Cross Talk:
The Public, The Experts, and Competitiveness

A Research Report from
The Business-Higher Education Forum
and The Public Agenda Foundation
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The Public, The Experts, and Competitiveness

John Immerwahr
Jean Johnson
Adam Kernan-Schloss

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For the past decade, leaders in business, government, education, and labor have been concerned about the skills of the American work force and the quality of education provided by the nation's public schools. For leaders, these interrelated problems pose a significant threat to the U.S. economy, and by doing so, threaten the aspirations and livelihoods of millions of American citizens.

Finding solutions presents the United States with major social, political, and economic challenges in a variety of arenas. Among leadership, there is a consensus that the nation must:

- reduce its burgeoning rates of illiteracy;
- dramatically increase the number of young Americans successfully completing school;
- offer education that is truly competitive with that provided by other advanced industrial democracies;
- increase the number of young Americans trained in the scientific and technological skills needed for the 21st century; and
- rapidly expand the training and retraining available to the American work force.

While the public does not reject these goals for America, the public opinion research on which this report is based suggests that there are important and troublesome differences between the way leaders and the general public view the issues of education and training in America. The research shows that the preoccupations of the public and leadership are not the same, and that to date, little communication has occurred between them. The following pages describe the public's thinking and indicate the public's conditions for taking leadership recommendations seriously.

**Crosstalk** offers some thoughts on how to close the gap between leaders and the public so that they will no longer be talking at cross purposes with one another. As such, we believe that it is important reading for all of us concerned about the country's economic future and charged with finding real and workable solutions to the challenges facing us.

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Colby H. Chandler  
1990-92 **Chairman**  
**Business-Higher Education Forum**

Daniel Yankelovich  
President  
**Public Agenda Foundation**
INTRODUCTION

FOR ALMOST 10 YEARS, the issue of America's declining economic competitiveness has been high on the agenda of policymakers and leadership groups. Of particular concern has been the human resources dimension of the challenge: the knowledge and skills of American students and workers.

In that time, more than 300 reports have been published, dealing with various aspects of the education and training crisis in our schools and workplaces. Thousands of specific recommendations have been advanced. Countless seminars and Congressional hearings have been held. Many communities have chosen to address various pieces of the problem — better textbooks for some, more adult literacy courses for others, higher standards and teacher pay elsewhere, a focus on helping kids learn science; and so on.

Despite these well-meaning efforts, not much has changed. Despite pockets of excellence, too few American students are graduating from high school with the skills they will need to succeed on the job. And too many American adults are unable to take advantage of the ongoing training they will need to learn the new skills demanded for the 21st century.

Given all the discussion, given the multitude of reports, given all the speeches and leadership pronouncements, why has so little progress been made? This research report offers some answers — and suggests some next steps for bringing the debate about competitiveness, education, and training, from conference centers and boardrooms into the living rooms of American citizens.
or the past two years, the Public Agenda Foundation, at the request of the Business-Higher Education Forum, has been conducting public opinion research to determine why Americans have been so reluctant to embrace the economic and education reforms recommended by leadership. Public Agenda examined survey data from the last decade — tracking Americans’ changing views of the U.S. and global economy, the state of U.S. schools, the skills and values of the work force, the quality of American products, the competence and integrity of American business, labor, and higher education, and related issues.

With the Forum’s support, Public Agenda also conducted more than a dozen focused group discussions in different cities around the country. These two-hour discussion sessions — led by a professional moderator according to a systematic research plan — helped disclose why people hold certain views and how they react to new information and unfamiliar arguments.

As the following chapters report, the research revealed major gaps between what the public understands about the interrelated issues of competitiveness, education, and training — and what experts and leaders think about these issues. The focus groups uncovered misconceptions and preoccupations that seem to “block” the general public from grasping the issue realistically. The sessions also suggested that some public misperceptions stem from flaws in the way leaders present these issues to the public.

Our findings from the focus groups, as with all observations from qualitative research, should be viewed as preliminary until they can be confirmed and quantified in national random sample surveys. Although these are preliminary findings, they are based on in-depth questioning of cross-sections of Americans from around the country. Throughout these research sessions, we heard similar concerns and questions and viewpoints voiced repeatedly. Because many of the observations in this study are at least partially corroborated by existing survey data, we include this information where available.

The state of mind people bring to this issue, as revealed in the focus groups, is startlingly different from that of experts and leaders. What people had to say in the focus group sessions was interesting. What people did not say was riveting.

In the next chapter, we describe what seems to be missing from public thinking. We outline the obstacles that seem to derail productive discussion, and we suggest what could be done to improve the prospects for reaching a broad and stable consensus on what to do.
A DOZEN DIFFERENCES BETWEEN LEADERS AND THE PUBLIC

1. Economics 101
(What Makes the Economy Tick)
The public and leadership have entirely different pictures of how the economy works and what steps will produce the economic prosperity both groups desire.

For most leaders, productivity and growth are the mainsprings of a vibrant economy. If companies and workers here can make good products at good prices that consumers here and abroad want to buy, the economy is judged to be basically healthy. Americans across the country reap the benefits of steady work and rising incomes.

For the public, a good economy is one in which everyone has a job — any kind of job. The public’s prescription for reaching this economic goal is straightforward and direct — make sure people who have jobs keep them and steer anyone not working into any job available. Thus, in the public’s mind, to have a healthy economy, the country should “do something” about businesses that eliminate jobs (by introducing technology or taking jobs overseas) and about individuals who don’t take jobs currently available. In focus groups conducted for this project, respondents repeatedly castigated business for practices that reduced the number of jobs available for Americans (see pp. 8-9), and they criticized individuals who did not take work to support themselves. As one typical respondent put it, "Some people could find jobs — menial jobs — if they would. You see signs for help in all the fast-food places."

Numerous survey findings reflect the public’s concern about jobs as the preeminent indicator of the nation’s economic health. Seventy-two percent of Americans, for example, say the creation of new jobs is the most important goal for business. Even during periods of relatively low unemployment, as in the late-1980s, Americans still named unemployment as one of their top six concerns.

By contrast, economists point out that the United States could have a robust economy even if fewer people worked (as in the 1950s when most households were comfortably supported by a single wage-earner rather than a husband and wife team) and could have a sick economy even if everyone worked (as in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe).

Virtually none of the respondents spontaneously grasped the importance of the productive side of the economy — the imperative to produce good products at good prices that sell well the world over. Although this concept is so obvious to experts and leaders that it often goes without saying, it is not an instinctive part of the public’s thinking. Few respondents initially saw the need to increase the country’s productivity, and almost none readily connected the country’s economic health to the skills and motivation of the work force.

2. So What’s New?
The public does not see the trade gap — the most potent symbol of declining U.S. competitiveness — as anything new or especially alarming.

For many leaders, the dramatic shift in the U.S. balance of trade in the mid-1970s (from historic surpluses to ever-widening deficits) signaled a new and ominous problem for the economy. Though leaders disagreed about the causes and consequences of the trade gap, its very existence became a lightning rod for concern — a red flag that the U.S. economy was not performing as well as it used to or as well as the economies of other advanced industrial nations.

Superficially, the public seems to agree with leaders. Surveys reflect a wide recognition of the existence and importance of the trade gap, with 83 percent of Americans saying they are aware of the nation’s trade deficit. But on closer inspection, this seeming agreement is only skin-deep. Although people are aware of the trade deficit, many see it as one of those chronic prob-
lems that have always been with us and always will be. As one focus group participant said, "The trade deficit has been going on forever, but you hear more about it now. It's more of the same old stuff . . . the natural evolution of the economy."

By this reasoning, nothing new needs to be done. Americans can continue to live with the problem — just as they have in the past. What is more, if the problem is an old one, it is probably an intractable one. Whatever we might do probably would not work. One focus group participant lamented, "We have all these problems, and I don't think they're going to go away." This fatalism is echoed in national surveys. Seventy-four percent of Americans say the problem of the trade deficit is either staying the same (27 percent) or that the country is losing ground (47 percent).³

3. Economic Competitiveness — The Also-Ran Issue
More immediate and concrete problems are always on the top of the public's agenda.

Most Americans express concern about the trade deficit when they are asked about it directly, but the issue tends to be an "also-ran." International crises such as that in the Persian Gulf or U.S. actions in Panama or Libya have a special urgency that propels them to the very top of the public's list of concerns. When no international crisis dominates the headlines, the public names drugs, homelessness, crime, the budget deficit, poverty, and the environment as the country's most urgent problems. Some small percentage eventually mention foreign trade or economic competitiveness.

Although there is widespread pessimism about the economy — particularly with the U.S. economy in recession — public concern tends to be diffuse. Fifty-one percent of Americans believe their financial situation is better than it was ten years ago, and 31 percent say it is about
the same. Although the real value of wages for most Americans has dropped by about 10 percent over the past ten years, only 16 percent of people perceive themselves as being worse off. Sixty-one percent of Americans do not believe that they have been personally hurt by the trade deficit. The fact that Americans’ current level of comfort has been achieved by putting more people into the work force (husband and wife both having to work to provide for their children) and by borrowing billions of dollars (much of it from abroad) remains almost universally unrecognized.

Since the effects of lagging competitiveness have been masked for most Americans — and because its most serious consequences lie in the future if the current trends continue — the public places more importance on issues that seem to pose a more immediate threat to their security.

4. The Side-Shows
The public’s attention is deflected by emotionally charged side issues — the symptoms and side-effects of the country’s lagging economic competitiveness.

Even though the public is aware of declining U.S. competitiveness, that perception does not lead people to conclude that the country needs to increase its productivity or upgrade the skills of the work force. Instead, public attention is diverted by a series of emotionally-charged side issues such as foreign aid, the failure to “buy American,” corporations exporting jobs overseas, cheap labor abroad, labor unions, and foreign ownership in the United States. In the focus groups, different people were drawn to different explanations for America’s declining competitiveness, often advocating their own personal economic “pet peeve” as the primary reason for the country’s woes. Chief among the distracting issues were these:

- **Foreign Aid.** In virtually every focus group, at least one or two people thought that the country’s trade problems were primarily caused by the United States “giving aid to other countries rather than helping our own right here.” This reflects a widely held perception that the United States often helps other countries, which, in turn, are often ungrateful. Some more sophisticated respondents focused on the cost of providing military defense for two of our major competitors — Japan and Germany.

  Most leaders, in contrast, see U.S. foreign aid as a relatively small expense (compared to the overall U.S. economy). And, although many leaders call for “burdensharing” with our NATO and SEATO allies, few offer it as a solution to the country’s competitiveness problems.
Buying American. Another common complaint is that Americans do not support their own economy by "buying American." As one Baltimore woman put it, "A lot of people are losing their jobs because we are buying foreign things." A substantial number of respondents viewed consumer preference for Japanese products as the cause of our competitiveness problems rather than — as an economist might view it — a symptom of Japan's ability to make better products for less money. People's frustration with what they saw as the selfish short-sightedness of American consumers diverted their attention from the need to improve American-made products.

Shipping Jobs Offshore. The public is also angry at corporations that export jobs overseas. As one focus group participant complained, "[If we took] care of our own people instead of going over to some foreign country [to] get cheaper labor, then our country would be stronger, and our people would have an income."

Respondents often saw the practice of moving jobs offshore as clear evidence of corporate greed and selfishness. A Philadelphia woman said, "[U.S. companies] can do everything cheaper in foreign countries, and, you know, forget about the United States. Who cares? You know that big business is making their money, so they don't care." The economic rationale — that corporations export jobs because it is efficient to do so — was not part of respondents' reasoning.

The contrast between the attitudes of the general public and experts on exporting jobs is very sharp. Although 79 percent of the public think it is "very important" to protect American jobs, only 44 percent of experts do.8

Cheap Foreign Labor. The availability of cheap labor abroad is a related distraction. When asked to choose the one factor most responsible for America's trade deficit, 36 percent of Americans — a plurality — name cheap foreign labor.9 Focus group participants repeatedly talked about how little foreign workers earn and how this gives foreign products an inherent cost advantage. Most participants were not aware that American wages are not as high as they once were relative to wages in high-productivity nations such as Japan and West Germany. In some industries, such as steel, the United States is already one of the lowest-cost producers in the world.

Labor Unions. For many respondents, concern about cheap labor abroad went hand-in-hand with anger at American labor unions. One in five Americans thinks labor unions are the factor most responsible for the country's trade difficulties.10 As one focus group participant explained, "We can't make it because our unions have jacked prices up so bad that we can't afford to buy what's made in this country."

The diagnosis that high wages are the cause of America's competitiveness problems leads people to an obvious and unacceptable solution — paying Americans less. Thus, in the view of many respondents, the only way to become competitive is to lower the American standard of living, which people obviously want to avoid. From this perspective, the situation appears hopeless. Not surprisingly, only 26 percent of Americans say we should cut the wages and salaries of workers and executives so that U.S. products can be sold at lower prices.11

Foreign Investment. Foreign investment in the United States provides another source of distraction. Focus group participants frequently referred to highly visible foreign acquisitions, such as the purchase of Rockefeller Center by Japan's Mitsubishi Corporation, and saw these developments as very dangerous for the U.S. economy.

Here again, there are sharp differences of opinion between the public and leadership.
Seventy percent of Americans view foreign investment in the United States as a bad thing, and 43 percent think it somehow takes good jobs away from American workers. Yet, only 26 percent of experts view foreign investment as a problem. Many leaders believe foreign investment is essential, given the size of the U.S. government debt and low rate of personal savings. For them, foreign investment provides needed capital that keeps Americans employed and helps the economy grow. They would argue, in contrast to public fears, that foreign investment creates jobs rather than eliminates them.

These issues are important and controversial. What they have in common is that they are the symptoms of America’s disease of declining economic competitiveness. But for most leaders, they are not, by themselves, the cause of the country’s economic problems.

For those wishing to engage the public in constructive debate on how to revitalize the U.S. economy, the point is not whether the experts or the public is right on these issues. Nor is it whether there should be policy changes to address any or all of these issues. Experts and leaders disagree among themselves about what should be done.

The point is that the public seems to believe that relieving the symptoms will cure the disease. Public anger and concern about these side issues is deflecting attention away from serious structural problems — such as the competence of the work force — that the country must address. Without a clearer understanding of what is causing our country’s competitiveness problems, many Americans may assume that if these side issues are addressed — if we reduce foreign aid or bar foreign investment here — our problems will be solved. Almost no expert or leader thinks addressing these issues will, in and of itself, get the country’s economy back on the move.

5. The Exceptional Japanese

Much of the public believes our competitiveness problems begin and end with Japan.

When Americans talk about competitiveness, the discussion immediately turns to Japan. By two to one, Americans feel that Japan, not the United States, is already the world’s leading economic power. This is in contrast to the views of most opinion leaders (72 percent) who, while admiring Japan’s remarkable economic recovery, still see the United States as the world’s economic frontrunner. Virtually none of the participants in the focus groups mentioned competition from the Europeans or from other Far East “tigers” such as South Korea and Singapore. Public attitudes about Japan are colored by two somewhat distorted perceptions.

First, people attribute Japanese success to a strong work ethic, but believe that this success comes at too high a price. As focus group participants saw it, the American lifestyle is the envy of the world, but, as one man put it, “no one wants to move to Japan and work himself to death.” Another man explained it this way, “The Japanese are doing real fine, but they’re working 60 hours a week.” Many participants referred to suicides by Japanese students or businessmen. Another woman said, “The [Japanese] individual is not a happy individual.” This pattern of thinking leads people to conclude that the only way the United States can compete is to emulate what they see as an austere, pressured, and ultimately self-destructive way of life — hardly an attractive prospect.

Second, some significant segment of the public seems to believe that the Japanese have succeeded by “stealing” U.S. ideas and engaging in unfair trading practices. Many focus group participants knew that Japanese companies have been astonishingly successful making and marketing products invented by Americans, especially TVs and VCRs. But a number also asserted that the Japanese had somehow dishonestly stolen our right to produce these products. This belief
is troublesome because it leads people to believe that, rather than investing in new technology, we should just stop the Japanese from stealing ours. Only a few respondents were aware that the Japanese are technological leaders in a growing number of fields, from high-definition television to laptop computers.

6. The Moral Fix
When the public thinks about the problems in the work force — and the problems of students who will enter the work force of the future — they focus almost exclusively on "moral" aspects of the issue. They believe attitudes and motivation, not skills or training, are the cause of the problem — and the cure.

Americans believe that their fellow citizens are not working as hard as they used to. This perceived erosion of the traditional values that built this country extends to every level of society — from managers who can’t see beyond next quarter’s profits . . . to factory workers who do just enough to get by, and, as a result, turn out shoddy products . . . to students who just put in their time, but do not learn much. Nine out of ten Americans believe that a decline in the American work ethic threatens the future of the American dream. As when asked why American products are not always high in quality, the number-one response is that American workers do not care enough.

More than three quarters believe that a stronger foreign work ethic is an important reason for U.S. competitiveness problems. As one Baltimore man put it, "America was made great by putting out a good day’s work for a good day’s wages. That’s not the attitude today. The attitude today is do nothing and get paid big for it." Another commented, "For years, if America built a car, it was built to last. Today, it is a throwaway economy. You don’t make something good. Six months later we can throw it away and buy a new one."

Permissiveness and lack of standards in the schools was a continual theme among focus group participants. One typical participant said, "In high school, they pass the kids no matter what. I think the schools are too easy today . . . they can just waltz themselves through school." Others blamed the situation on a lack of values among young people. A Baltimore woman said, "They only work hard enough just to get by, and they don’t care what they’re going to do later. ‘Oh well, I’ll go on public assistance. I’ll go on welfare. I’ll do something. I don’t care.’" Others put the onus on the family. "The basic problem in America today," one man said, "is the parents. They want the church to do this. They want the schools to do that. But let’s face it, if kids are gonna’ get educated, the parents have got to help the teachers."

For the public, motivation, standards, values, and the work ethic are the most important elements to be addressed in rebuilding the American economy. By this reasoning, America has plenty
of technology and could upgrade its citizens' skills very quickly — if only so many of us were not lazy, self-centered, self-indulgent, soft, corrupt, and indifferent to quality.

But because this element of competitiveness — motivation and values — does not respond significantly to public policy or short-term action, the public's viewpoint does not lead to much progress. People are angry and frustrated, but they cannot envision practical steps to address the problem. Some seem content to wallow in the problem, rejecting ownership and responsibility for solutions.

Many leaders share the public's dismay with the national mood. But because they see no practical policies for improving Americans' values, policymakers tend to focus instead on programs, services, and funding to foster better skills. Thus, when leaders address the public about these issues, they often omit or downplay problems with motivation — and their message misses the mark. When leaders say "more" is needed — more pay for teachers, more scientists and engineers, more diverse curricula — the public tunes out. For the public, what is missing is the will to make use of what we already have. As one focus group participant said, "If you have the will, you can get the skills. The will comes before the skills."

7. The Sleeping Giant
Because the public believes the problem is a question of will and effort, they believe America can "bounce right back" — if and when it decides to.

Americans who recognize that the nation is falling behind its competitors often think in terms of the United States as a giant slumbering unaware while a squad of little interlopers makes off with the valuables (such as American inventions) and leaves us with our shoelaces tied together. If only America could wake up, it would sweep away its competitors in an instant and regain its former economic vitality. As one focus group participant said, "America has to be pushed. When America gets pushed, America comes back." Another said, "We have the skills and technology. We can do it. There's no problem, 'cause we've already done it before."

To these Americans, the nation's victory in World War II after the bombing of Pearl Harbor and its success in reaching the moon after the U.S.S.R.'s launch of Sputnik are proof that a dramatic comeback is possible. If the United States decides to tackle its current problems, the public believes it can achieve results virtually overnight. This is reflected in survey data, which show that half of the public endorses the statement, "We are slipping dangerously, but can still turn it around if we act decisively."19

By contrast, few, if any, leaders believe that such a quick fix is possible. Were it only a question of motivation, a fast turnaround might be
one aspect of the work force skills problem that people do recognize and talk about — often heatedly — is the number of young people who cannot read, write, or do simple arithmetic. Many focus group participants volunteered anecdotes of restaurant waiters, retail clerks, or other entry-level employees who were shockingly deficient in even the most basic skills. Older participants repeatedly pointed out that in the past, a high school diploma indicated some reasonable degree of educational competence.

Although experts tend to stress the kinds of skills required for the 21st-century world of work — skills such as communications, problem-solving, a grasp of basic scientific and mathematical concepts, familiarity with computers, the ability to work as part of a team — much of the public seems to yearn for the little red schoolhouse of the 19th century, with its emphasis on basic skills and traditional values. Indeed, a number of focus group participants saw the use of computers or calculators in the classroom as counterproductive — a shortcut that makes things “too easy” on students.

Although focus group participants expressed outrage at the low level of basic skills among millions of Americans, they were often complacent about an issue that increasingly alarms leadership: that even above-average American students are falling below international norms. For example, the top 5 percent of American high school science students would be only average in the classrooms of our Far Eastern competitors. Many focus group participants were unaware that top American students are deficient in any way. Even when information on this problem was presented to them, some respondents downplayed the achievements of students from Europe or Asia by asserting that only the very best students stay in academic programs beyond their early teens in these foreign countries. The comments in the focus groups are

"A number of focus group participants saw the use of computers or calculators in the classroom as counterproductive — a shortcut that makes things 'too easy' on students."

8. Back to Basics
The public believes that basic skills are enough. They do not understand that the 21st-century work force will need new, advanced skills.

When most Americans think about job skills, what comes to mind are the basic skills they needed to earn a high school diploma. And the feasible. But leaders recognize that it will take years and a massive investment of human and financial resources to upgrade the skills of American students and workers: to make sure that the one in four children growing up in poverty starts school ready to learn, to reduce the 25 percent high school dropout rate, to help 30 million illiterate adults learn to read, to give students and workers the advanced skills they will need for high-tech workplaces.
confirmed in survey data. Although 70 percent of Americans say it is most important to make sure low-achieving students learn basic skills, only 13 percent say it is most important to challenge bright students to do outstanding work.20

Thus, when it comes to school reform, the public and experts have quite different agendas. While the public generally seems willing to declare victory once every American has mastered basic reading, writing, and math, experts believe that such skills represent only the first step.

9. Only K-12 Counts
The public believes that the only change required to prepare a competitive American work force is to improve the learning that goes on in grade school, middle school, and high school.

The public is not very concerned about learning that occurs — or does not occur — in college, graduate school, or on the job. The public thinks that if kids graduate from high school with the "3 Rs," they will get along fine as adults. As one focus group participant said, "It is the training from K-12 that counts. If we fall back, we won’t be able to keep up, and then we won’t have jobs."

Thus, people are not very receptive to the experts’ calls for advanced skills training, premier science and technical education, life-long learning systems, and adult literacy efforts, none of which seem as necessary as good, basic K-12 education. Support for upgrading American colleges was almost nonexistent in the focus groups.

Leaders, on the other hand, express considerable concern about the state of the nation’s college and graduate school education. The need to train and retrain Americans already on the job is considered urgent. While leaders acknowledge the importance of K-12 reform, they recognize that the economic “payoff” will not come for ten to twenty years — when today’s school children are in the work force — and the nation cannot afford to wait.

The public’s preoccupation with basic skills only partly explains its lack of interest in adult education and work force training. In the focus groups, some people failed to see any connection between job training and the country’s economic well-being or competitiveness. For these individuals, job training is something some employers offer for their own reasons, and whether they do so or not is pretty much their own business. From this point of view, no public policies are needed or desired. As one Atlanta man summed it up, “Why would you retrain someone who already has a job?”

The public’s almost single-minded focus on jobs and motivation, described earlier, reinforces its resistance to work force training. The reasoning goes like this: For adults who have jobs, retraining seems superfluous. For adults without jobs, it is not a question of skills but of motivation. There seem to be plenty of menial jobs around, if only the unemployed adults had enough motivation to take them.

10. Legacy of the Great Depression
The public often resists policies for upgrading skills because they do not think there will be enough jobs for people who improve their skills.

The Great Depression and the Baby Boom, both of which put too many people in competition for too few jobs, have left some Americans leery of being too skilled. Visions of engineers working as plumbers and Ph.D.s driving cabs prompt these people to reject the experts’ calls for more and better training to raise the work force’s skills. To these people, more training is a waste because it would only result in more people chasing too few high-skill jobs. As one focus group participant said, “You can give people all the skills you want — the jobs aren’t there.”

As noted earlier, the public equates a good economy with low unemployment. Many Americans have an overriding fear of unemploy-
ment. For them, a shortage of jobs, not a shortage of skills, is the biggest danger the U.S. economy faces now and in the future. If people do not have jobs, they will not have money. Then they will not be able to consume enough to keep other people employed.

Virtually no one in the focus groups conducted for this project readily grasped the analysis that drives leadership concern about the economy: that the new “unemployment” will be characterized not by too few jobs, but by too many people without the skills to do the jobs that are available. Given the public’s single-minded focus on full employment, leadership concern about retraining the work force seems, at best, to be slightly off the point.

11. Legacy of the Great Society
The public is ambivalent about policies to upgrade education or improve the skills of workers if they seem to require massive government spending on programs for the disadvantaged.

A growing number of experts and leaders believe that the most successful economic competitors in the 21st century will be those with the highest overall literacy and education levels — that is, nations (such as Japan, South Korea and Germany) with a strong “bottom third.” This observation has significant implications for the American economy since demographic trends show that the future U.S. work force will increasingly be composed of groups with disproportionately high rates of illiteracy and educational underachievement, such as minorities and recent immigrants.
Given this diagnosis, one of the best things the United States could do for its economy would be to attack illiteracy, poverty, drug addiction, and other debilitating social problems hampering the educational prospects of America’s “bottom third.” That is, education and training reform should be viewed in a broader overall context that addresses the totality of human needs: adequate education, yes, but also adequate housing, health care, and child care, for example.

Many members of the general public agree in principle with some of these goals. But here again, the agreement is more superficial than it seems. Although the public supports these ideas on humanitarian grounds — and as a way to save money on welfare and other social services — Americans have not grasped the idea that individuals in the bottom third are essential economic players. Because people continue to believe that there are not enough jobs to go around even for people with skills, the idea that the nation needs to educate even more workers is not convincing to them.

Moreover, a significant portion of the public also remains cautious about spending scarce and precious tax dollars on programs that may not work — particularly programs that seem to be part of what many Americans see as a failed “welfare system.” Fully 64 percent of the public say that current welfare programs perpetuate poverty rather than restrain it. 21

In the focus groups, people tended to reject solutions that reminded them of the “Great Society” efforts of President Lyndon Johnson’s years. They were cautious about “big government,” higher taxes, and “throwing money at the problem.” The comments of focus group participants reflect findings from a 1988 Public Agenda study on the public’s views on social welfare. That study found that 66 percent of Americans feared that additional spending on welfare would result in the creation of “a huge bureaucracy of counselors, training staff, and new government employees.” 22

Although there is substantial support (69 percent) for the Head Start program — because people see it as both a worthy cause and a good investment — there may be skepticism when experts call for higher funding for less familiar programs, even though these also may have excellent track records.

12. Technology as a Bane, Not a Boon
The public has mixed feelings about technology. For some, technology is a problem, not a cure. Others just cannot imagine that we need more technology than we already have.

A significant portion of the population continues to see technology as a threat to full employment, and many people foresee computers and robots taking over jobs people used to do and should be doing still. For example, 63 percent of Americans believe that the expanded use of robots on the assembly line will cause increased unemployment even if retraining is done. 24 Because the public believes that unemployment is very bad for the economy, some people reason that technology must be bad for the economy, too. Hence, when leaders and experts call for more and better technology in the workplace, they appear, to at least some portion of the population, to be issuing threats instead of suggesting solutions.

A focus group participant from Denver said, “Everything’s machines; everything’s computers. What are these kids going to do in the future? You’ve got computers now that do the work of thousands of people, hundreds of people. Everybody has to be an engineer, but how many engineers can society accept?”

Added to the concern that technology could eliminate jobs is a fundamental lack of familiarity with the professions of science and technology. Many people were unfamiliar with
what engineers and scientists actually do, and did not understand why they might play a key role in rebuilding a strongly competitive American economy. Although science and engineering are generally regarded as good professions, and engineers receive especially high marks for honesty and integrity, to the public, scientists and engineers are "them," not "us." Some see engineers and scientists as specially gifted elites or nerds who carried briefcases in high school. A small minority may even see them as dangerous Dr. Strangeloves. In 1988, for instance, 38 percent of Americans agreed with the statement, "Because of their knowledge, scientific researchers have a power that makes them dangerous." 25

Most Americans also seem unaware of the role technology plays in creating more desirable, and thus more competitive products. When asked why American products are not always high in quality, out-of-date equipment and technology were cited least often.26 Again, when asked what one thing — more than anything else — makes a product high in quality, the public mentioned innovation and having the latest technology least often.27

In the focus groups, many people tended to see technology as a mixed blessing. Even discounting the jobs issue, some respondents were overwhelmed or disturbed by the broad array of technologically advanced products and services they encounter daily. A Denver man said, "I think the explosion of technology is going to drown us. There isn't anything that was [around] ten years ago that is really useful today. Everything is wiped out. It's no good. It's outdated. We're becoming too much of a throw-away society." For these individuals, it is hard to believe that more technology is needed. Others believed that technology is somewhat dehumanizing — changing life and mankind for the worse. Some expressed the view that increasing science and math in grade school and high school would give students a narrow, almost mechanical, outlook on life.

Even people who seemed to embrace and take pride in technological advances of many kinds often rejected the notion that the United States might be losing ground in this area. Typical of those holding this view was a man who said, "I don't think the rest of the world is ahead of us in technology, because all their technology is either derived from ours or outrightly stolen. A lot of the so-called Japanese advances in microcomputers are just taking our technology and feeding it back to us without the hang-ups and hassles of our manufacturing rules, what have you."
THE PROSPECTS FOR CONSTRUCTIVE DEBATE: OPPORTUNITIES AND PITFALLS

The misperceptions and miscommunications between experts and the public are serious, but, based on research conducted for this project, promising opportunities exist for including the public in an informed and thoughtful debate about the future of the American work force. Several broad and deeply held public attitudes are assets that will assist those who wish to extend the debate about education and training beyond the expert community.

The first asset in getting the public's attention to this problem is widespread nervousness about the state of the U.S. economy. Despite the misperceptions and half-truths that characterize the public's understanding of the issue, there is a widely held conviction, repeatedly voiced in the focus groups and confirmed in national survey data, that "something is wrong" with the U.S. economy. Although most Americans cannot articulate the experts' crisp analysis of what is wrong, there is real fear that the country is skating on economic thin ice and that somehow, somewhere, we have lost something crucial to our success as a nation.

A second asset is the public's deep-seated commitment to education. Time and again, in survey after survey, and in study after study, Americans have endorsed the concept of universal education, universal literacy, and universal opportunity through education. Americans from all economic strata, in all areas of the country, share the belief that a good education should be available to every child and that education is the key to the American dream.

The third asset is the public's basic common sense. Americans may not spontaneously talk about the need to increase productivity, or the need to make the best products at the best price, or the need to have a skilled, educated and motivated work force, but these concepts
make sense to people when they are presented. The public may not always volunteer the connection between educational excellence and economic prosperity, but once those links are spelled out, the public readily accepts them.

Finally, the public is ready to act. Unlike what so many observers have witnessed among the populations of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, Americans do not believe that “the good life” is something to be delivered to them by government. Americans continue to believe that they are the makers of their own futures.

These are powerful assets when communicating with the public, and they provide a sound basis for helping Americans understand what has happened to their economy and what now needs to be done. These assets provide a solid foundation for presenting Americans with an array of choices about how to upgrade their schools and ensure that American workers have “world-class” skills and motivation. Research conducted for this project suggests that people can understand, and equally important, that they want to understand what needs to be done.

Most leaders and experts concerned about competitiveness believe that the problem will not be solved without greater public understanding and support for necessary policies. But leaders themselves sometimes contribute to the public’s misunderstanding and seeming disinterest in the issue.

Leaders too often define the issue in the technical terms of their own special domain and, thus, either deliberately or unintentionally, keep ownership of the issue to themselves. The economist may focus on yen-dollar exchange rates. The business executive concerned about losing market share may concentrate on near-term strategy for upcoming trade negotiations. Experts on mergers and acquisitions, capital formation, commercial applications of technology, and industrial policy will discuss the issue in terms of their own field of specialization and detailed knowledge. Most of these experts operate on a shared understanding of economic basics, and virtually none would argue that the country can maintain its standard of living if the skills and motivation of the work force are allowed to deteriorate.

But the public gets lost in this maze. What people hear are the technical details rather than the basic truths. What they remember are disagreements “around the edges” rather than the widely shared consensus among leaders that action to upgrade the skills of the work force is needed now.

Another pitfall for leaders is a tendency to ignore — or, for some, even denigrate — the public’s real concerns. People care about declining values. They are concerned about unemployment, even about temporary “adjustments” in the labor force. They are worried about launching an array of new programs that do more for the employability of government bureaucrats, administrators, and evaluators than for the people the programs are supposed to help. Too often, leaders who want the public’s attention violate the cardinal rule for getting people to listen to what you have to say: You must talk about what’s on their minds as well as what’s on yours.

In the focus groups conducted for this project, people showed a remarkable ability to listen carefully to leadership’s agenda, in addition to voicing their own. The public’s open-mindedness might be something some leaders would be well advised to emulate. A sincere attempt to communicate with the public — as opposed to talking at them — has genuine prospects for success as long as it is grounded in an understanding of the perceptions and misperceptions that have blocked real public involvement in the competitiveness issue.
NEXT STEPS

Using the research discussed in this report as a starting point, the Business-Higher Education Forum and the Public Agenda Foundation have initiated a multi-year project to help close the gaps between public and expert understanding of these issues.

The project is called "Crisis in the Work Force: Help Wanted." Its goals are to help the public see the links among inadequate education and training, declining economic competitiveness, and a lower standard of living — and from there to discuss and make realistic choices about various options for upgrading the skills of all Americans.

To help citizens weigh the pros and cons of various options, the Forum and Public Agenda have developed citizen education materials that address public misperceptions and clearly frame policy choices in a balanced way. Materials include a newspaper supplement (with a ballot to allow the public to vote on the choices), a TV documentary film, public service announcements, newspaper advertisements, and op-ed articles.

The materials will be used during intensive, six-week campaigns involving the active participation of major local newspapers and TV/radio stations, community groups, and the members of the Forum and the Business Roundtable. The first campaigns will begin in spring 1991 in several pilot "flagship" cities across the United States, including Hartford, Indianapolis, Nashville, New Orleans, Phoenix, and Seattle.

Later in 1991 and continuing through 1992, the campaign will be offered nationwide through about 250 ABC television network affiliates, the Network for Public Debate (major newspapers and TV/radio stations in communities across the country), the National Issues Forums (a consortium of more than 1000 universities, libraries, and other local groups), the Business-Higher Education Forum, and the Business Roundtable. The project will ultimately reach millions of Americans, and the results will be communicated to policymakers, the press, and other opinion leaders.

A major component of the joint venture will be a pre- and post-campaign survey of participants in selected cities; this evaluation will allow the partners to see which approaches are most effective in enhancing citizen understanding, which are ineffective, and why.

The citizen education campaigns will not advocate any specific policies or programs. Their co-sponsors, however, believe that once communities have had an opportunity to consider various choices presented in an intensive, comprehensive, and balanced way, they will be more receptive to the kinds of recommendations advocated by leadership groups for the past decade.


4. Ibid.


6. Ibid.


10. Ibid.


15. Ibid.


27. Ibid.

Focus groups for this project were conducted from August 1989 to December 1990 in Atlanta, Georgia; Baltimore, Maryland; Chicago, Illinois; Cleveland, Ohio; Denver, Colorado; Kansas City, Kansas; Los Angeles, California; New York, New York; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Phoenix, Arizona; Spokane, Washington; and Stamford, Connecticut.
SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

From the Business-Higher Education Forum:

Three Realities: Minority Life in the United States. A fresh look at the economic opportunities and obstacles facing American minorities, including recommendations for business and higher education leaders to implement in their own institutions. June 1990.

American Potential: The Human Dimension. A sweeping re-evaluation of America's education and training challenge, which tries to build consensus for reform in three key areas: basic education and skills, worker training, and science and technology. To implement the report's recommendations, the Forum has established a five-year committee of its members. September 1988.

An Action Agenda for American Competitiveness. Based on a series of roundtables with more than 100 Members of Congress, the 16 recommendations for improving America's ability to compete address four basic areas: research and development, human resources, international trade, and federal government organization and policies. September 1986.


From the Public Agenda Foundation:

Saving: Good or Bad? A Pilot Study on Public Attitudes Toward Saving, Investment, and Competitiveness. John Immerwahr. This research report on the public's views on personal savings and its relationship to economic competitiveness is based on focus groups conducted nationwide and a review of survey data from the last decade. 1989. 15pp.

Putting the Work Ethic to Work. Daniel Yankelovich and John Immerwahr. This ground-breaking report on the state of the American work ethic and its relationship to America's economy is based on in-depth interviews with 845 working Americans. The study includes findings from comparable studies conducted in Great Britain, Israel, Japan, Sweden, and West Germany. 1983. 45pp.

For information on how to order these and other publications, please contact the Forum (Tel: 202-939-9345 or Fax: 202-833-4723) or the Public Agenda (Tel: 212-686-6610 or Fax: 212-889-3461).
The Business-Higher Education Forum is a membership organization of selected chief executives of major American corporations, colleges and universities. The Forum's purposes are: to identify, review and act on selected issues of mutual concern; to enhance public awareness of these concerns; and to help guide the evolution of cooperation between corporations and institutions of higher education, while preserving their separate traditional functions.

Over the years, the Forum has addressed such critical issues as international economic competitiveness, education and training, R&D partnerships, science and technology, and global interdependence. The 1990-92 Forum chairman is Colby H. Chandler, Retired Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, Eastman Kodak Company. Don M. Blanding is the Forum's director.

The Forum was founded in 1978 by the American Council on Education (ACE), which represents all accredited post-secondary institutions as well as national and regional higher education associations. The current chair of ACE is Robert L. Albright, Johnson C. Smith University. Robert H. Atwell is the Council's president.

One Dupont Circle, Suite 800
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Tel: (202) 939-9345
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