

Foreword

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By 2000 it was clear to most people who pay attention to such things that higher education in the United States was changing. There were new ads for new kinds of colleges with names that evoked a sense of place without signaling an actual place: Strayer, Argosy, Walden, Capella. At the same time, colleges with names that felt more familiar were aggressively marketing themselves in new ways. You could earn a degree online or earn a new certificate or not earn a certificate at all but instead cobble together buckets of “microskills.” There were even new credentialing machines that were not higher education institutions at all. Companies like Edx, Coursera, Udacity, and 2U joined platforms like Lynda and LinkedIn in a competition to sell the new degree for a new digital society. The U.S. system of higher education had long been defined by its decentralized, sprawling, and open nature, but this felt different. There were new kinds of institutions, millions of new entrants into higher education, and most of the activity was happening in the private sector. The question was, What ends did all of this change, growth, profit, and differentiation serve?

There were many good answers to that very important question. By 2010, we understood that new entrants into the field of higher education had adopted some forms of classic institutions while innovating in other ways. This isomorphism suggested that the heterogeneity caused by massive growth would eventually level off

into something that looked more familiar to those of us who study such things. We also questioned the economic returns of these new forms of credentials, finding mixed results that are less mixed and less impressive the more vulnerable the student characteristics in question. But it was not until recently that social scientists seriously questioned these different institutions and credentials through classic theories of stratification.

I was surprised to find little sustained inquiry into this new subsector of credentials, which is produced by different kinds of institutional forms and consumed by status groups who occupy so much of our standard study of inequality. We had a great many data points about enrollment, graduation, credit hours, and wages but less discussion about what it all meant. One book brought the fault lines of heterogeneity and new credentials into sharp relief: Randall Collins's *The Credential Society*. Along with work by David Bills, Mitchell Stevens, Claudia Goldin, and Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, Collins's work brings conceptual clarity to the acceleration of higher education stratification in the twenty-first century.

This important book is an antidote to atheoretical work in contemporary studies of higher education and is a critical complement to the study of stratification. Technology has changed much about how we work. It has also changed a great deal about how our higher education institutions are organized. This book speaks to why those two domains are interrelated. Collins primarily does this work by expounding on *credentialing theory*. Much of his data is drawn from the last great period of higher education growth and differentiation in the twentieth century. The lessons remain instructive. Changes in how we work generate new types of credentials, and not all credentialing schemes are created equal. Status groups—not just individuals with status characteristics—have differential access to, experiences of, and returns to credentialing. Collins's work shows how we, as a society, can produce more access (a particularly loaded buzzword in public discourse and academic research) to higher education while maintaining and accelerating inequality in outcomes. The question of higher education in a modern society cannot be reduced merely to

the idea of access. That has long been true, but given the pace of technological change, it is more true than ever before. Access is a useful frame for some questions but is anemic in the face of globalization, growing inequality, and privatization.

The Credential Society is the first book I recommend when I give public lectures for my own book on higher education stratification, *Lower Ed: The Troubling Rise of For-Profit Colleges in the New Economy*. It is also the book I most wanted my own graduate students to read, but it was difficult to find copies. I myself had a scan borrowed from a dissertation advisor, which he had once borrowed from a colleague. With its empirical richness, methodological triangulation, and conceptual clarity, *The Credential Society* is a model for how to do complex, rigorous research in complicated times. Now is such a time. I am beyond pleased that this book will once again be widely available for those who are trying to unravel the wicked problem of how unequal societies reproduce themselves.

