

Students as Economic Actors, Past and Present

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In this essay, Jennifer Light examines the ideal versus the reality of the “unproductive student,” the young person who puts off work in favor of schooling to develop their human capital for later workforce participation. The economic status of student activities has been the source of recent controversy with college athletes and graduate teaching assistants seeking greater recognition for the value they generate in terms of revenues and cost savings, while educational institutions push back against claims that students are employees. Missing from these discussions is the recognition that students have routinely made economic contributions to American schools while educators have located the significance of these contributions in their educational rather than financial value. Here, Light traces the history of students’ everyday participation in the construction and maintenance of public schools. With insights from economic sociology, she shows how students came to be seen as noneconomic actors despite ample evidence about their economic activities. Her essay argues for an alternative economic history of public schools, points to new directions for research in educational history and educational economics, and calls into question one of the defining assumptions about students for the past one hundred years.

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The economic status of undergraduate athletes and graduate teaching assistants has been a source of ongoing tension at colleges and universities across the United States in recent years. Football players at Northwestern, for example—echoing efforts by other student athletes to call attention to the imbalance between the money they raise in ticket revenues, television contracts, and alumni contributions, and their remuneration in scholarships alone—petitioned the National Labor Relations Board to organize a union, a move the board’s local branch supported before the national board voted it down (Jenkins, 2017; Strauss, 2015). Graduate students who teach as part of their

doctoral training, reducing institutional costs, have similarly pushed to unionize at public and private universities, also with mixed results (Johnson, Kavanaugh, & Mattson, 2003; Patel, 2016; Singh, Zinni, & MacLennan, 2006). As students and their advocates frame these activities as labor and call for recognition as employees, college and university administrations and their allies reject this proposed reclassification, describing such activities instead as vital components of the postsecondary learning experience.

Absent from these discussions is how the ideal of the “unproductive student”—the young person who defers labor force participation to develop human capital for later use—has long figured prominently in American education while the reality of students’ economic identities has been more ambiguous. Between 1890 and 1930, decades before the college or university experience became mainstream, US public schools were rapidly expanding, bringing education to mass populations as an alternative to child labor. The genealogy of the unproductive student lies in these institutions in this period when schools constructed public images as havens of child protection even while profiting from activities they labeled “educational.”

This article brings insights from economic sociology into educational history to reveal how, like the better-known story of the separation of housewives from the economy, students came to be seen as noneconomic actors despite ample evidence about their economic activities in schools. This episode in the conceptual history of American education shaped assumptions about higher education as well, anchoring current claims from the parties who argue that a student, by definition, is not an employee. Its account of four decades of students’ contributions to the construction and maintenance of public schools and educators’ efforts to locate the significance of these contributions in their educational rather than financial value argues for an alternative history of the economics of American education. The discovery that these institutions never completely committed in practice to the deferral they espoused in theory points to new directions for research in educational history and educational economics, calls into question one of the defining assumptions about students for more than a century, and sheds new light on contemporary debates about student activities.

From Family Economy to Sheltered Childhood: Public Schools in Industrial America

The decades between 1890 and 1930 were a time of significant transition in the US economy as a wage economy located in factories and firms replaced the prior family economy in which men, women, and children worked together at home. Social roles diverged as new cultural scripts assigned men to go off to earn for their families, women to tend to domestic concerns, and children to attend school. Although public education predated mass industrialization, these institutions took on greater importance in a context where par-

ents no longer possessed the necessary expertise to train their children for future employment and as public acceptance of child labor was being called into question. The industrial economy features prominently in histories of public schooling during this period and its links to broad transformations in social expectations about youth (Kett, 1977; Labaree, 2010; Lagemann, 2000; MacLeod, 1998; Smuts, 2009; Steffes, 2011). In these accounts, schools became the focus of efforts to achieve a “sheltered” or “protected” childhood in which young peoples’ once-routine participation in the labor force and public life was replaced by future-oriented training that would develop their human capital for later use. What this future-oriented training should look like was a source of ongoing debate—for example, about the balance of academic versus practical curricula, about how best to educate for democratic citizenship, and about the extent to which different populations should receive different educations (Kliebard, 2004; Labaree, 2010; Nasaw, 1981). Amid these disagreements lay increasingly broad consensus among psychologists, educators, politicians, and the public that child labor was not desirable and that schools were the appropriate alternative to labor force participation such that large-scale efforts should be made to bring new populations into the educational system.

The shift to a more protected childhood occurred slowly, first with middle-class youth, then working-class and immigrant youth, and subsequently African American youth extending their in-school time. In this transitional period, campaigns to increase student populations took varied forms, from compulsory schooling laws that punished truants to educational reforms that enticed older youth to voluntarily stay in school. The burgeoning field of developmental psychology, in particular work by G. Stanley Hall and colleagues at Clark University, backed these changes by articulating the dangers of “precocity,” or premature access to adult experience, and calling for children’s natural instincts to be the basis for instruction. In an era when Progressive reformers were confident that scientific principles should guide the reorganization of American society for a modern age, psychologists’ field investigations of young people at play and the informal education these activities supplied became the empirical basis for a generation of educational theory based on the view that institutions which channeled play instincts toward pedagogical aims would be most likely to succeed in bringing more children under adult supervision (Cremin, 1961; Crosswell, 1899; Hall, 1901, 1902; Jordan, 2010; Lagemann, 2000; Sheldon, 1898; Wiebe, 1966). Studies of these scientists’ influences on educational reform focus on how their understanding of developmental stages normalized age-graded classrooms and how their identification of children’s preferred play activities guided curricular choices to supplement academic instruction in “reading, ’riting, and ’rithmetic” with more active modes of investigation—bringing school close to “life,” in Hall student John Dewey’s (1897) popular phrasing (Lagemann, 2000; Smuts, 2009). The mass popularization of vocational education and home economics training,

and the rapid spread of activities, including student government and student media, are understood in this context as engaging modes of active learning grounded in scientific research, pedagogical approaches that trained students to meet the challenges of an industrial era while protecting them from economic exploitation.

Although these accounts offer important insights into connections between the changing American economy, science, and schooling, they overlook how the educational reforms hailed at the time and by subsequent historians as developmentally productive for students proved to be economically productive for schools as well—a boon for the many institutions with expansive ambitions and budgetary constraints. In an era when, in some schools, “every desk, map, chart, reference book . . . every single thing needed to be purchased at once,” administrators and teachers guided students to build desks, lockers, and playground equipment and cook lunchroom meals, clean corridors and classrooms, keep the books, conduct health inspections, and repair plumbing and heating systems in order to manage costs (Heads of Municipal Departments, 1909, pp. 50–51). And when schools lacked resources to hire truant officers, crossing guards, and public relations staff, educational leaders directed students’ attention off campus to track down absentees, help peers cross busy streets, and rally community support for school programs. These were commonplace experiences for the nation’s students even as specific educational opportunities varied widely by race, class, and location. In short, despite an ideal of deferred economic participation, young peoples’ new identities as students did not eradicate their economic agency so much as it redirected it to serve schools’ financial needs.

The developmental psychology that backed the incorporation of such activities into the curriculum readily articulated why they were antithetical to child labor, however, in its focus on the role-plays of adult life that young people enacted at every developmental stage. Theories of imitation dominated explanations of societal and individual development across the human sciences. Hall and colleagues identified imitation’s special function in the lives of youth (Leys, 1993; Light, in press). In their view, as young people played “mother” and “police,” they defined themselves in opposition to adulthood, a future life stage. Play was a vicarious experience, and at the center of young peoples’ play lay the imitation of “adult ancestral or present day occupations” (Allin, 1902, p. 60). Channeling this instinct for recreation as re-creation toward pedagogical ends was their charge to teachers so that children could participate in and learn from adultlike activities while being sheltered from actual adult experience (Harris, 1895).

Dewey became an eloquent spokesperson for this ideal of simultaneous participation and protection and how the educational value for students trumped any economic value they produced. Noting how, outside of school, “children’s plays are simply more or less miniature and haphazard attempts at reproducing social occupations,” he called for schools to be “active with types of occu-

pations that reflect the life of the larger society," each "a mode of activity that reproduces, or runs parallel to, some form of work" but "freed from all economic stress" (Dewey, 1899, pp. 134–135, 27, 131, 16). Schools' protected environments transformed activities such as cooking, sewing, and manual training into media for teaching larger lessons. "It is possible and desirable that the child's introduction into the more formal subjects of the curriculum be through the medium of these activities," he mused in 1897 (Dewey, 1897, p. 11). Later he articulated how "the absence of economic pressure in schools supplies an opportunity for reproducing industrial situations of mature life under conditions where the occupation can be carried out for its own sake," while noting that payment could heighten the learning experience: "If in some cases, pecuniary recognition is also a result of an action, though not the chief motive for it, that fact may well increase the significance of the occupation" (Dewey, 1916, p. 240).

School administrators across the United States found in Dewey's ideas and the broader field of scientific educational theory justification for curricular reforms that guided students to make value for schools. To date, however, only the developmental productivity of this approach has featured in educational histories. Recent studies of the changing economic status of American housewives during this period offer important insights into how students' economic productivity could remain hidden in plain sight for so long and point the way toward a reconsideration of the economic history of US public schools. In these accounts, the elimination of women from economic accounting was a phenomenon that was as much rhetorical as real. When men went to work and children to school, the households considered productive spaces when families worked there together came to be regarded as women's unproductive "separate spheres" (Folbre, 1991). As some industries that replaced home production were closed to women, domestic tasks previously labeled as "home work" and considered economically generative were reclassified as "unproductive" homemaking and tied to women's biological "instincts" for care. A rich literature has established how the ideology of separate spheres prevailed despite the possibility of alternative interpretations, such as the push by some women to assign economic value to household activities, efforts to industrialize household labor through scientific management and labor-saving machines, or the fact that servants received wages for the same activities (Boydston, 1994; Folbre, 1991; Hayden, 1982).¹ As a result, when the US Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was first calculated in the 1930s, housework was not included except when domestic servants did it, making it difficult to see how women's labor produced households and also helped sustain the industrial economy.

As such findings offer insights into women's experience of the shift from family economy to wage economy, they illustrate one of economic sociology's central claims: what counts as economic activity is socially defined and historically contingent. In particular, the assignment of value can depend on *who* is performing an action (e.g., housewife or servant) and *where* they are per-

forming it (e.g., inside their household or in someone else's household). This rich body of research, which identifies housewives and households as critical factors shaping definitions of economic activity, offers a new lens for examining students and schools (Boydston, 1994; Folbre, 1991; Hayden, 1982). Through it we discover how linkages between the spread of scientifically organized schooling in the industrial era and the changing status of American youth were more complicated than previously presumed. The schools that provided alternatives to child labor benefited financially from students with help from administrators and teachers who articulated differences between "occupations" performed inside and outside educational institutions. And the developmental psychology that served as a linchpin for the child-centered programming that helped expand pupil populations simultaneously theorized a biological basis for young peoples' interests and activities in ways that minimized the value they produced. A closer look at how this story played out inside public schools lays the foundation for an alternative economic history of American education.

Toward an Alternative Economic History of US Public Schools

School Cities

Hall's vision for American education burst into public consciousness at the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition, where an educational congress offered him a platform to popularize his ideas about the dangers of precocity and the possibilities for scientifically organized schools (Smuts, 2009). There was also a Children's Palace, where lectures and demonstrations on scientific child rearing and education took place. One of the most vocal advocates for the building as a medium for popularizing the latest educational techniques was Wilson Gill, a New York City engineer and participant in the "good government" movement who had recently turned his attention toward civic education as a strategy for assimilating diverse populations into the body politic and improving public administration in the United States (Gill, 1892).

Inspired in part by Hall, in the summer of 1897 Gill piloted a new, more active approach to civics instruction inside the Norfolk Street Vacation School, a summer vocational program for twelve hundred immigrant youth aged five to fifteen.² He organized the students as a city government based on the soon-to-be-consolidated greater New York City. The pupils chose a mayor and common council and a range of other elected and appointed officials, including health inspectors, police, judges, and a court clerk. (Girls were eligible to vote on account of the good government movement's belief in the possibilities for "purification" that female suffrage represented, as well as the fact that women could vote in some local elections at this time.) The low-status immigrant groups at this institution—"Russian, Polish, or Hungarian Jews, unpromising material, it might have seemed for educational experiments"—greeted Gill's School City with enthusiasm, passing ordinances to encourage attendance,

discourage littering, and generally keep order in the school (School Cities, 1899, p. 650). The young officials' primary jurisdiction was the campus, but they occasionally took their role-plays into the surrounding community, such as when the student police "arrested" truants outside school bounds.

Although student governments in recent decades are typically structured as councils, with a more restricted menu of activities and obligations, Gill's vision of pupil democracies that mirrored state, local, or national agencies was a popular arrangement in an era in which developmental psychologists and educational theorists called for role-plays of adult occupations inside schools (McKown, 1944). First piloted in urban school districts where immigrants were considered to be in need of assimilation, this format soon spread to "Americanize" Native American youth as well, many inside the residential Indian schools operated by the US Bureau of Indian Affairs, a set of educational institutions that Gill was appointed to supervise in 1911.³ Already by 1901, more than fifty thousand students had experienced life as a citizen or official in a School City or School State (Craft, 1901). In 1904, Philadelphia's Franklin Institute awarded Gill its Elliott Cresson Medal, and prominent backers in New York City organized the School Citizens Committee to promote the method. Dewey joined this organization several years later, a testament to the pedagogical principles he and Gill shared.

As schools adapted Gill's method, evidence accumulated about its effectiveness in teaching civic knowledge for future application. School Cities' immediate financial benefits to schools became apparent as well. In one case, pupil police were more effective than the adult officer stationed at one New York City school (who was subsequently fired) (Cronson, 1907). One principal reported:

The time formerly spent in duties outside of their rooms saved to my teachers amounts in one day to five hours and twenty minutes, in one week twenty-six hours and four minutes, in one year 214-school days. If the teachers are using that time in preparation of lesson work, at the present salary rate, the value to my school in one year is \$642. (Drum, 1907, pp. 13-15)

And Gill (1913) observed that Carson Indian School students assigned to the Board of Public Works built their playground "at almost no cost."

Yet if they recognized how students reduced staffing needs, freed teacher time, and made equipment, teachers and students shared with Dewey the view that such realistic features heightened rather than undermined the education taking place. Journalist Albert Shaw (1899) explained:

The scheme has in it all that is fascinating for children in a play, with the further point in its favor that it is not, after all, a mere playing at government but is so far as it goes a real and serious thing. And yet its analogies appeal to the child's natural fondness for imitation and make-believe. Thus wherever the School City is tried the periodical election of officers awakens more intense interest than the most exciting ball game. A part of this interest undoubtedly is due to the plea-

sure children get from playing at the pursuits of their elders. But no less important as an element in the intense interest the children take in the matter is the palpable fact that the officers to be elected have a very real part to perform in the ordering of the every-day affairs of the school community . . . The school policemen make real arrests for real offenses. The trials of the arrested offenders involve the enforcement of real rules and regulations that the school community has adopted for its own well-being. The sentences that are pronounced by the court mean real punishment of some kind that is no more a part of a children's game than are the punishments meted out under the municipal government to disorderly persons arraigned before the police magistrates.

Shaw's description emphasized the child-centered dimensions and educational benefits of School Cities' realism, overlooking the realism of the value pupils produced.

Although Gill was a particularly prominent voice on student government in the early 1900s, analogous programming was widely found without the School City label. At the Hart Farm School for Colored Boys in Washington, DC, for example, the students in a miniature democracy "assist in getting breakfast . . . perform the dining-room and dormitory work . . . go out to the fields."⁴ These cost-saving activities were chiefly praised for what they offered Hart's students, even in an article soliciting donations for the underresourced school: "The boy is taught . . . to do what he will be called upon to do in actual farm life . . . [Students] learn by actual experience under proper guidance what are the rights, privileges and duties of citizenship in the great republic." Activities labeled "work" in the school environment were not child labor but learning opportunities: "The work is not only a refuge and a relief for the neglected colored boy . . . it is also a sociological and educational one in purpose and effect" ("Negro Boys' Junior Republic," 1900).

Gary Plan

Boyville in Gary, Indiana, established by former Utah juvenile judge Willis Brown in 1910 when he became Gary's school superintendent of moral and civic training, is another example of the many student governments indirectly influenced by Gill. The schools in this factory town, which was struggling to accommodate a rapidly growing population of immigrants and African Americans who migrated there in search of employment, bridged two scientific visions for industrial-era education (Cohen & Mohl, 1979). Superintendent William Wirt, who had studied with Dewey, aimed to guide children's play instincts toward pedagogical ends and bring education close to life (Thorburn, 2017). Equally motivated by the principles of scientific management organizing activities at the nearby US Steel plant, he sought efficient operations in the "school plant" to maximize the production of educated youth at low cost (Dealey, 1916; Wirt, 1912). The educational system Wirt designed, which was replicated in more than a thousand other schools, would "naturally hold its pupils" and yet simultaneously get "the largest possible returns out of

its raw material . . . not steel and iron, but boys and girls" (Dorr, 1911, p. 63; Hendrick, 1913, p. 63). At Gary's Emerson School, for example, Boyville citizens opened a school store and bank, selling goods and offering loans, and a Boyville court endeavored "to settle all cases involving the conduct of the boys of the school whether these occur in school or out" (Hollister, 1911, p. 353).

Under the Gary Plan, however, student government was merely one locus for pupils' contributions to school operations. Vocational education classes built school furniture and playground equipment and repaired the facilities. Home economics courses made lunch for staff and students and did meal budgeting. Other classes ran accounting for the school office. The Froebel School, which opened a few years later, organized a similar curriculum, serving African American as well as immigrant youth, although segregating them within the school (Betten & Mohl, 1974; Bourne, 1916; "Negro Children Attend Froebel," 1912). Reducing absenteeism by engaging students, this pedagogical approach "cost the city of Gary practically nothing"; indeed, it "saved enough for the school system" to "pay the entire cost of conducting the school departments, including the salaries of the instructors" (Hendrick, 1913, p. 69).

Yet, even in a context of deliberate efforts to make schools more like factories, critical similarities went unseen. Although Gary educators spoke of "work" within the curriculum to differentiate hands-on activity from the "study" methods of book learning and appointed as instructors the same individuals who might have trained apprentices in workshops off-site (rather than conventionally trained teachers), they classified these activities as eradicating child labor by keeping kids out of the workforce. The school was a "preventive agency" in Wirt's (1909) mind. "It is not child labor," he explained, because "there is a wholesome environment and the children are being instructed" ("Studying Gary to Help New York," 1914, p. 37). The "school heating plants, the repair and equipment shops, the lunchrooms, the storerooms, the school offices" all could "become laboratories for the industrial and commercial education of the children" (Wirt, 1915, p. 12). From Dewey to David Snedden, educators typically at odds on curricular questions hailed the Gary Plan, stressing its future payoffs: "In five years' time the kids of Boyville and the Emerson school will be running that town of Gary and running it right" (Bourne, 1916; Burris, 1914, p. 27; Dewey & Dewey, 1915; Snedden, 1915). Across ideological divides, activities including cooking, making furniture, and selling school supplies, when performed for pay in the wider world, were understood as culturally undesirable. Yet the same activities carried out as guided role-plays under the auspices of schools were sources of civic and character education, even as such activities benefited schools' bottom lines. Gary's schools even won praise from the US Bureau of Education and the National Child Labor Committee, the nation's most prominent organizations in the fight against child labor (Burris, 1914; McIntire, 1917).

As with the proliferation of student governments that eschewed the School City label while implementing analogous programming, similar pedagogical

cal methods could be found in institutions that did not officially adopt the Gary Plan. As part of the curriculum in vocational education, home economics, commercial education, and other subjects, pupils across the nation took attendance, managed finances, printed textbooks, prepared lunches, and constructed libraries and gyms (Cox, 1927; North, 1919; Printing in California Schools, 1919; Snow, 1917) In many of these settings, environments that duplicated the sites for their future work as adults heightened the experience, as home economics classes directed students to build "model kitchens" and "model cottages" and vocational education aimed to get "near to reality" so that "shop standards, rather than school standards, will have to prevail" (Snedden, 1910, pp. 36, 41). Noting how "work which we deny . . . in the factory, for profit, may be demanded in school . . . for education and training," *Charities* editor Edward Devine underscored the common belief that students' "work" inside educational environments was never the same as that in the world outside (Devine, 1908, p. 9). This was the case even as it provided "a source of income to the schools" (Burris, 1914, p. 18). These historical discussions were the origination point for the common expression separating educational institutions from the "real world."

That public talk of making schools more like factories did not prompt greater awareness of how educators in Gary and their many imitators merely shifted the locus of young peoples' productive energies attests to the strength of popular conventions for interpreting student activities. Such characterizations notably persisted even when students were paid for their contributions. In the campaign to persuade young people to leave the workforce for more sustained education, payment for learning had been a subject of some debate, with the result that wages were occasionally paid for school attendance (Chrisman, 1907; Kliebard, 1999). More common, however, were scholarships, stipends, and financial aid. These transactions carried distinctly different cultural meaning from wage labor by maintaining focus on the student status of the person being remunerated and the educational benefits of the carefully selected activities in which he or she engaged, resonating with Dewey's observation that remuneration could heighten the educational value of some classroom activities (Snow, 1917).

Wartime Education

Curricular reshufflings during World War I solidified the view that activities taking place in school by definition deferred young peoples' participation in the US economy. Educational historians have described how proponents of civic education, vocational education, and physical education saw the conflict as an opportunity to advance their prewar ambitions for curriculum reform. A new and broader definition of military preparedness for modern warfare that eschewed military drill in favor of physical education and vocational training and a new urgency to promote Americanization among immigrants in the name of national security helped achieve their long-standing pedagogical

goals, with support from federal legislation, such as the 1917 Smith-Hughes Act (Lagemann, 2000; Light, in press; Todd, 1945).

Absent from these accounts is the persistence of other prewar trends, namely the rich variety of economic activities taking place inside schools. During the conflict, educators redirected students' attention and energies to the war effort, making value for the state as much as for the school. In Los Angeles, for example, between April and June 1917, vocational education and home economics classes produced "925 pair of pajamas, 800 hospital shirts, 100 bed slippers, 1000 pillow cases, 505 pillows, 1350 shoulder wraps, 1320 comfort bags, 150 ambulance pillows, 50 surgeon caps, 180 napkins, 544 handkerchiefs, 1200 wash cloths" for the US War Department (Los Angeles City School District, 1918, p. 29). The Red Cross created a Junior Auxiliary to coordinate such efforts in schools across the nation, sharing, for example, patterns and precise specifications for needed articles, with the result that students produced "surgical dressings, hospital supplies, hospital garments, refugee garments, articles for soldiers and miscellaneous items totaling 15,722,073 in number and valued at \$10,152,461.96, or ten percent of the entire Red Cross production during the war" (Bauer, 1943, p. 8). Beyond school campuses students joined "farm cadets" and "food battalions" to harvest food for transport overseas, receiving academic credit for their labors (Dean, 1918; "Negro Boys Will Join Working Reserve Force," 1919; Todd, 1945).

As with pupils' prior contributions to schools' bottom lines, such activities were hailed for their developmental and educational value, for channeling children's natural leisure-time interests toward pedagogical ends, and for mediating adult experience in activities that were realistic but not real. "All of the so-called 'war activities' became of themselves a valuable means of education," Los Angeles school administrators explained, describing how "boys and girls were engaged in the making of things which so happily reflected their powers of invention and industry, and which, because they were actually to be sold, afforded such a genuine sense of reality" (Los Angeles City School District, 1918, p. 5). Although, they continued, the "material contribution of the Los Angeles City Schools has been considerable," then "the benefits which have been derived . . . must not be measured wholly in dollars and cents, nor in materials produced and salvage reclaimed" (p. 27). The benefits of these activities were their future community impacts:

The ideal of service to the state and to their fellows, is being indelibly impressed upon the minds of the children in our schools. Upon their shoulders will fall the duty of conserving an ideal of citizenship that will find expression in actual performance. These school experiences are training them for such a service. (p. 55)

John Dewey's assessment of farming programs shared this view. Such efforts "employ[ed] for economic production a great unused labor force which is too young to join the fighting forces" but did "not interfere with the labor market or serve as 'scabs.'" Instead they had "give[n] the children healthful

exercise, a sense of reality which means so much to children, and a sense of service in performance of work which is really useful." Food production was "important, valuable, and educational," but when done for academic credit with teacher guidance, it was merely a "performance" or work with a "sense of reality" in lieu of the actual thing (Dewey, 1917, pp. 5, 7). As a result, US educators proudly contrasted the experiences of American youth who continued their educations to many early school leavers in allied nations, suggesting these activities exemplified how schools served as sites for child protection, reducing rather than expanding the child labor pool.

Postwar Developments

In the booming postwar economy, the financial picture for educational institutions looked brighter, with high schools opening at a comparatively rapid pace. Educators nonetheless continued to embrace prewar pedagogical trends. Taking the view that "instead of trying to build a fence around the school so high that children cannot jump out," National Child Labor Committee general secretary Owen Lovejoy said, "why not make the enclosure attractive enough so that they will want to stay in," administrators added curricular and extracurricular programs appealing to youths' leisure-time preferences as they continued to press for compulsory education legislation ("Editorial and News Notes," 1919, p. 17). As active learning programs of student government, vocational education, and home economics continued to engage pupils—and in many cases help schools' bottom lines—new subjects added to the curriculum followed suit.

Safety education was a key example. Introduced before the war, it surged in popularity in the 1920s and 1930s, largely in response to the growing use of automobiles and the many accidents that occurred as students made their way to and from school ("The Present Status of Safety Education," 1926). President Herbert Hoover urged education for drivers and pedestrians alike. To reach both audiences, school leaders assigned pupils to serve as traffic police and crossing guards (Coleman, 1934; "Traffic to Be Bossed by Pupils," 1926). Students loved the new off-campus roles. "It's got football licked to a frazzle," declared Barney Millman, captain of one student traffic patrol ("School Pupils Have Own Court for Violators of Safety Rules," 1926, p. A27). Educators were equally enthused and pushed to make these activities part of state educational standards, in some cases paired with traffic courts or equivalent judicial bodies in which juvenile offenders were tried by their peers.

From public curfews to street trades regulations, child welfare advocates, including psychologists, educators, and parents, had long campaigned to remove children from the streets they called the "devil's kindergarten" and bring them inside protected spaces, including schools (Pierson, 1899). Recognizing that totally excluding young people from community life was an impossibility, they simultaneously expanded school activities into public spaces with

the ambition of making safer streets. Junior civic leagues were one example, school-based programs that organized cleanup campaigns, sanitary inspections, and playground beautification from the turn of the twentieth century (Light, in press; "League's Clean-Up Drive Shows Visible Results Here," 1929, p. 16; "Second and Third Ward Junior Civic Leagues," 1917, p. C5). Safety education was a popular variation on these alternative child protection techniques. By the early 1930s, more than one thousand US communities had stationed more than two hundred thousand students in local streets ("Junior Traffic Patrols in Schools Save Lives of Many Children," 1932).

These pupil patrols eliminated the need for schools to sponsor adult crossing guards or police in many communities. "Ten years old and 'earning' \$25,000 a year," reported one journalist on the Berkeley Traffic Safety Commission's estimate that "it would require 30 policemen working several hours a day to take the place of the boys . . . The young policemen save \$25,000 a year to the taxpayers" ("Junior Police Save \$25,000 for Berkeley," 1933, p. 1). Yet educators at the time and scholars who followed identified students as these programs' chief beneficiaries, touting such arrangements as expanding the active learning curriculum into communities (even when patrol members got paid) and pointing to statistical estimates of accidents reduced and lives saved ("Berkeley Proud of Service of the Junior Traffic Police," 1940; Rossland, 1926; Zelizer, 1985). Some adults did raise questions about students' legal authority to issue tickets to adult drivers and schools' liability when pupil patrol officers were injured in the line of duty. Yet, in making these issues of legal jurisdiction their focus of concern and disregarding the question of whether such tasks constituted child labor, it is apparent that any "work" performed by students carried a different economic status from the same tasks assigned to adults.

Rhetoric and Reality in the Postwar Curriculum

Although public talk about safety education and other programs of active learning continued to highlight the benefits to students and downplay the benefits to schools, not all was the same in the postwar period. In particular, the earlier sense that these activities offered young people access to vicarious experiences of adult life lost ground to the view that they were authentic educational activities for the nation's youth. With their mass diffusion, curricular choices, including student government, vocational training, home economics, and pupil patrols, initially adopted to direct young peoples' instincts for imitating adult occupations toward pedagogical ends, thus took on new public meanings in the 1920s. The mere association with schools came to serve as shorthand for the child protection these activities supplied. No longer so strictly tied to adult activities as their point of reference, organizational changes followed—for example, as student governments and pupil patrols dis-

carded earlier ambitions to mirror governmental structures in the adult world (Bryan, 1935; McKown, 1944).

This altered rhetoric did not alter the reality of school leaders' continued commitment to programs in which students created value for their institutions. The community school movement, for example, which took up Dewey's pedagogical vision in the 1930s, made this clear as instructors guided students to create products for sale in the school store in Deatville, Alabama; move electric systems underground in a Santa Maria, California, school; and farm five acres each as members of the Georgia Cotton Growers Association at one Fort Valley, Georgia, school (Mitchell, 1942; "The Southern School Has a Stronger Appeal," 1930). At Wisconsin's Atwater School, pupils built the school gym, ceramics facilities, tennis and volleyball courts, and ballpark; installed its public address system, shower, and water heater; operated a hatchery, apiary, and kiln supplying eggs, honey, and all plates and dishes to the lunch room; and ran a barber shop and beauty parlor inside the school (Olsen, 1945, p. 273).

Yet, as these activities relieved pressures on school budgets during an economic depression, when many schools were forced to lay off teaching staff, they were characterized as modern methods of experiential education—"learning by doing," "project" methods, "work experience," "study-action," "training 'the head, the heart and the hand'" (Mitchell, 1942; Olsen, 1945; "The Southern School Has a Stronger Appeal," 1930). Such programs were decidedly not exploitative, wrote Morris Mitchell in *Progressive Education*, because "children like to do hard things if they can really do them well" and had "suffered more from the frustration of not being invited to share in solving real problems than from being overtaxed in working at them" (Mitchell, 1942, p. 1). Acknowledgments of mutual gains for pupils and schools were typically accompanied by declarations about carefully selected projects that prioritized learning objectives, or commentary on the fun had by participating youth.

Discussions about student-produced media followed the new rhetorical framework. Scholars have described the growth of media education in this period as fears about the influences of propaganda and popular culture prompted instruction in media literacy and betterment inside schools (Jowett, Jarvie, & Fuller, 1996; Polan, 2007; Smoodin, 2004). These accounts follow the education-as-child-protection narrative, describing how students learned to be skeptical consumers in a media-saturated world. Overlooked, by contrast, is the equally robust tradition of media making in schools and how, like so many prior curricular and extracurricular choices, as it offered developmental benefits to students, it simultaneously offered economic benefits to schools.

Students had published school newspapers and magazines for decades, typically literary in focus. School radio clubs had operated since the turn of the century, with point-to-point communication rather than broadcasting dominating activities in their early years. Film, although less commonly encountered, also made inroads into educational settings. From the late 1920s,

student media increasingly covered school subjects and activities (Atkinson, 1939; Finch & Child, 1941; Cox, 1927). Students wrote and edited newspaper stories and radio and film scripts; served as radio and film announcers, directors, and performers; and manufactured and maintained radio equipment and broadcast facilities. Sometimes they charged fees to enjoy the media they made, raising funds to purchase necessary equipment. Educators were thrilled by these developments, viewing educational media production as complementing and modernizing a laboratory-oriented curriculum and building community within the school (Atkinson, 1939; Cox, 1927; Dale, 1940).⁵ "It takes teaching out of the narrow confines of the school room, and gives to the students valuable experience in 'learning to do by doing,'" Louisville, Kentucky, teacher and filmmaker Lillian McNulty (1939) explained. "One of the real purposes of a school-produced motion picture is not to 'play like Hollywood', but to help vitalize some piece of literature, historical event, or community problem."

Yet students were not the only beneficiaries of these new programs. Thanks to student newspapers' public circulation, school radio stations' off-campus reach, and the community screenings of pupil-produced films, equally significant was the impact on schools of student media as public relations tools, raising local awareness of school programs as a prelude to raising political or financial capital (Atkinson, 1939; Cox, 1927; Martin, 1939; Trautman, 1938). In Fargo, North Dakota, for example, school radio programs director Clarence B. Wright described how

the great numbers of children appearing on these programs throughout the year help to create an interest in the schools and their problems. These children call attention at home to the broadcasts and the parents form the habit of listening to the school programs. This fact was demonstrated several years ago when the radio programs helped markedly in bringing out a near record vote in a special school election which gave the schools an additional two mills to the regular school levy at a time when the general sentiment was in favor of lowering taxes rather than raising them. (Atkinson, 1939, p. 219)

In an era when educators were increasingly aware of the importance of publicity, but when few had funds to support public relations staffs, student media production, with its focus on the school community, was a widely used advertising tool (Alexander, 1928; Bernays, 1928; Bolser, 1920; Routzahn & Routzahn, 1928). Praising how pupil-produced media achieved "the Dewey philosophy that *education is life*" while simultaneously observing how "school publications play or might play" a part "in developing desirable home-school-community relations" on account of how they "influenced or modified" community attitudes, manuals for educational administrators make clear how these benefits were increasingly widely understood (Yeager, 1939, pp. 187, 191, 185). As a result of its simultaneous benefits to students and administrators, by the 1930s

public relations broadcasting had become the most common type of school radio and film activity (Atkinson, 1939; Finch & Child, 1941b).

Limitations and Legacies of the Unproductive Student Ideal

The changing explanations that muted the economic value of school activities over four decades underscore how student populations were excluded from the American economy in ways that were as much rhetorical as real and how histories of education have identified only the latter exclusion. These dual exclusions highlight similarities between the economic histories of schools and households at the turn of the twentieth century. Popular assumptions that nothing with immediate economic value was produced in either setting help make sense of why the notion that students, like housewives, are “unproductive” has persisted for so long and, equally, argue for revising the status quo.

Certainly, legal restrictions on child labor in factories, firms, and other settings helped expand student populations. And compulsory education legislation, along with new programs of active learning, both forced and enticed young people to stay in school. Yet it is equally vital to recognize that as educators sang a common refrain about schools as sites of child protection from the labor force, as spaces to develop human capital for later use, these institutions were in fact lively locations for economically generative activity in which students played starring roles. Although economic sociologists have explored children’s changing financial position in this period amid altered social expectations, the ways in which young people continued to generate value inside protected spaces has not been widely understood (Zelizer, 1985).

Teachers and administrators did acknowledge the financial benefits of such arrangements to a limited extent. Yet in regarding role-play of adult occupations and, later, any educational activity as distinct from that same activity taking place outside the educational system, they erected an imaginary line that walled off school activities from the economy—even those taking place off campus and those in which monetary exchange took place. By offering a biological rationale for students’ interest in cleaning classrooms, making furniture, and chasing truants, the classic developmental psychology and educational theory of Hall and Dewey and others that backed these interpretations make clear how such pupil contributions to the construction and maintenance of the US public school system had pedagogical value. In emphasizing the developmental rather than economic implications of this vicarious work, these theories and practices were equally critical components of the economics of education.

As in the better-known case of the housewife and her home, students and schools were among the populations and locations Americans came to regard as unproductive. Time and again this interpretation overrode conflicting evidence, for example, that children preparing meals, printing books, and build-

ing broadcast studios would have been compensated for these activities had they taken place in other locations. Equally, they suggested how, like women's "municipal housekeeping" (the term of art framing women's contributions to community improvement as merely extending their identities as unproductive housewives into public settings), junior civic leagues and junior traffic patrols enabled children to retain their identities as students being protected and educated even as they stationed themselves in the street (Spain, 2000). As a result, GDP measures of schools—quintessentially nonprofit institutions—made note of teachers but not students, even as they accounted for child laborers doing similar tasks in other settings.

Historians of education and childhood in America identify the 1930s and 1940s as the period when older adolescents (usually demarcated as ages sixteen to twenty-five) were integrated into the nation's collective sense of who comprised its "youth" (Reiman, 1992). As the evolving economy created jobs requiring specialized and extended training, and as the GI Bill made postsecondary education more affordable, the community college, college, and university experience came to be increasingly common, especially after World War II. With educational institutions now widely regarded as nonmarket spaces, also common were the assumptions about older students' lack of economic productivity even as their educational activities created value for schools and the state.

During the depression economy of the New Deal, for example, the National Youth Administration and state education agencies organized a broad range of "work experience" and "educational" programming for this age group to improve its future employment prospects and reduce competition for scarce jobs with adults.⁶ For their contributions to the construction and maintenance of educational institutions, the manufacture of government articles, and the development of civic amenities, these older students received "stipends" or "financial aid." A familiar discourse described how such programs solved "the problem of affording these young people a chance to work at something that is real" with "further educational opportunities . . . yet something which does not result in . . . competition with the great army of [adult] wage earners" (Barnard, 1934, SM3). The belief that "educational" programming for these older populations, as for younger students in public schools, was, by definition, not an economic activity that appeased unions sensitive to unfair competition from "work relief" programs and created fear among some educators that a new federal system might replace local control (Light, *in press*; Reiman, 1992). In short, one of the legacies of public schools' identities as institutions on the frontlines of the battle to end child labor was their influence on the history of higher education. This finding situates current controversies around the employment status of college athletes and graduate teaching assistants in a much broader context, pointing to new directions for educational research and new perspectives on contemporary debates.

For educational historians, this account of the construction of the unproductive student invites research on private schools, community colleges, colleges, and universities to flesh out in greater detail the stories of students' contributions to the economic history of American education and to trace how assumptions about their identities solidified so many decades ago managed to persist to the present day. Some of this information is hiding in plain sight—for example, in the items that pupils made at Dewey's Chicago laboratory school, the participation of fraternities and sororities in addressing campus housing shortages, and the proliferation of student traffic patrols in schools across the US (American Automobile Association, 2017; Fass, 1977; Mayhew & Edwards, 1936). Revisiting these and other examples through an economic sociology lens will help paint a more accurate picture of what students were actually doing as well as the changing lexicons that obscured the full value of these contributions in different times and places—for example, the claims in recent decades from colleges, the National College Athletic Association, and judges adjudicating student-athletes' complaints that stress the "amateurism" and recreational nature of college sports over the revenue it generates for schools (Schwartz & Trahan, 2017).

For educational economists, this four-decade history of tensions between educators' claims about schools as alternatives to the labor force and the fact that as students learned many delivered economic benefits to their institutions in activities that would have market value assigned in other locations invites new work in which "productivity *in* schools" joins "productivity *of* schools" on the field's research agenda (Hoxby, 1999). Assumptions about students as "raw material" so vividly expressed a century ago in Gary, Indiana, have had remarkable staying power, launching a rich tradition of scholarship on the development of human capital in schools, quantifying the future economic returns to students of educational participation at all levels (Stevenson, 2010; Tyler, Murnane, & Willett, 2000).⁷ Yet many school programs have dual beneficiaries, and systematically accounting for this broader range of economic impacts is necessary to supply an accurate picture of the economics of US education.⁸

The evidence presented in this article makes clear that institutional hesitancy around redefining and compensating college athletes and graduate teaching assistants as employees is merely the latest variation on Americans' long-standing resistance to a full accounting of students' economic activities. This framework is so powerful that even some advocates for increasing compensation to students adhere to it, emphasizing, for example, "that athletes are also students" (Santesteban & Leffler, 2017, p. 91). Yet, as we recognize the continuities between past and present, it is equally important to note that the growing resistance of students and their allies to these common assumptions offers evidence that a cultural turning point might be near (Avi-Yonah, Englemayer, & McCafferty, 2018; Strauss, 2017). Recent discussions about unpaid internships for academic credit and remunerating students for consistent attendance and good grades suggest that schools' longtime identities as

nonmarket spaces may be about to change (Owens & Stewart, 2016; Prothero, 2017). As we aim to settle these matters for the twenty-first century, the perspectives from economic sociology that uncover contradictions in the assignment of value remind us that the meaning of labor is not fixed. Armed with these insights, education scholars can lead a more nuanced conversation calling public attention not only to what schools do for students but, equally, what students do for schools.

Notes

This article, like most of my research, blends methods from history and sociology. In this case, economic sociology provided the lens for locating and organizing the historical materials. Following the work of scholars who have sought to explain how households “fell out of the economy” with the industrial-era transition from family economy to wage economy, I set out to find evidence about the economic value that students produced inside schools and the rhetorical strategies used by scientists and educators to minimize these activities’ economic value to schools in favor of their developmental value to youth. Where possible I sought to link well-known individuals and institutions in the history of US education (e.g., G. Stanley Hall, John Dewey, the Gary Plan, community schools, etc.) to these developments. Thus, the materials consulted included familiar texts by prominent psychologists and educators, records of influential educational movements from the Gary Plan to community schools, and work by less prominent individuals and institutions. As the bibliography attests, few of these were archival sources. Most were drawn from the professional literature for psychologists and educators circulating during the period under consideration, as well as mass media sources.

1. Scientific management, a set of principles for industrial work spaces that aimed to rationalize and standardize work processes to improve efficiency and productivity, is most closely associated with Frederick Winslow Taylor, and sometimes called Taylorism. Its popularity as a method of work efficiency inspired applications across a range of contexts, including households and schools.
2. Another inspiration for Gill was his friend William George’s junior republic in Freeville, New York, a stand-alone institution that he believed had broader applications (Light, in press). Notably, during this era, national origin as well as skin color were understood to separate racial categories, an understanding of race that persisted throughout the period covered in this article (Light, 2010).
3. Gill, appointed supervisor of Indian schools in 1911, aimed to install School Cities in all institutions supervised by the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs (“Indian youth taught citizenship as well as agriculture,” 1912; Gill, 1912; “Indians and the School City,” 1912).
4. This was specifically modeled on the George Junior Republic, which also inspired Gill’s work.
5. This notably included Ohio State University’s Edgar Dale, more famous for his participation in the Payne Fund studies that aimed to discover the extent to which screen content was influencing youth behavior.
6. After the 1938 publication of Dewey’s *Education and Experience*, the phrase *work experience* was especially popular.
7. There is a stream of research that examines present payoffs, but its focus is typically on behavior such as truancy, pregnancy, and school achievement rather than economic value (e.g., Cuffee, Waddell, & Bignell, 2017; Price & Simon, 2011).
8. There have been few efforts to quantify the value that students produce for institutions; notably, these are from outside of educational economics (Sanderson & Sigfried, 2015; Borghesi, 2018).

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