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Education: The Bridge out of Poverty

Executive Summary

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We could discuss at length education's many roles in life, but in a modern industrial society such as the United States education is an essential requirement for the earning of a reasonable standard of living. Wages in Utah are consistently 18% below the national average. Utahns stay out of poverty by having more than one earner per family, more than one job per earner or more education than average. The median household income in Utah is \$54,813. High school graduates earn an average of \$22,437 which is approximately the current official poverty line for a family of five. Obtaining a certificate from one of Utah's Colleges of Applied Technology is to earn, on average, about a dollar an hour more than one-half of the median household income. An associate's degree or a year or more of on-the-job training – essentially an apprenticeship – will raise the single earner family to three-quarters of the average household income. But even a worker with an associate's degree or a bachelor's degree typically does not earn a median household income. On average, it requires a master's degree for a single earner to achieve the state's median household income.



Utahns are slipping away from the obvious implications of those statistics. Our education record has been commendable in the past but it is currently deteriorating. We were number one in high school graduation but in 2006 we had dropped to fifth with 91.5% of residents over 25 years of age having a high school diploma. Where we were 12th in the nation in obtaining bachelor's degrees in 2004, we had fallen to 24th by 2006. Only 27% of Utahns over 25 had a bachelor's degree in that year compared to a national average of 28%. Only because we have more multiple earners per family and more jobs per individual worker than the national average do we maintain a relatively low poverty level.

Industrial Staircase

The rising importance of education in the work world can be illustrated by the existence of an industrial staircase. With food, shelter and clothing as the essentials of life, economic history must begin in an agrarian age. As soon as enough food was being produced, as well as shelter and clothing from agriculture, time could be taken off from farming to learn to work with brass and iron and move toward the industrial age. That beginning of what would ultimately be the steel industry made possible the primitive manufacture of plows and other gadgets, thereby improving the productivity of agriculture. The "old spinning wheel in the parlor" moved to the textile and clothing factories—simple consumer products manufacturing. Steel is only one example of basic industry and it is impossible without mining. Automobiles, airplanes, radios, and refrigerators are examples of complex assembly.

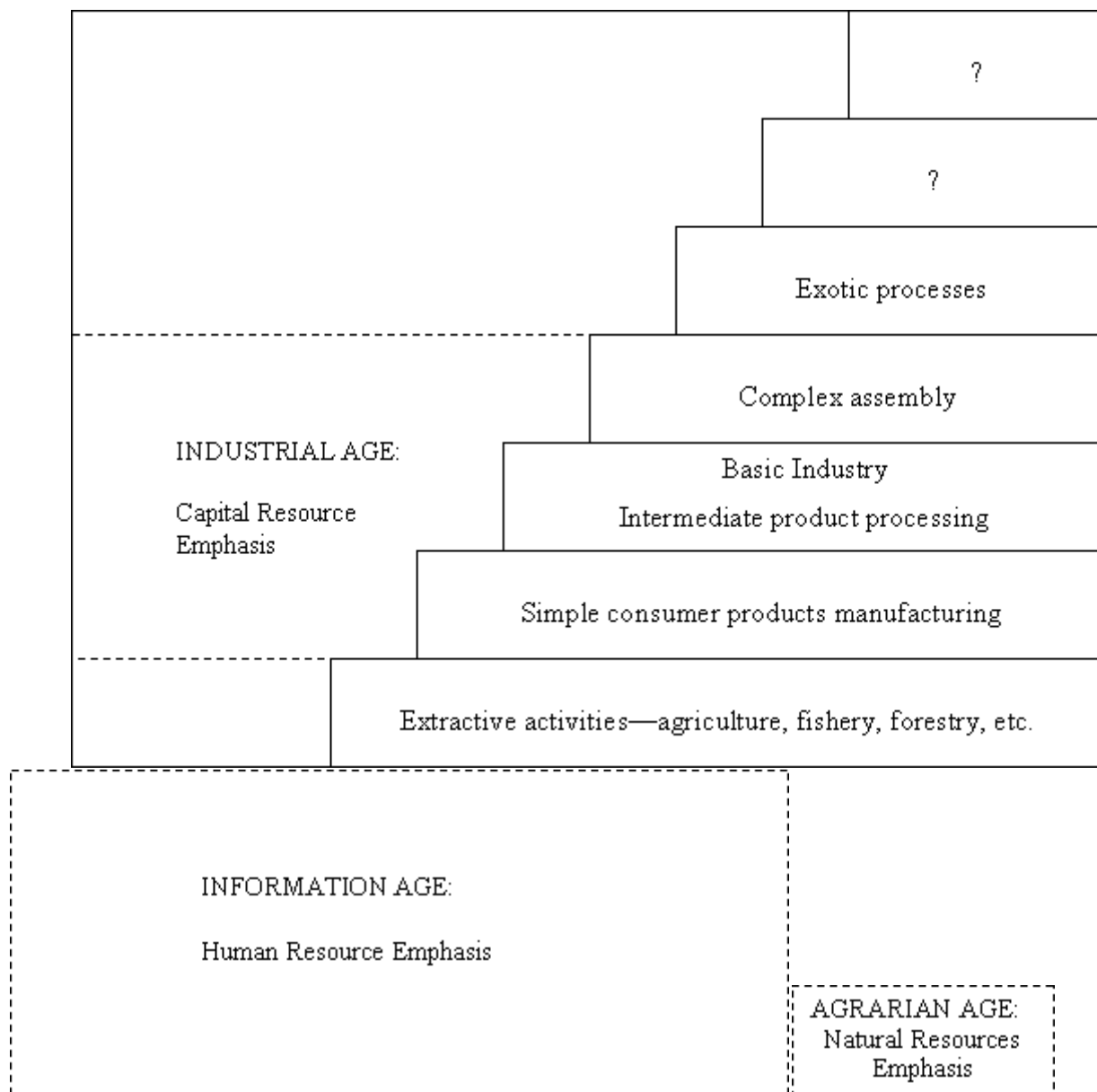


Figure 1: The Industrial Staircase

But as one climbs that industrial staircase, others follow. To remain on the clothing manufacturing step, for instance, one must be willing to work for the pay that others somewhere in the world will accept for doing the same job. One can attempt to close the entryway through tariffs and other trade barriers but then all consumers are hurt and the barriers prove temporary. Or one can move up to steel making and then automobile manufacturing. But as soon as everyone in the world learns to do that, we have to work at their wage or move up to what? Exotic processes: information technology, biotechnology, nanotechnology, and on and on. Just as complex assembly required on-the-job training and vocational education, the more exotic processes require higher education. The race up that staircase has no end, at least not one which has been discovered so far.

Preschool education

Children must get off to a strong start in elementary education in order to have academic success, and pre-school preparation is the key. Unfortunately, some parents do not have the

time, energy or skills to prepare their children for schooling. Parents lacking the capabilities to prepare their own children or wanting additional assistance in that preparatory task should have access to early childhood education. The Head Start program does an excellent job of providing that service to children of the poor. It needs to be funded adequately so that all of the eligible children can be enrolled. Childcare facilities are the other obvious source of a "head start" for those not eligible for Head Start. Utah is working to improve the competence of child care professionals for that assignment and should accelerate that effort.

Education funding

Utah has the largest student/teacher ratio, the lowest teacher pay and the lowest overall per student educational expenditures of any state in the nation. Per pupil expenditures, teacher pay and classroom size should move rapidly to at least national average. The 2007 Legislature made commendable progress in this regard. Given high tax surpluses and tax expenditures on a wide range of items, it appears more action could be taken. Some ideas include:

- Recognizing the objective of schools as learning, not teaching. Developing better means to facilitate the learning process is necessary. Teachers should be paid more at those schools with the most troubled student bodies to make those teaching assignments attractive and enable those schools to choose the most capable teachers.
- Teacher aides can be added to allow the teacher to exercise their profession more effectively.
- Competency-based education should be used whenever the learning goal can be clearly identified so students can learn at their own speed with teacher assistance adapted to their capabilities.
- After school and between school remedial opportunities should also be available and be made attractive.
- School should be year-round rather than continuing in the long ago agricultural era format, adding to teacher earnings in the process.

K-14 Education

Now that something beyond K-12 has been proven essential, K-14 with most of grades 10-14 dominated by competency-based education should become the reality of public education, tax supported throughout those years. This change would allow post-secondary education to have universal support rather than a tuition system biased in favor of those that are better off.

- Pending the K-14 arrival, concurrent enrollment through which the equivalent of 14 years of schooling can be accomplished during the current K-12 years, should be vigorously encouraged.
- To say that post-secondary education preparation must become the norm does not mean that everyone should spend those additional years in the classroom. Where the requisite skills can be learned on the job and an employer is not willing to cover the cost, subsidizing the on-the-job training of people is a perfectly reasonable policy.
- Parallel classroom training to provide knowledge and skills best learned in that setting at public expense, while learning other skills on the job at the employer's expense, is also a wise policy.
- Tuition and other education expenses should be met by Pell Grants and other provisions for all of those from low income families. Also, for those from low-income backgrounds, it makes sense to meet income needs along the way by combining education for future competence with work for current income. Participating in formal education for a while, leaving the classroom for the workplace for a time and then returning for further education is also a reasonable way to learn. Thus the doors to both should always be open and every obstacle possible should be eliminated.

- The restriction on using learning and credit from Utah's Colleges of Applied Technology as important steps up the career ladder towards bachelor's and graduate degrees should be eliminated.

A Second Chance

Many will inevitably stumble and fall and some will never have been offered the necessary opportunities to succeed. These individuals should be given every opportunity to rise and continue onward and upward. There are tasks which must be done which do not justify family-sustaining earnings. These tasks can be performed at lesser wages by secondary earners, not responsible for satisfying the bulk of the family's need, by youths earning while learning as they pursue their way to more desirable labor market roles. They can also be performed by immigrants and refugees entering and learning their way into a new environment without being permanently blocked from improved earnings. School drop outs or any who find that they quit learning too soon should have opportunities to return to learning in an earning status. Those incarcerated, but slated to eventually return to the world outside, should be taught and trained therein and then offered combination earning and learning opportunities upon release.

As time goes by, our economy and all others will certainly move further up that continual industrial staircase. Since we in the United States have been persistently ahead in that race, we can only guess what those further steps will be. Being fully and adequately prepared for the current top step is the best way to prepare for the future. One key to that, obviously, will be education.

To see the full paper, please go to:

www.cppa.utah.edu/publications/higher_ed/Education_Bridge_Out_of_Poverty.pdf

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