

THE EDITOR'S PAGE

Working Minds

LAST month, I used this space to highlight a proposal from Leon Botstein to do away with high school as we know it — or at least to alter the kinds of education we offer young people between 16 and 18. This month, readers can consider a different set of proposals — perhaps even more radical than those Botstein offered.

Marc Tucker of the National Center on Education and the Economy summarizes the views of the *New Commission on the American Workforce*, a panel he co-chaired, which produced the report *Tough Choices or Tough Times*. Among the proposals set out by this group is a completely different idea about late teens and what these young people can do. Tucker's summary is followed by commentaries from a variety of perspectives, to which he replies.

The take-away message of both Botstein and Tucker is that young people in the last two years of high school can do a lot more with their minds than we have traditionally asked of them. Both authors focus primarily on early college programs or stronger preparation for the kind of intellectual activity that ideally takes place in college classrooms and labs. Certainly more of our young people ought to be prepared well for and ought to attend and graduate from college. But that's not the only kind of intellectual activity that people — young *and* old — are capable of. (In fairness, both Botstein's book and the *New Commission's* report do devote some space to education for the skilled trades, but not a great deal, and those who opt for something other than college would be justified in thinking their careers are not seen as intellectually demanding.)

Which brings me to a happy accident. Penguin Books recently issued a paperback edition of Mike Rose's 2004 book, *The Mind at Work*. I overlooked this fascinating little volume the first time around. Its disarmingly simple premise is that a great deal of higher-level thinking characterizes the working lives



of individuals who perform jobs our culture doesn't usually view as mentally challenging. People like carpenters, waitresses, hairdressers, plumbers, and electricians.

Of course, it's easy to accept that a body of practical knowledge is foundational in service jobs and in the skilled trades, along with an intimate knowledge of tools and ways to use them. If you're installing a new breaker box in my house, I want you to know more than white-to-white, black-to-black. But Rose looks deeper than the external "work" these folks do. He talks with them and gets inside their heads to examine how they think about their work, how they solve the problems each task or customer presents, and what kinds of satisfaction besides a paycheck their labor provides.

For example, the thinking and project-management skills that Felipe, a young carpenter in training, exhibits as he serves as a crew chief in Jerry Devries' wood construction class would pay dividends for many a dissertation writer. And the feeling of satisfaction that all the students share when a project is completed — and done well — is palpable.

Have we slighted those whose talents and interests are not as strongly focused on academic kinds of learning? In our necessary efforts to open doors to college and make what goes on there more meaningful, have we also slighted our academically inclined students by not providing them the practical knowledge of how the modern world works? The undersold and undertold story of those whose work makes the world "work" is the subject of James Howlett and Brad Huff's article in this issue. It might just give your mind something to work on this summer. — BMS

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