



Reform for College Readiness

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Most Americans see college as the Great Equalizer. If a student can only open those doors, the thinking goes, then a degree, a good job and a middle-class life will follow.

But before first-year students arrive on campus, they have already spent a dozen or so years in schools of uneven quality and grown up in homes with varying levels of interest in education and exposure to books, to art, to the world. Those prior experiences have a profound impact on how well they will adapt to postsecondary study.

In fact, “college readiness” correlates strongly with the wealth of home communities. Students from wealthier areas usually have parents who are themselves college graduates, and who expect their children to complete four-year degrees. They attend better-funded public schools that emphasize college preparation.

Students from lower-income backgrounds, on the other hand, are more likely to come from homes where neither parent attended college. They may need to take care of relatives or work part-time jobs to help support families, and are thus distracted at school. And rather than being encouraged to go to college, they may encounter teachers and school staff who have lowered expectations of success.

A few school finance reforms and some equitable admissions practices would go a long way in making New England a model for college readiness.

For example, the general difficulty of being poor is compounded by the fact that K-12 education is funded mostly through local property taxes, rather than through statewide levies. That means poorer communities with lower property values get underfunded schools. In these communities, school buildings themselves often resemble

warehouses. Elementary schools likely lack the kinds of preschool programs that are great predictors of later success. High schools offer no model of the sort of critical thinking that students need in order to go farther. The grim result is a college-readiness gap that is all about socioeconomic class.

Some states have expanded their role in school financing to smooth out inequities among communities. Massachusetts in particular passed the 1993 Education Reform Act that established a baseline funding level per student and allocated state monies to meet the need.

But by relying to any considerable extent on local communities to fund local schools, we condone unequal education by class and race. And that costs us dearly in the long run, as less-educated citizens incur higher health care costs than their college graduate neighbors, put more strain on public assistance and criminal justice programs and give back less in taxes and charitable donations.

A Columbia University symposium held in October reveals that if one third of all high school dropouts earned high school diplomas, the United States could save \$10.8 billion in food stamps, housing assistance, and spending on Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. If 600,000 recent high school dropouts were to attain one more year of education, the United States could save nearly \$42 billion in health care costs. One more year of schooling on average would reduce murder and assault by almost 30 percent, motor vehicle theft by 20 percent, arson by 13 percent, and burglary and larceny by about 6 percent.

The question is: do we want to spend our state taxes on quality education at about \$13,000 per student-year, or on jails at \$27,000 per inmate-year?

There’s no getting around it: better education is a winning investment. We need to make sure every student in every community has a fair shot at the returns on that investment by ensuring that schools are funded equitably.

Meanwhile, college officials also have a clear role to play in better reaching young people. Too many just admit traditionally defined “college-ready” students and leave the rest behind. This is what increasingly popular merit-based financial aid programs do in effect. And why not? More accomplished and generally better-heeled entering classes mean more successful alumni and greater institutional prestige. Admitting wealthier students also increases tuition income and protects institutional student aid budgets because well-off kids on merit aid pay at least some of the freight.

But I trust no one works in education to just count beans. Educators, I believe, are idealists by nature, who want to improve society and the lives of their students. And society improves only if colleges take a chance on students who may not be college-ready by traditional definitions but are at least “ready to be college-ready” if afforded the right combination of remedial courses and academic support networks.

Today’s Knowledge Economy demands that college officials roll up their sleeves and work alongside governments, pre-K-12 educators and other partners to prepare more students for college success and, in doing so, to confront head-on the thorniest challenge of American life: creating equality of opportunity in an unequal society.

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