

CONNECTION

THE JOURNAL OF THE NEW ENGLAND BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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EDITOR'S MEMO

Ready Yet?

Only seven in 10 ninth-graders in U.S. public schools graduate with their high school class four years later, and of those, only about half leave high school with the necessary sequence of courses and basic reading skills to apply to four-year colleges, according to a widely referenced study by the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research. For minority students, the figures are worse. Only 23 percent of black students and 20 percent of Hispanic students leave high school "college-ready."

Meanwhile, the standardized test company ACT reports that just 22 percent of the 1.2 million high school students who took the ACT assessment in 2004 achieved scores that would deem them ready for college English, math and science. More than half of high school graduates who do go on to college need remedial courses once they get there. And half of those who enroll in college as freshmen do not complete degrees within five years.

To be sure, business imperatives and political agendas muddy the waters. The ACT wants to convince people that performance on its exams correlates with college success. The Manhattan Institute wants to suggest that blacks and Hispanics are under-represented in college not because of shrinking student aid or weakened affirmative action policies, but rather because their local schools do not prepare them adequately.

Biases aside, people who don't earn college degrees can generally expect low-paying jobs and a life of disadvantages. So "college readiness" is very much a matter of economic and social justice. Which is why New England Board of Higher Education and others have tagged this as a priority issue in higher education and economic development.

Questions abound. Why in today's Knowledge Economy is there *any* gap between what high schools require for graduation and what four-year colleges require for admission? Why do schools continue to sort students into "college" and "non-college" tracks when critical thinking is increasingly required for all aspects of civic and work life, whether a student is college-bound or not? How can school districts ensure that all students are college-ready when parents of the brightest kids want scarce funds directed to enrichment?

And more: What are the special problems faced by sub-populations such as students whose parents did not go to college, students with disabilities, single mothers, working adults? How does declining public support for higher education affect student decisions about where to go to college or whether to go at all? Why, despite the emergence of a massive testing industry that professes to measure merit, is a lackluster student from a rich family still more likely to be enrolled in college than a bright kid from a poor family?

One national coalition of education groups and foundations that has been focused on these problems quite a while, the Pathways to College Network, sees five main strategies to ensure success: 1) encourage schools to make a rigorous college-prep curriculum the standard for all students; 2) improve college marketing access campaigns that aim to influence the college-going behaviors of underserved students; 3) encourage early financial aid and early notification programs for underserved students; 4) persuade colleges to improve retention of underserved students; and 5) pursue research that can inform effective policies and practices.

Some other strategies need consideration as well. Thoughtful people are talking again about national service—not only as a way to revive civic engagement and add a check and balance to military misadventures, but also as a way to universalize college readiness. Is it time to *require* all young Americans to choose from a menu of military and public service options?

Most importantly, the readiness shortfall is not only a "pipeline" problem. Colleges play a role too. They need to recognize and value more complex qualities in applicants than completion of the prescribed sequence of algebra and physics courses, take some chances in their admissions decisions and show as much interest in student support activities as they do in shiny athletic centers.

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