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Unrealistic Plans and Misdirected Efforts: Are Community Colleges Getting the Right Message to High School Students?

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INTRODUCTION

Community colleges have grown enormously over the past four decades. While four-year college enrollment doubled between 1960 and 1990, community-college enrollment increased five-fold in the same period, from 200,000 to over 1,000,000 (NCES, 1992, Table 169). In turn, college opportunities have dramatically increased. While 45 percent of high school graduates entered some postsecondary institution in 1960, over 62 percent did in 1993. Moreover, community colleges initiated open-admission policies and remedial courses to reduce the academic barriers to college, and the Associate Arts (AA) degree has come to have increased value in the labor market (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Grubb, 1992, 1993). Thus, community colleges have increased access to an economically valued degree.

Despite these great gains, community colleges have been severely criticized for "cooling out" students' aspirations as they gradually realized that college was not appropriate for their abilities (Clark, 1960). Much of the criticism of community colleges is misplaced. Students' failures arise not from barriers inside colleges, but from a failure of colleges (and especially community colleges) to convey clear information about the preparation that high school students need in order to have a strong chance of finishing a degree.

Americans are strong advocates of open opportunity, which in recent decades has led to the "college-for-all" (CFA) norm. This norm encouraged the formation of community colleges, open admissions, and remedial classes. It encourages high expectations in youth and argues for better instruction in schools, especially schools serving low-income youth. Without this norm, society might give up on raising the educational achievement of the most disadvantaged youth.

However, while 71 percent of high school seniors in the class of 1982 planned to get college degrees, half of the seniors lacked basic ninth-grade math and verbal skills (Murnane & Levy, 1997), and only about half of the college entrants completed a college degree (Resnick & Wirt, 1996). The completion rate for two-year colleges is even worse. For the 1980 high school graduates enrolled full-time in two-year public colleges in October 1980, less than 40 percent completed any degree (AA or higher) by 1986, and the rates were only 15 percent for the substantial numbers (about one-fourth) who were enrolled part-time (NCES, 1992, Table 287). For the 1980 high school graduates who planned less than four years of college (but more than a certificate), less than 20 percent attained a college degree (AA or higher) in the next six years (NCES, 1992, Table 286).

This study is based on three kinds of data: (1) detailed interviews with a non-random sample of high school seniors in two high schools; (2) a survey of 2,091 seniors, administered to a random sample of classes at 12 high schools across the Chicago metropolitan area in 1992-94 (see Rosenbaum & Roy, 1996); and (3) a twelve-year follow-up of the High School and Beyond 1980 sophomores (NCES, 1983).

FINDINGS

Many Seniors Believe They Can Attain College Goals With Low High School Achievement; Students With These Beliefs Exert Little Effort In High School

Interviews in 1993 with a non-random sample of 50 students found sentiments similar to those Stinchcombe (1965) found thirty years previously: Many students said that high school is not relevant to their future careers. Yet something had changed. While only work-bound students expressed these beliefs in 1960, these sentiments were also expressed by college-bound students in 1993. Their comments suggest that the vast expansion of community colleges over the past thirty years has contributed to their views: They see the "second chance" of the two-year college as making high school effort less relevant.

The survey of Chicago metropolitan area seniors

(see Rosenbaum & Roy, 1996) found that many—including college-bound students—doubt school's future relevance. More than 36 percent of the whole sample and of the college-bound did not agree with the statement, "getting a good job depends on how well you do in school."

Further, almost 46 percent of students agreed with the item, "Even if I do not work hard in high school, I can still make my future plans come true" (44 percent of the college-bound agreed with the statement). Most surprisingly, despite many campaigns against dropping out of high school, over 40 percent of seniors did not disagree with the statement "people can do OK even if they drop out of high school." Of course, it is possible that students rationalize their poor effort by denying future relevance. But even if these views arise as rationalizations, they are not effectively challenged by schools, and they represent misconceptions that encourage a continuing cycle of low effort (Rosenbaum, Miller & Krei, 1996).

Students Can Enter College Even If They Have Low Achievement

Community colleges are frequently seen as "second chance" institutions for those who have done poorly, as they offer open admissions, low tuition, and remedial courses. In some community college departments, remedial courses may be 40 percent of the courses offered. Over 40 percent of freshmen at public two-year colleges take one or more years of remedial coursework, just to acquire the skills they did not learn in high school (NCES, 1995). Because of these policies and the five-fold growth of community colleges, fewer students face barriers to college access. Indeed, admissions standards are now practically non-existent in community colleges. For example, Illinois high school graduates can attend an Illinois community college even if they have Ds and no college-prep courses (after age 21, even a diploma is not required).

The High School and Beyond data indicate that 27 percent of students enrolling in two-year colleges had low grades in high school. That is only slightly less than the proportion of students with low grades who did not enroll in any postsecondary education (30 percent). College-bound students who think high school effort is irrelevant to their future plans are partly correct; low high school grades are not an obstacle to enrollment at two-year colleges.

High School Achievement Predicts Degree Completion; Students' Plans Do Not Anticipate This Relationship

Our analyses emphasize grades because all students know their grades, so students could use this knowledge if they chose to do so. Because most people have had a few teachers who gave arbitrary or unfair grades, grades are often dismissed as erroneous and irrelevant. Yet averaging grades eliminates random idiosyncrasies, and low grades have a strong impact on actual educational attainment.

Using the data from the High School and Beyond study, we see that of all the seniors who planned to get a BA or higher (n=5528), only half succeeded in getting a BA. However, a breakdown of this data by students' grades tells an even more dramatic story: 71 percent of the students with As in high school achieved a BA or higher; 47 percent of those with Bs attained a BA; and for those students with a C-average or less, only 20 percent got BA degrees. A further analysis reveals that students who did little homework in high school (less than an hour per week) decreased their BA chances to only 11 percent.

Since the AA is a shorter and perhaps easier degree than a BA, one might expect that students planning to get AA degrees are more likely to be successful, but that is not the case. Of the 3,267 seniors who planned to get an AA degree, only 24 percent succeeded in getting a college degree (AA or higher) in the next 10 years, and for those with low grades (Cs or lower), only 13 percent did. Multivariate analyses indicate that grades and homework time explain most of the differential success rate between those with BA and AA plans (Rosenbaum & Miller, 1998).

Why do the majority of seniors with low grades believe they can achieve college plans? "Social promotion" practices in high schools and open admissions at community colleges may contribute to this belief. Seeing these two practices, students may infer a similar view of college degrees, as an award for putting in time that does not require academic achievement. This suggests that students view school as a credentialing process rather than a human-capital-building process.

Some students may worry that their future attainment is predestined by their social background (SES, ethnicity, gender) or intelligence (as test scores are sometimes interpreted). Policy makers also need to know to what extent grades or other factors predict the lower outcomes and disappointed plans of disadvantaged students. Regression analyses on the High School and Beyond cohort who graduated in 1982 and were followed through 1992 (8,969 respondents) indicate that SES and ethnicity are related to attainment, but grades, test scores, and homework time are also strongly related, and these factors mediate much of the relationship between disadvantaged backgrounds and attainment. Unfortunately, many students do not realize how much high school achievement predicts future

attainment. While all students probably know their grades, their plans underestimate the extent to which their grades predict later attainment, and this is true for both black and white students. Indeed, grades are the single best predictor of the ways attainment falls short of plans, and this predictability is somewhat larger for blacks than for whites. If students could focus on changing one attribute in high school to make their plans come true, they should improve their grades.

DISCUSSION

Human capital theory explains students' achievement using two factors: students' inherent capabilities, and their efforts to invest in themselves. The theory says students will invest in themselves and exert effort in school because they know there is a societal payoff. Yet 78 percent of poorly achieving students with college plans do less than an hour a day of homework, and many (25 percent) do less than an hour in a whole week (12 minutes a day), even though their low grades predict an 80 percent failure rate.

Rather than acting as gatekeepers as they did in earlier decades (Rosenbaum, 1976), guidance counselors now urge all students to attend college, but they rarely warn poorly prepared students that they will have difficulty completing a degree (Rosenbaum, Miller, & Krei, 1996). Counselors, however, respond to the information they get from colleges. Instead of blaming community colleges for cooling-out students' plans, we should wonder whether the colleges could do more to inform high school counselors and students.

Second chances are a fundamental American tenet. However, open-admission policies and remedial programs inadvertently convey to students that high school is irrelevant and that there are no penalties for poor effort. Although second-chance programs sometimes work, they rarely work as well as "first chances"—meeting achievement requirements the first time. Moreover, if students enter college with poor grades, they face a lot of hard work to catch up, and they have much lower chances of getting a degree.

Manski (1989) says that many youth begin community college as an "experiment," a low-cost way to discover whether they can make it in college. But is it really low cost? There are costs to any decision, and this "experiment" has some large opportunity costs to students while they are still in high school. Should students with more than an 80 percent chance of failing at college place all their bets on their college experiment? Or would it be prudent for such students to hedge their college bets?

A further opportunity cost of the college-for-all norm is that students with little prospect for getting a college degree fail to get vocational training. Encouraging poorly achieving students to delay their work preparation until they see the results of their college "experiment" makes it likely that they will make poor use of vocational preparation in high school. Indeed, many students with a low probability of success in college have no back-up plans or training.

If the CFA norm did not focus so much on getting everyone into college, community colleges could be candid about the importance of high school grades, and high schools could tell students their realistic chances of attaining college degrees. If students realized that high school achievement is the first "experiment" with strong predictive power, then students with poor grades would either revise their plans down, or they would spend more than 12 minutes a day on homework. Shielding high school seniors from the realities of college demands and allowing them to hold unrealistic plans is not a kindness. Because of the CFA norm many youth waste time, energy, and money on a college experience they are ill-prepared to handle and that is likely to lead to failure, low self-esteem, and misused opportunities in high school.

High school students can more easily identify with the students a year older than themselves who enter college, than with the 28-year-olds who never finished the degree. Thus, students can easily see college *enrollment*, for which high school achievements are irrelevant, but they have difficulty seeing college *completion*, for which high school achievements are highly relevant. Students' perceptions will not improve unless policy action is taken, and community colleges have a major role in addressing these problems.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Community colleges need to make it clear that students should try to master high school skills before they enter college. Students with unrealistic plans should be encouraged to increase their efforts or to develop back-up plans and preparation.

Community colleges must realize that their message does not just go to high school seniors; it also goes to younger students, and it tells them what actions they must take to improve their future prospects. The present findings suggest that students have misinterpreted the message from community colleges, and their misinterpretation has led them to reduce their efforts and to believe that high school achievement and grades are irrelevant to their future attainments.

The following proposed actions will make it easier

for community colleges to do their present tasks and to do them more successfully.

First, *community colleges should provide detailed information on degree-completion rates as a function of students' grades or test scores.* This could be aided by a universally recognized test of achievement (not aptitude or intelligence), either statewide (like Illinois's IGAP achievement test) or national (like President Clinton's proposal for national proficiency examinations). Even if such tests are not available, grades can be used. While the grades from individual teachers are highly imperfect, grade-point averages cancel out teacher idiosyncrasies and have strong predictive power (stronger than test scores in some analyses). Schools and society should be stressing their importance to students. Students need to realize that "open admissions" does not mean that high school achievement is irrelevant.

Second, *community colleges should inform students that "second chances are second best."* While community colleges should continue to offer second chances, students need to realize that it is easier to expend the effort to learn the high school curriculum the first time than to face it again in remedial courses, which take time, cost tuition, and offer no college credits.

Third, *linkages between high schools and colleges may help improve high school students' understanding of college requirements.* New reforms like tech-prep and 2+2 programs coordinate high school and college programs. Progressing seamlessly from high school to college, receiving full credit for their high school work, high school students can see the relevance of their high school courses. Since these programs define career-preparation as continuous between high school and college, high-school efforts advance students up the same ladder that continues in college.

Community college staff have a choice. They can accept the fact that many students will enter with plans that do not match their preparation, and then they will be stuck with the unpleasant and time-consuming task of cooling-out students' plans. Or they can spend time building linkages to high schools and informing counselors and students what actions students can take to make their preparation match their plans. Given the extensive misconceptions and failures that now result from the former choice, linkages and information efforts are central to the mission of community colleges. ⌘

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