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# The College Juggernaut

## Just Who Is It That Needs to Get Ready?

By Elliot Washor & Charles Mojkowski

A college degree is emerging as the new threshold of entry into the economy, as well as to social mobility and a healthy and productive life. As authors Frank Newman, Lara Couturier, and Jamie Scurry affirm in *The Future of Higher Education: Rhetoric, Reality, and the Risks of the Market*, “For America to function as a fair and open society, an ever larger share of its citizens must continue education through to completion of a college degree.”

As a consequence, secondary schools are being challenged to give increased attention and effort to getting more—make that *all*—high school students into college. Recently, the commissioners of education in New England made a pact to do just that, an audacious goal given that nationally less than 30 percent of our adult population has a college degree. Without question, postsecondary, even lifelong, learning is a must in our society and economy. Nevertheless, we have reservations about the unexamined headlong rush into the traditional, standardized four-year curriculum offered at most colleges and universities.

The problems with college are well-known: tuition increases outstripping inflation, tuition aid declining, appalling graduation rates, rising postcollege debt, and uneven instructional quality. These problems convince us that the “getting ready for college” juggernaut is more than a few degrees off course, with well-meaning people at the helm who are not thinking deeply enough about what long-term success looks like and how all youths might have opportunities to achieve it. We say this as strong advocates for equity in serving the needs of urban, often poor, young people and their families, most of whom see a four-year college degree as the ultimate achievement, promising financial independence and social mobility.

Most high schools have increased their efforts to get more of their students into college without necessarily preparing them to succeed there. And many colleges are themselves unprepared for the substantially larger numbers of high school graduates whom society needs to succeed in college. In addition to the challenge of finding space for these many new students, helping those who typically would not apply for or enter college be successful graduates may require a very different kind of college experience, one that entails a fundamental redesign of nearly every aspect, starting with the application process and the transition experience and extending to curriculum, instruction, and student-support systems.

Well-meaning people are failing to think deeply enough about what long-term success looks like and how all youths might have opportunities to achieve it.

And, of course, the elephant in the classroom is affordability. It is axiomatic that this new, expanded population of the “college ready” is not at all ready to pay for college. As tuition is increasing, the means to pay for it are decreasing. Tuition support is targeted less to low-income students and more to the academically talented. Increases in the amount of financial assistance such as the Pell Grant have failed to match tuition increases. The result is that, as *The Economist* reported in December 2004, 75 percent of the students at the top 146 colleges come from the richest socioeconomic fourth of the population, compared with just 3 percent from the bottom fourth. Since 2003, interest rates on loans have almost doubled, and the average graduating senior now carries about \$20,000 in student loans.

Even the process of applying for college disadvantages the poor. A recent *New York Times* article reported that tens of thousands of high school students and their families are employing “the scholastic equivalent of steroids—test-prep courses, private consultants, Internet mills for massaging if not entirely creating their essays, exaggerated or cynical accounts of their community service.” *Times* education columnist Samuel G. Freedman argued that “the system is broken, even in the estimation of its participants, and it is so thoroughly broken in so many ways that counselors, students, parents, and deans can agree on little else than that somebody is at fault—somebody, invariably, other than themselves. ... [T]he moral morass of high-stakes college admissions continues to be an object of regret instead of reform.” Such assessments have prompted even the dean of admissions at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to call for a re-evaluation of the college-admissions process.

With costs so high, it is not unreasonable to inquire about the quality of the experience. Ken Bain, the vice provost for instruction at Montclair State University in New Jersey, has identified “what the best college teachers do,” and, in the process, found that teaching excellence is a rarity in higher education. The prevailing mediocre quality is particularly hazardous for high school teachers attempting to infuse new levels of rigor, relevance, and relationships into their teaching and learning practices. In doing so, they run the risk of handicapping their students who end up as freshman in large, impersonal, lecture-based introductory survey courses listening to an otherwise brilliant professor who appears uninformed about the “rules of (student) engagement.”

Are high schools struggling to get their students ready for a place that doesn't get them ready? According to Newman and his co-authors, 90 percent of college graduates have reported that “their degree was useful in getting a job but did not provide them with the skills they need to succeed in the workplace.” That observation reminds us that getting into college is not at all like staying there, and graduating is not at all like being prepared to do real work.

The economist Anthony P. Carnevale provides one example of the disconnect between the subjects students take in school and their ultimate use. “It is true that if you're going to get a good job in America, you've got to take Algebra 2,” he says. But he adds that “when you look at college majors, and, even more so, when you look at occupations, the content in Algebra 2 has very little to do with either. That is, you never use that content again, but it predicts your success in college and in the labor force.”

Readiness for college is a complex challenge that will require a much-strengthened collaboration between high schools and colleges. Three changes would make the challenge easier to address. The first is thinking, talking, and behaving differently with respect to college readiness, seeing it as not merely an intellectual challenge but a financial and social one as well.

The second change is for colleges to recognize that they are as unready for the new, much larger cohorts of nontraditional students soon to arrive at their doors as the high schools are to prepare them. Based on our experience, colleges will need to substantially increase transition-support programs for these students. In addition to redesigning teaching and learning, colleges may need to provide increased opportunities for students to work while they learn, perhaps through a much-expanded system of paid internships closely connected to student learning plans.

If society is to help close its social gaps, colleges will need to find ways to bring every student along on the developmental-learning pathway that leads to economic success and individual well-being.

Third, policymakers need to stop selling a four-year college degree for all students when many if not most of the new and emerging jobs will not require more than a two-year degree and technical certificate. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that there will be a 35 percent increase in the number of jobs requiring associate degrees between 2000 and 2010. Compensation for graduates with technical degrees is rising faster than that for many graduates of traditional four-year degree programs.

If society is to help close its social gaps, realize the American dream of social mobility, and free people from the sticky rung on the socioeconomic ladder they were born into, colleges will need to find ways to bring every student along on the developmental-learning pathway that leads to economic success and individual well-being. Colleges can promote such pathways by moving away from a language about absolute and unchanging standards—there aren't any—and toward one that encompasses the concept of developmental pathways and real-world assessments of proficiency.

As Frank Newman and his co-authors remind us: “What is at stake in the admission to higher education of low-income students and students of color is far more than a diverse campus, even more than having citizens with the skills needed for the workforce. What is at stake is the fundamental concept of our democracy—a concept based on widespread civic participation and social mobility.”

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