: National Center for Education Statistics (2010).

The expansion of the network of community colleges played a key role in the so-called democratization of access. Not only because community colleges were more affordable, much more affordable than even state universities, but also because they were decentralized and sprawled across most of the country. The website of the American Association of Community Colleges records 1,100 of such higher

education institutions. And several of them operate more than one campus. Growth can be measured by means of another benchmark – number of enrollments (Graph 7).

**GRAPH 7**  
**ENROLLMENTS IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES**



Source: Graph based on data compiled by Cohen & Brawer (1996).

Thanks to this network, and to multi-campus state universities,<sup>1</sup> it is estimated that any given candidate is bound to find a higher education point of entrance in a 40-kilometer radius from her home. Surely, in some states the expansion policy took a different path, yet one that, to some extent, emulated community colleges: state universities created special campuses, besides their flagship campus, which offered college freshman and sophomore years.

Moreover, decentralization reduces a cost that is not visible on tuition price lists – room and board costs. With decentralization, students can keep on living in their homes and working. One of the outcomes of this expansion has been the ever-increasing weight of commuter students, or part-time, as compared with resident students, on a full-time basis.

## SHORTCOMINGS OF THE UNITED STATES EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM AND OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES, IN PARTICULAR

The community college is part of a system that grew without a previously detailed blueprint. As an Enlightenment Scottish scholar used to say, human institutions are the result of human action, yet not necessarily of their design. The community college is an integral part

<sup>1</sup> The United States educational system is highly decentralized, circumscribed to local and state jurisdictions. There are no federal universities, for instance. The only existing federal higher education schools are military academies, as the tendency to create state universities prevailed as a result of a 19<sup>th</sup> century policy, the Morrill Act, which provided for the granting of land to the states on condition that these lands be used to create agricultural and engineering schools. We lack the breadth herein to narrate this remarkable episode, mostly unknown in Brazil. Readers interested may find it in my book to be published this year by the São Paulo State University (UNESP) entitled *Educação superior americana: história e estrutura* [American higher education: history and structure].

of a system set up to address multiple challenges: educate the elites, incorporate and Americanize immigrants, provide a skilled labor force, invent and innovate, and generate a hegemonic culture for a nation with an imperial inclination.

Today, besides being of critical importance in receiving and educating great part of all college newcomers, the community college accounts for hosts of non-degree students, that is, students attending shorter-length courses, focused on more practical and immediate matters. These students do not go to a community college to get an associate's degree; instead, they generally attend vocational courses or ESL programs (foreigners seeking to improve their English). I visited a community college run by the City University of New York (CUNY), in the impoverished Bronx, where I had the opportunity to witness this reality in small scale. Yet CUNY itself represents this same reality, only that in a broader scale. In addition to its senior colleges and graduate centers, CUNY has seven community colleges, with over 200,000 degree students. Plus receiving another 200,000 non-degree students.

This segment, of "free" courses, often vocational, has grown in the community colleges just as they strive to train more and more intermediate labor force workers – those with training, for example, in between that of the engineer and the skilled factory worker. Accordingly, workforce development departments are expanding, along with contract training agreed upon with companies and local governments.

Let us now consider the students' conditions – all that which we have referred to with such expressions as social and cultural capital, plus the legacy bequeathed by a weak and generic high school. Overall, community college entrants are underprepared to face the challenge posed by higher education. This led to the mushrooming of preparatory courses, in English, math, and science, programs also known as remedial or developmental education. This is one of the system's stalemates – the need for and simultaneous relative incapacity of these programs to break this barrier.

The "remedial education" debate has been going on for two decades now. Still, much older is the whining regarding the unpreparedness of secondary students for higher education. Indeed, it was precisely because the academic leadership acknowledged this issue that they thought of creating junior colleges in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although often attributed to the poor quality of the high school, this "unpreparedness" seems to have much deeper roots – roots scarred by the appalling inequality that divides the American society.

Not only community colleges are incapable of addressing this problem, but they are actually the higher education segment most hit by it. Of all industrialized countries, the U.S. is one of the most unequal, if not

the most –inequality of income, but also of status, prestige, and power. And this inequality has risen dramatically over the last thirty years.

When Barak Obama was sworn in, he intended to earmark some US\$ 8 billion for modernizing the infrastructure of the community colleges. Congress slashed most of such spending. This was not the only higher education sector to feel the impact of hard times. And it was hardly just the more recent inequality spike that forged the American society's resilient and deeply entrenched inequality, eventually impacting its educational system. Arguably, the community college is just a more salient tip of the rising inequality trend.

### **WHAT NO SCHOOL CAN DO...**

A few years ago, Robert Reich (1994) contended that, in the United States, about 15% to 20% of all children and youth were educated in good-quality middle schools, offered, in general, by just some dozens of private schools, and public schools located in affluent suburban neighborhoods. Furthermore, these young adults, the cream of the crop of American society, attend intellectually challenging and rich environments, with access to resources that enable them to continue to be the “cream”. On the other side are the 80% or 85% graduating from less affluent and “rich” high schools, mostly enrolling in two-year community college programs. In fact, they just recycle their poor middle school and are assumed to be equipped for modern life. A share, perhaps a third, of these two-year college students manage to get into a transfer program, that is, manage to enroll in bachelor's programs (law, medicine, engineering, economics). It's not much but, then again, it's a lot if we consider total figures. Even more interesting is to pay attention to the form of organization of this fantastic network of opportunities and talent hunting. As it is highly decentralized and extensively ramified, it is almost certain that high-school graduates will find a point of entry to post-secondary education that is close enough to their homes to, we insist, allow them to, at least, “check it out”. Many will be called, yet may not be chosen. This might be evidence of the system's vitality, despite its flaws and deceiving appearance. And it might also mean a channel for legitimizing the “land of opportunity” that America still figures to be. A rather contradictory situation. Poignantly contradictory.

As was to be expected, “hard times” have merely exacerbated latent dramas. A document by the American Association of Community Colleges (2012) portrays one such example in strong tones,

The American Dream is at risk. Because a highly educated population is fundamental to economic growth and a vibrant democracy, community colleges can help reclaim that dream. But

stepping up to this challenge will require dramatic redesign of these institutions, their mission, and, most critically, their students' educational experiences. [p. vii]

[...]

Community colleges have a crucial role to play in seizing this opportunity. If this nation can add 20 million postsecondary-educated workers to its workforce over the next 15 years, income inequality will decline substantially, reversing the decline of the middle class.

[p. viii]

[...]

Community colleges, historically underfunded, also have been financed in ways that encourage enrollment growth, though frequently without adequately supporting that growth, and largely without incentives for promoting student success. These conditions hinder middle-class students and have a devastating effect on low-income students and students of color, those often in greatest need of what community colleges have to offer. [p. viii]

Between the lines or, rather, in the text's subconscious, there might lie the problem's ultimate cause: the dream itself. At least this is what is suggested by a wealth of literature that is critical of the U.S. educational systems, that is focused on the theme of the American society's structural and unique inequality, unparalleled among the developed nations. In particular, the studies by, among others, David C. Berliner (2005), Jean Anyon (2005), and Norton Grubb & Marvin Lazerson (2004), seem to go to the core of the matter.<sup>2</sup> In their *The education gospel...*, Norton Grubb and Marvin Lazerson (2004) pointed to the risk of underestimating the educational effects of a non-educational factor: America's powerless Welfare State. More than that, they pointed to the recurrent litany of complaints and denunciations on the "failure of school" as the conduit per se of social mobility.<sup>3</sup> The problem, we might say, is not conduit malfunctioning but, rather, the assumption that mobility is a key driver of the social order.

This theme – however crucial – is beyond the purposes of this article. For now, all I can do is single it out and recommend its study. An article by Traub (its title, more importantly) might hint at the conclusion: "*What no school can do*" (2000).

The author underscores a paradox,

The idea that school, by itself, cannot cure poverty is hardly astonishing, but it is amazing how much of our political discourse is implicitly predicated on the notion that it can. (TRAUB, 2000)

2

Inquiries into this issue as regards elementary and high schools can also be found in a wealth of literature that includes Tyack (1974); Powell, Farar & Cohen (1985); Cremin (1964); Conant (1961), Oakes (1985), and Kozol (1992).

3

An important review of the fierce criticism directed at schools is in Berliner & Biddle (1995).

And makes a troubling finding for progressive “school enthusiasts”,

In recent years conservatives have come to play a critical role in the debate over inner-city schools; indeed, school reform is the one type of social engineering with which conservatives feel comfortable. (TRAUB, 2000)

So, why is it that the conservatives feel so comfortable with this “solution for all evils”? One sentence might hint at the answer,

Nobody believes in school the way Americans do, and no one is more tantalized by its transformative powers. (TRAUB, 2000)

The strength of this almost hypnotic belief should not be overlooked.

Berliner (2005) takes the argument to extremes so as to suggest some form of unthinkable and unthought in American society that would not allow identification of the nature of the trauma and, therefore, of how to go about it,

Perhaps we are not doing well enough because our vision of school reform is impoverished. It is impoverished because of our collective views about the proper and improper roles of government in ameliorating the problems that confront us in our schools; our beliefs about the ways in which a market economy is supposed to work; our concerns about what constitutes appropriate tax rates for the nation; our religious views about the elect and the damned; our peculiar American ethos of individualism; and our almost absurd belief that schooling is the cure for whatever ails society. These well-entrenched views that we have as a people makes helping the poor seem like some kind of communist or atheistic plot, and it makes one an apostate in reference to the myth about the power of the public schools to affect change.

[...]

On the other hand, the idea that schools cannot cure poverty by themselves sounds something like a vote of no confidence in our great American capacity for self-transformation, a major element in the stories we tell of our American nation. (2005, p. 7)

The comment is strongly worded. Should the finding be conclusive, the “pedagogical gospel” and the belief in school reform and reform by the school would become a new kind of “opium of the people”, or as read in the well-known text where such expression first

appeared, a cry of the spirit in an unspirited world, yet concurrently an all-soothing instrument that renders the valley of tears bearable. As the condition for abandoning illusions regarding one's conditions is abandoning a condition that is predicated on illusions, the circle seems to have closed and be safe from disruption. This is not the conclusion reached by the authors of this stream, as suggests the book by Jean Anyon (2005), starting with its title, *Radical possibilities*. But the road to achievement against all odds – although not dispensing with school reform – is much harder and complex. In other words, the possibilities are radical or require some sort of radicalness.

But keep in mind, my dear reader, that this is the American experience... The rest is up to you.

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