



Bob Dylan’s 1964 lyrics about times a-changin’ are as fresh today as they were more than fifty years ago. And though the world has indeed changed since the ‘60s, there has been one constant: business has been the tail wagging the U.S. higher education dog.

Some might argue universities have had no choice. Surveys by the Higher Education Research Institute show that, in deciding to go to college, “getting a better job” was the top reason cited by most first-year, full-time students in both 1971 and 2015. (In 1971, 70 percent said it was “very important,” and in 2015, 85 percent said so.)

U.S. universities today serve as vocational training for a wide spectrum of the population. In October 2015, nearly 70 percent of 2015 high school graduates were enrolled in college, Bureau of Labor Statistics data show. The figure was closer to 45 percent in 1970, the Association of American Colleges & Universities reported. As technology upends work as we know it and democratic societies confront new tests, questioning the role of higher education as primarily vocational should be front and center on every educator’s agenda.

Without a broader mission, the benefit of university educations has been mixed at best. In November, *The Atlantic* reported that “despite a growth rate that has averaged three percent over the last 60 years (which is quite robust), there are still 43 million Americans living in poverty, and most people’s wages are essentially unchanged from the end of the Reagan administration.”

Even if higher education had achieved top marks in advancing jobs and broad economic prosperity, changes in technology are on track to lessen reliance on higher education as a career tool. In December, *Wired* magazine reported that (as in the late 1970s and early 1980s) most computer programmers or coders in the future will likely be high school grads. And even more weighty changes are occurring due to advances in robotics and artificial intelligence, which are on course to eliminate

jobs in the future. Work as we know it will be profoundly different and less time-consuming.

A need for a systemic rethink is in order. The November *Atlantic* article notes that “GDP measures activity in the economy, but there’s no way to know whether that activity is actually good for society.” Higher education can play an important role in a way self-interested business enterprises and conflicted, business-dominated governments haven’t been able to. Ira Harkavy and Matthew Hartley, writing for the Association of American Colleges & Universities, note that over the final decades of the twentieth century, “Increasingly, the public came to view a college education as a ticket to securing a good job — a private rather than a public good” and the “commitment to civic engagement had grown increasingly hollow,” with disastrous consequences: “savage inequalities.”

With so many problems to be solved and a need to fundamentally reboot, society needs higher education to rise to the challenge and return to its roots as a provider of education to those who seek not a job but the capabilities to answer the deepest questions confronting humanity.

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