In an interview with CBS News, the president of the United States was asked if the nation's dire unemployment problem was likely to improve soon." By this, he meant that the economy needs to create tens of thousands of new jobs every month just to keep pace with population growth and prevent the unemployment rate from rising even further. He pointed out that "we have a combination of older workers who have been thrown out of work because of technology and younger people coming in" with too little education. The president proposed a tax cut to stimulate the economy, but he kept returning to the subject of education—in particular, advocating support for programs focused on "vocational education" and "job retraining. The problem, he said, wasn't going to solve itself: "[T]oo many people are coming into the labor market and too many machines are throwing people out. The president's words capture the conventional—and nearly universal—assumption about the nature of the unemployment problem: more education or more vocational training is always the solution. With the proper training, workers will continuously climb the skills ladder, somehow staying just ahead of the machines (1). They will do more creative work, more "blue-sky" thinking There is apparently no limit to what average people can be educated and trained to do—and likewise no limit to the number of high-level jobs the economy can create to absorb all these newly trained workers. Education and retraining, it seems, are a solution that is immutable across time. For those who hold this view, it is perhaps of little import that the president quoted above was named Kennedy and the date was September 2, 1963. As President Kennedy noted, the unemployment rate at the time was about 5.5 percent, and machines were confined almost exclusively to "taking the place of manual labor" Seven months after the interview took place, the Triple Revolution report would land on a new president's desk. It would be another four years before Dr. King would make his own reference to technology and automation in Washington National Cathedral. In the nearly half-century since then, belief in the promise of education as the universal solution to unemployment and poverty has evolved hardly at all. The machines, however, have changed a great deal. If we were to draw a graph of the gains from ever-increasing investment in education, it seems very likely that we would end up with something that looks like the S-curves we discussed in Chapter 3. The low-hanging fruit of further education is long behind us. High school graduation rates have leveled off at roughly 75 to 80 percent. Most standardized test scores have shown little or no improvement in recent decades. We are on the flat part of the curve, where continued progress will be at best incremental. An abundance of evidence suggests that many of the students now attending American colleges are academically unprepared foror, in some cases, simply ill-suited to college-level work. Of these, a large share will fail to graduate but very often will nonetheless walk away with daunting student loan burdens. Of those who do graduate, as many as half will fail to land a job that actually requires a college degree, whatever the job description might say. Overall, about 20 percent of US college graduates are considered overeducated for their current occupation, and average incomes for new college graduates have been in decline for more than a decade. In Europe, where many countries provide students with college educations that are free or nearly so, roughly 30 percent of graduates are overqualified for their jobs.2 In Canada, the number is about 27 percent.3 In China, a remarkable 43 percent of the workforce is overeducated. In the United States, the conventional wisdom tends to put most of the blame on students and educators. College students are said to spend too much time

socializing and too little time studying. They are choosing fields with easy classes, rather than graduating with degrees in more rigorous technical fields. Yet, as many as a third of American students who do obtain a degree in engineering, science, or other technical fields fail to find a position that utilizes their educational background.