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# The Next Literacy: Educating Young Americans for Work and Citizenship

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## The Next Literacy: Educating Young Americans for Work and Citizenship

DAVID FLEMING

**T**HE EMERGING GLOBAL ECONOMY presents the American workforce with many challenges. As national economic borders disintegrate and U.S. manufacturing jobs disappear, more and more opportunities are opening up in "complex services" (insurance, engineering, law, finance, computer programming, advertising) and "person-to-person service" (retail, education, health care). Many of these new jobs offer high-skill, high-wage work; unfortunately, the majority of American workers lack the education and training for them. What those workers are left with are an increasing number of low-skill, low-wage, nonunion jobs. One feature of this economy, then, is a growing split between the few who are benefiting from the new arrangements and the many who are not.

America, on the eve of the 21st century, is a country where the rich are becoming richer and more powerful, the middle class is stagnating, and the poor are becoming increasingly poorer and frustrated. This growing polarization between rich and poor is a theme of Kevin Phillips' recent study, *The Politics of Rich and Poor*. According to Phillips, among Western nations, the United States displays the sharpest cleavage between

rich and poor. In 1986, the top 10 percent of households controlled approximately 68 percent of the nation's total wealth and appeared to be further accumulating and concentrating that wealth. Between 1977 and 1988, only 20 percent of U.S. families showed a positive change in average real income, while 80 percent suffered a decline. Total income figures reveal a similar concentration: between 1969 and 1988, the top 20 percent of income earners increased its share of total U.S. income from 40 to 44 percent while the bottom 80 percent decreased its shares. As Phillips notes, recent years have been characterized economically and socially by an intensified contrast "between proliferating billionaires and the tens of millions of others who [are] gradually sinking."

What accounts for this growing disparity? Why are some Americans adapting so well to the new economy and so many others falling only further behind?

One answer, Robert Reich says in *The Work of Nations: Preparing Ourselves for 21st Century Capitalism*, can be found in the superior education and training received by the rich and powerful. They are schooled and practiced in a group of

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## FUTURE CHOICES

attitudes and abilities that Reich collectively labels "symbolic analysis." In another place, he has described those abilities this way:

The intellectual equipment needed for the job of the future is an ability to define problems, quickly assimilate relevant data, conceptualize and reorganize the information, make deductive and inductive leaps with it, ask hard questions about it, discuss findings with colleagues, work collaboratively to find solutions, and then convince others.

Reich argues that less than 20 percent of the U.S. population is practiced in such skills, the

quality requirements, and proliferating product variety." Competitive organizations in such an economy, the report notes, will give front-line workers more power to use their own judgment, make decisions, and assume responsibility for a greater variety of work tasks. Research shows that companies organized this way do require better-trained, and therefore, higher-paid workers; but gains in productivity and quality offset higher costs for training and wages.

In other words, the global economy will require of American workers not that, as before, they merely live and work in a country with powerful national corporations, protective borders, a complaisant labor movement, and a self-

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*Reich argues that less than 20 percent of the U.S. population is practiced in such skills, the very ones required of workers in a global marketplace.*

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very ones required of workers in a global marketplace. And the acquisition of "symbolic-analytic" abilities accounts, he claims, for the increasing income of that "fortunate fifth" of Americans who wield economic and political power in our country.

Kevin Phillips agrees. Global economic restructuring, he says, provides the underlying context for the concentration of wealth. Such a climate favors "skills, enterprise and imagination," different words, I believe, for essentially the same thing that Reich is talking about. Phillips quotes a Stanford University professor who has called the new economy a "meritocracy," giving "the smart, the well-educated and the highly motivated" a large share of the income gains. The 1990 report of the National Center on Education and the Economy, *America's Choice: High Skills or Low Wages!*, reiterates what Reich and Phillips say about the abilities required in a global economy. According to the NCEE report, we are entering a "third industrial revolution" where "high performance work organization" is more important than mass production. The features of this new economy are "complex technologies, more frequent product introductions, increased

sufficient manufacturing sector. The economy now demands economically competitive people. What that means is a citizenry trained not in specific job skills but in more general, adaptable, creative, and intellectually powerful "symbolic-analytic" abilities—a citizenry trained, Robert Reich says, as "problem identifiers, problem solvers, and brokers of the two."

Other factors determine economic success, of course; some, like racial or sexual discrimination, act as barriers in this so-called "meritocracy." But there is no question that people with practice in situations where "symbolic-analytic" thinking is required—people adept at manipulating ideas, words, and images in certain ways—are the ones getting the good jobs and grabbing the political power in our society. The great educational challenge ahead of us, then, is to disseminate those abilities among more than just 20 percent of the workforce.

Unfortunately, a population in which the majority of the workers are poorly equipped for the jobs of the future is not our only problem. Reich argues in *The Work of Nations* that those currently engaged in "symbolic-analytic" work are trying, in a sense, to secede from the rest of the

country, protect their privileged jobs, neighborhoods, schools, hospitals, and lifestyles. Promoting more widely disseminated "symbolic-analytic" skills would help solve the problem of an uncompetitive workforce but would not address the breakdown of community that capitalism has fostered. We also need, therefore, increased attention to social investment and the fostering of public life.

All that said, what can we do now? How can we better train young Americans for the more intellectually demanding work of the future and, at the same time, instill in them a greater sense of community?

### *The Next Literacy*

The answer, I believe, involves the way we use, discuss, and teach language. For people to think and behave in more creative, productive, and collaborative ways, we will need to provide them with opportunities to practice certain language behaviors and attitudes—certain ways of talking, listening, reading, and writing. Traditional ways of using language in the schools, for example, will not be adequate preparation. Just as we are entering a new, global economy, when the old methods of organizing work will no longer be effective, we are also entering a time when the old "literacies" will no longer accomplish our economic and political goals.

The word "literacy" may need some clarification here. Many educators and social scientists now see literacy not as a definable technical skill but as a "continuum" of practices tied to specific cultural contexts. A literacy is a certain understanding of meanings and forms and behaviors, and different communities will have different understandings of such things. They will value reading and writing in different ways. In some communities, doing things with texts may not be that important; and members of those communities, though "literate" in the sense that they can read and write, will get along fine without actually doing much reading and writing. The extent to which one engages in certain literate practices, then, will be closely tied to one's own social and

cultural situation. As writing specialist Anne Ruggles Gere has said, literacy is a matter of "joining a specific community through understanding the issues it considers important and developing the capacity to participate in conversations about those issues."

What the schools can do, then, is offer people entrance into communities—academic, vocational, and political—to which they have previously been denied entrance. To do so, we will need a conception of literacy—and appropriate teaching methodologies to accompany it—that emphasizes the social and behavioral aspects of language use. Such a conception would release us from our tendency to see literacy as something inextricably connected to intelligence and return to the classroom its power to set up situations where students can acquire literacy by familiarizing themselves with situations in which literate practices are used in meaningful ways. James D. Williams and Grace Capizzi Snipper, in their recent book on literacy and bilingualism, call this a literacy of "inclusion" rather than "exclusion."

In other words, if we can determine the language behaviors young people will need in order to exercise active, creative, critical control over their environments, we could then set up language instruction in the schools so that they are given opportunities to *practice* those very behaviors.

Let us return for a moment to Robert Reich's vision of the future marketplace. Reich says in his book that, to better prepare people for the jobs of the future, they will need practice in "symbolic-analytic" work—practice in manipulating ideas, words, and images in complex, creative ways. And, he continues, in order to pull our national community back together, they will need to develop a greater sense of social, or public, responsibility. This two-pronged vision (one, an economically competitive workforce schooled and practiced in problem-solving skills; and two, a citizenry bound together by a sense of common purpose) is nothing new to educators. The first proposal, increased training and practice in "symbolic analysis," has much in common with what is usually called "critical thinking"—the

## FUTURE CHOICES

ability to question, define, analyze, criticize, elaborate, engage, and propose in certain sanctioned ways. As for the second proposal, many have long argued that the only way to redirect our culture's drift toward isolation and disintegration is to privilege social cooperation over self-interestedness. Both of these goals — critical thinking and collaboration — are essentially linguistic activities; and they should be prominent in any discussion of the literacy we want to promote in the schools.

The "new literacy," I would argue, is a disposition to use language, particularly written language, in ways empowering to both individuals and social groups. It is a tendency to question, define, analyze, criticize, evaluate, elaborate, propose, and persuade; and it is a familiarity with the literate forms that such behavior often takes. It enables people not merely to accept and dominate culture around them, but to engage with others, in the literate conversations that lead to genuine self-government, whether at home, in school, at the workplace, or in the community. I believe the acquisition of this kind of literacy, *critical and social*, can help prepare young people for better-paid, more rewarding work and give them practice in the kinds of activities that confer power in our society. The literacy is access — access to a larger, an empowered, a more democratic world.

### *The Workshop Approach*

This kind of language cannot be "taught" in the traditional way that language is "taught" in our schools. Critical thinking and social cooperation can only be *demonstrated*. In other words, students must be encouraged to use language in ways meaningful to them and to others, and they must be provided with opportunities and situations to do so. Critical thinking is not some set of generalizable skills which can simply be applied to any situation. Critical thinking — and by extension, I would argue, critical literacy — is always *used* for a specific purpose; it cannot be separated from that use. It is not a "skill," but rather a disposition, "a tendency," Frank Smith writes in

*Joining the Literacy Club*, "to behave in a particular way on particular occasions." If Smith, Gere, and others are right, then, high-order literacy cannot be "taught" by exercise and drill. It can only be *acquired* through extensive familiarity with situations in which one *uses* such language in meaningful ways for real purposes. And this is NOT the kind of language use that typically goes on in American schools. What we need is a teaching methodology that is pragmatic and collaborative, what I will call here a "workshop" approach to language instruction.

Let me first define this key word. A "workshop" is a place where people practice, in a structured, insulated environment, activities they are likely to engage in "outside" that environment. A workshop invites active participation by the individual, frequent interaction among participants, and some guidance by a mentor or instructor. Workshops often involve role-playing and other pragmatic simulations of real-life activity but without the real consequences of failure.

What language workshops share, I believe, are two features: they are structured around pragmatic, real-world, discursive situations; and they engage students with each other in productive, *collaborative* work. Many composition instructors, for example, currently structure their classes around a writing workshop. In such a course, the center of the class is not grammar or punctuation or the five-paragraph theme. It is language, the rich language that people use to accomplish goals important in their lives. Instructors who use a workshop approach emphasize the interrelationships of speaking, listening, reading, and writing; the pragmatic function of writing; the writing process itself: how people plan, generate, organize, draft, and revise; and the empowering possibilities that literacy can create in school, on the job, and in the community.

What exactly happens in a language workshop? Let's look at a hypothetical college composition class set up as a workshop. Students begin a section on argumentation by first having a class discussion on, for example, taxes. By the end of the discussion, the class has, together, generated a working definition of the word, listed various

features of taxes, and developed some tentative statements which can be used for argumentative purposes on the topic. Before leaving, the instructor distributes articles about the proposal to decrease the capital gains tax. The next class meeting, students break off into small groups of four to five students each. Each group is responsible for writing, by the end of the class period, a short group paper analyzing the capital gains tax issue and summarizing the various positions on it. The next class period, each group is assigned a position on the issue and is asked to develop reasons

different kinds of introductions, the importance of anticipating counter-arguments, the criteria used to evaluate writing, etc.

Such workshops improve student writing, many composition instructors now believe, by more effectively mirroring the rhetorical situations under which people really use language. They also give students practice in the building of community, in the fostering of what is sometimes called "public talk."

OK, but does such an approach really work? Research done by University of Chicago English

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to support that position, possible counter-arguments, and strategies to deal with those counter-arguments. During another class period, the groups hold a debate, each group arguing for its prescribed position. Later, students are required to do more extensive research on the issue. Each member may be required to interview local business people to assess their views on the issue. Another may do extensive reading on the history of the proposal. Back in their groups, students read each other's papers, offer suggestions for revision, and begin planning how the pieces can fit together into a "book" on the issue. If the instructor sees that things are going well, the unit could continue with more individual projects: letters to members of Congress, for example, or argumentative papers on similar topics to be chosen by the students themselves. Throughout this process, which can take several weeks, students receive continual feedback both from other students and from the instructor. Grammatical or formal problems are dealt with as they appear in student writing. Small groups are monitored closely to see that class time is well spent and that all members are participating. And the teacher helps students understand the different rhetorical decisions involved in their speaking and writing: how audience helps determine the shape of one's discourse, the effect of

professor George Hillocks Jr. may provide some answers. His 1986 book, *Research on Written Composition: New Directions for Teaching* provides a "meta-analysis" of research conducted on writing instruction during the past 20 years. According to Hillocks, the accumulated research reveals clearly that classes set up as I have described them are not only feasible, they may be the most effective way of teaching writing.

Hillocks does not use the word "workshop," though I believe what he labels the "environmental mode of instruction" is essentially the same thing. He says such a methodology is characterized by peer-group activity and highly structured problem-solving tasks. The teacher's role as "presenter" of information is minimized, and problems and activities are selected to engage students with each other. But this is no free-for-all. Objects are clear and specific, and activities are highly-structured. Such activities are usually pragmatic, often involving role-playing on the part of students; and feedback from fellow students and the teacher is frequent and constructive.

Hillocks describes one such classroom in detail. In a 1974 research study conducted by Lynn Quitman Troyka, 50 college remedial composition classes were used to test the effectiveness of role-playing, what Troyka called

## FUTURE CHOICES

"simulation-gaming," in the writing classroom. Twenty-five classes used the experimental approach; another 25 did not. Students in the experimental classes participated in various "simulation games" throughout the semester. For each game, students received roles to play in a problem situation: a neighborhood crime wave, a specific pollution problem, a labor dispute, etc. Each student was also associated with a group: executives in a local company caught polluting the drinking water, a neighborhood group concerned about increasing crime, etc. The group then had to persuade the other groups of the legitimacy of its position. In the classroom, action alternated between periods of planning and writing within the group and "cross-group" activities like hearings and debates. Each game involved associated writing tasks and focused on different writing strategies. One day it was providing facts or describing incidents; the next day, predicting objections and dealing with them.

According to Hillocks, the effectiveness of this approach, as measured by evaluating student essays written at the beginning and the end of the semester and then comparing improvement with gains recorded in control classes, was the most impressive of the 73 studies he examined. Such classes work, he says, because there are high levels of hands-on involvement, frequent student interaction, and practice in dealing in a variety of ways with specific real life problems.

The Troyka study shares many features, Hillocks claims, with other projects using this "environmental" mode of instruction. Students typically work in small groups before proceeding to independent tasks, taking advantage of the fact that people write better if first given an opportunity to develop and test their ideas orally. There is an emphasis placed on specific, concrete problems. And the classroom is set up to emphasize not the teaching of new knowledge and skills but what writing researchers Carl Bereiter and Marlene Scardamalia call "procedural facilitation," teaching students procedures to put knowledge they already have to work. As Hillocks notes, "environmental" instruction is not averse to presenting students with new forms, models, and

criteria, but the emphasis is on using that information in real writing situations.

Hillocks' research indicates that these kinds of classes work. "On pre-to-post measures, the environmental mode is over four times more effective than the traditional presentational mode," he writes. And it works largely not because it teaches students the skills of writing but because it provides them with the opportunities to be writers.

Another class set up as a kind of a language workshop is described in Shirley Brice Heath's groundbreaking 1983 work, *Ways With Words*. In that book, Heath includes an account of her experience teaching a fifth-grade science class in South Carolina. The class was made up almost entirely of black boys who were reading at the second-grade level or below. Heath began a unit on plant life by talking to the boys about the work of anthropologists. Suggesting that the methods of ethnography might be used in their communities to answer questions about food and agriculture, she had the student imagine that they were strangers in their own communities, come to set up an agricultural resource center and learn as much as possible about the local foodstuffs and the ways of growing them. Community residents were to be the only resources, as the students "participated, observed, interviewed, collected documents and artifacts, took photographs, and collected life histories in the area."

Heath reports that word spread quickly in the community of the boys' interest in gardening and farmers. The class received numerous contributions as the boys conducted interviews, collected artifacts, and scoured newspapers and recipe books. The culmination of the unit was a book, written by the class and similar, Heath writes, to a chapter on gardening in a traditional ethnography. By having to "translate" the knowledge of local folk into scientific concepts presented in the textbooks, the boys learned such terms as photosynthesis, chlorophyll, and pesticide.

The academic results of the project were astounding. On the test given after the eight-week unit, 12 boys scored above 90 percent, eight in the 80s, and three in the 70s. Of the 23 boys in the

class, none failed the test. Cumulative records indicated that none of these boys had ever passed a standardized unit science test in his school career. Attendance also improved, Heath reports, and more parents became involved in the class.

Heath concludes that the greatest benefit of the project was linguistic. Learners in the science classroom had learned to talk about ways of obtaining and verifying information. They had come to recognize, use, and produce knowledge about the skills of inquiring, compiling, sorting, and refining information. They had not only made use of "inquiry" and "discovery method" skills

ment, and the arts; and the writing of such social documents as constitutions, by-laws, and proposed college curricula. Richard Bullock, who teaches business writing in Athens, Ohio, has assigned his students projects in which, for example, they determine how to turn their town into "an art-centered showplace to revitalize the area's economy." Each student is responsible for one component of the study, but the final project must be coordinated among the whole class. Bullock reports that the students learn, among other things, how to conduct interviews, where to look for certain types of information, and how to involve

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discussed in science and social studies methods texts; they had acquired the language to talk about these skills.

Heath's class shares many features with what I would call a workshop approach: specific objectives, high levels of student interaction with each other, real-life situations and problems, and practice in the literate ways people deal with those problems.

There are many examples of such language workshops. Elliot Wigginton's *Foxfire* magazine at Rabun Gap-Nacoochee School in rural Georgia was the product of a workshop approach to language instruction. Wigginton's composition classes, he has written, involved interviewing, practice in oral history, group projects, field trips and ethnographic studies of local culture. Similarly, Ira Shor, who teaches English classes at Staten Island College in New York City, uses a "component" approach to group writing in his classes. Each student has the responsibility to write one component of a group project. Projects might include a detailed analysis of "work," with individual students writing sections on salary, training, unemployment, and work conditions; a "utopia," with individual students responsible for "chapters" on transportation, education, employ-

ment, and the arts; and the writing of such social documents as constitutions, by-laws, and proposed college curricula.

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### *The Basic Skills Approach*

The workshop approach, though it has steadily gained adherents over the past 20 or 30 years, still faces resistance. The most formidable resistance comes in the form of what I call the "basic skills" approach to language instruction. Like the workshop approach, this approach goes by many names. Put simply, it is a teaching methodology which advocates that language instruction is largely a matter of teaching skills, sub-skills, rules, and sub-rules, and that once a person has "mastered" those things, he or she is able to write competently. It sees language production as largely a bottom-up cognitive process, and it sees the classroom as a place to drill and practice students in the basic skills that make up "correct" writing.

## FUTURE CHOICES

Hillocks, who labels this teaching approach "the presentational mode," claims that it is the most commonly practiced mode of composition instruction in schools and colleges. In such an approach, he says, "the instructor dominates activity, with students acting as the passive recipients of rules, advice, and examples of good writing." According to Hillocks' meta-analysis, the presentational mode is the "least effective" of all types of writing instruction he examined.

A useful description of the methodology comes from Mike Rose, whose book, *Lives on the Boundary*, is an account of life among America's "educational underclass":

The curriculum in developmental English breeds a deep social and intellectual isolation from print; it fosters attitudes and beliefs about written language that, more than anything, *keep* students from becoming fully richly literate. The curriculum teaches students that when it comes to written language use, they are children: they can only perform the most ordered of tasks, and they must do so under the regimented guidance of a teacher. It teaches them that the most important thing about writing—the very essence of writing—is grammatical correctness, not the communication of something meaningful, or the generative struggle with ideas . . . not even word play. It's a curriculum that rarely raises students' heads from the workbook page to consider the many uses of written language that surround them in their schools, jobs, and neighborhoods. Finally, by its tedium, the curriculum teaches them that writing is a crushing bore. These students traverse course after remedial course, becoming increasingly turned off to writing, increasingly convinced that they are hopelessly inadequate.

The basic skills approach succeeds only—when it succeeds at all—at reducing language use to rules and restrictions and prescribed formulas. It operates under a conception of literacy that is not only outdated—as data on employment opportunities clearly indicate—but also demeaning to our students' potential to take active, critical control over their environments.

And research shows clearly that people do not learn or use language in this way. Speaking, listening, reading, and writing are primarily tools for social identification and interaction. They are functional, pragmatic activities; and people who are effective in manipulating language are conscious of its social, performative power. Studies have shown that expert writers, for example, tend to see writing as a problem-solving activity, a rhetorical situation that necessitates certain decisions about audience, intention, form, and organization. Research further indicates that effective writers do a great deal of "global" planning both before and during writing, paying constant attention to such things as effect, the readers' need for background information, purpose, and tone. Similarly, effective writers tend to see the act of revising as yet another opportunity to make major global changes in the paper. Less experienced writers, on the other hand, see each writing situation not as a new problem to be solved in its own way but as an exercise on which to apply a set of rigid, all-consuming rules: rules about the right way to spell, the right way to begin a sentence, the right way to go about writing. During revision, also, less-experienced writers focus changes mostly on the sentence and word level; they are concerned more about conforming to the rules than to meaningfully interacting with others through language.

Studies also indicate quite clearly that classrooms where students are engaged productively with each other, in pairs or small groups, are more effective than classrooms where students are isolated from each other. Particularly in language instruction, students should be able to take advantage of the enormous possibilities of talking, questioning, criticizing, suggesting, praising, elaborating, and debating that are opened up when the classroom atmosphere becomes more collaborative.

The message is clear. Not only does the workshop approach work better than the basic skills approach at improving writing performance, it more effectively practices students in the kinds of "symbolic-analytic" thinking Robert

## LITERACY

Reich talks about in *The Work of Nations*. Further, it engages students with each other in ways that will be important to them when, later, they share the burden of democratic self-government.

### **Conclusion: Running Newspapers, Building Sheds**

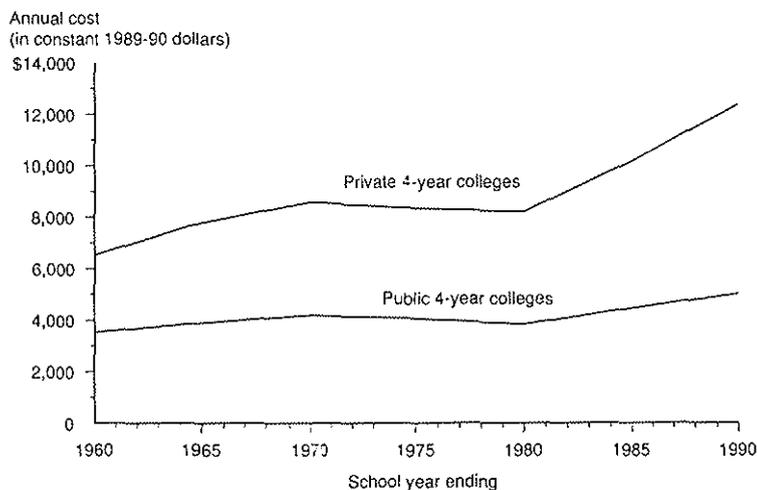
Asked about how "critical thinking" can be incorporated into school curricula, educator, researcher, and essayist Frank Smith has written about the usefulness of what he calls "enterprises," activities similar to the language workshops I have described in this article. Enterprises, Smith says, are "possibilities for the meaningful

environments in which children can become literate." Two examples of enterprises which can be used for all grade levels, he writes, are running a newspaper and building a shed. "Both entail reading, writing and computation, planning, organization, prediction, problem-solving, initiative, imagination, collaboration, management, and fitness of purpose." Aren't these the very skills we are looking for in the workers and citizens of the future?

If we want our society to be one in which all people use to their fullest potential the extraordinary powers of language and thought that they possess, shouldn't we give them the opportunities to demonstrate and practice those powers?

### Indicator 20. College Costs

Total tuition, room, and board charges at public and private 4-year colleges:  
1959-60 to 1989-90



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics, 1990*, and *Projections of Educational Statistics to 1979-80*.

College tuition, room, and board charges (after adjustment for inflation) declined slightly during the late 1970s. Since 1980, student charges have risen substantially, particularly at private 4-year colleges. Charges for tuition, room, and board rose by 31 percent at public 4-year colleges and 51 percent at private colleges between 1979-80 and 1989-90.

Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, *Youth Indicators 1991: Trends in the Well-Being of American Youth*, Washington, DC, April 1991.

## FUTURE CHOICES

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