

High School-to-Community College Strengthening

the Transition

In the last issue, I described research revealing that many high school students who plan to enroll in college do not prepare themselves well academically.

Research by James Rosenbaum of Northwestern University and his colleagues show that nearly 90 percent of current high school students expect to attend college, but many, if not most, have no clear idea how to get there. Moreover, many students, both college-bound and non-college-bound, see almost no link between working hard in high school and achieving college success. Perhaps most discouraging is that these students believe their minimal efforts in high school will result in few penalties. Only later will they realize their mistake and enroll in college without the skills to match their ambitions.

BY STEPHEN J. HANDEL

Impact of Poor Grades

Any experienced instructor can testify that weak efforts as represented by low high school grades are not a barrier to enrolling in non-selective four-year institutions and community colleges. But poor high school grades put students in a perilous position academically and do not bode well for future educational success.

The Education Trust reports the dropout rate at community colleges is 50 percent. Anywhere from one-third to one-half of all students entering non-selective colleges and universities are tracked into remedial courses, which reduces the chances of students' completing a postsecondary degree, the U.S. Department of Education has found. And students beginning college without the skills they need to do college work — even if they manage to stay in college for more than a year — are far less likely to earn any kind of degree.

Rosenbaum reports that more than 83 percent of students with low grades who planned to go to college and earn a B.A. degree fail to do so. More than 92 percent of students with low grades who planned to go college and earn an A.A. degree similarly fail.

The students most likely to suffer the consequences of a poor high school education are those least able to overcome the effects. Students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to come from college-going families and to have the related resources that sustain academic efforts. As a result, many students — the very ones recruited by community colleges and who represent groups largely missing in higher education — are disproportionately unsuccessful in earning educational credentials.

Message of Easy Access

Why don't students appreciate the importance of a strong high school foundation for future academic success? One reason is that they view access to higher education as relatively easy because community colleges exist. Many students see these institutions as an extension of high school and not a substantive leap from one type of schooling to another.

In a survey of students in six states, Michael Kirst and his colleagues at Stanford University discovered that over 80 percent of prospective college students did not understand preparation requirements for college, and they believed that community colleges had no academic standards. The researchers also emphasized that most community college-bound students did not understand that they would be unable to do college-level work if their performance in high school had been low.

Community colleges offer a welcoming environment for even the most disenfranchised students. But does their emphasis on open admission send the inadvertent message that hard work in high school is unnecessary for success?

We concluded in the last issue that while all students need true access to higher education, they must see that their work in high school will help them lead better lives via college. Moreover, we need to admit publicly that the way community colleges are perceived by students, parents, four-year faculty and the media is inadequate and should be redressed.

Correcting a Misperception

How can we redress this misperception?

One way would be simply to tighten admissions requirements at community colleges so that students are better prepared for the work they will face. The first hints of selective admissions are found in highly subscribed community college programs around the country, especially in areas like nursing. Another option would be for community colleges to drop remedial and developmental education from their curricula, requiring instead that students acquire these basic skills in high school.

These options are neither attractive to nor likely to gain much traction among community college leaders. The *raison d'être* of the community college is access to higher education unfettered and unapologetic. To change that would simply doom the community college model. But this approach appears to be the strategy of many four-year colleges and universities.

Faced with mounting numbers of students who enroll without having mastered basic skills, their response has been simply to

eliminate remedial programs. This policy only reinforces the pivotal role of community colleges. The antidote to poor high school work cannot be the abandonment of the unique educational mission of the community college. A far more sophisticated, multi-faceted approach is needed.

Toward a Smoother Transition

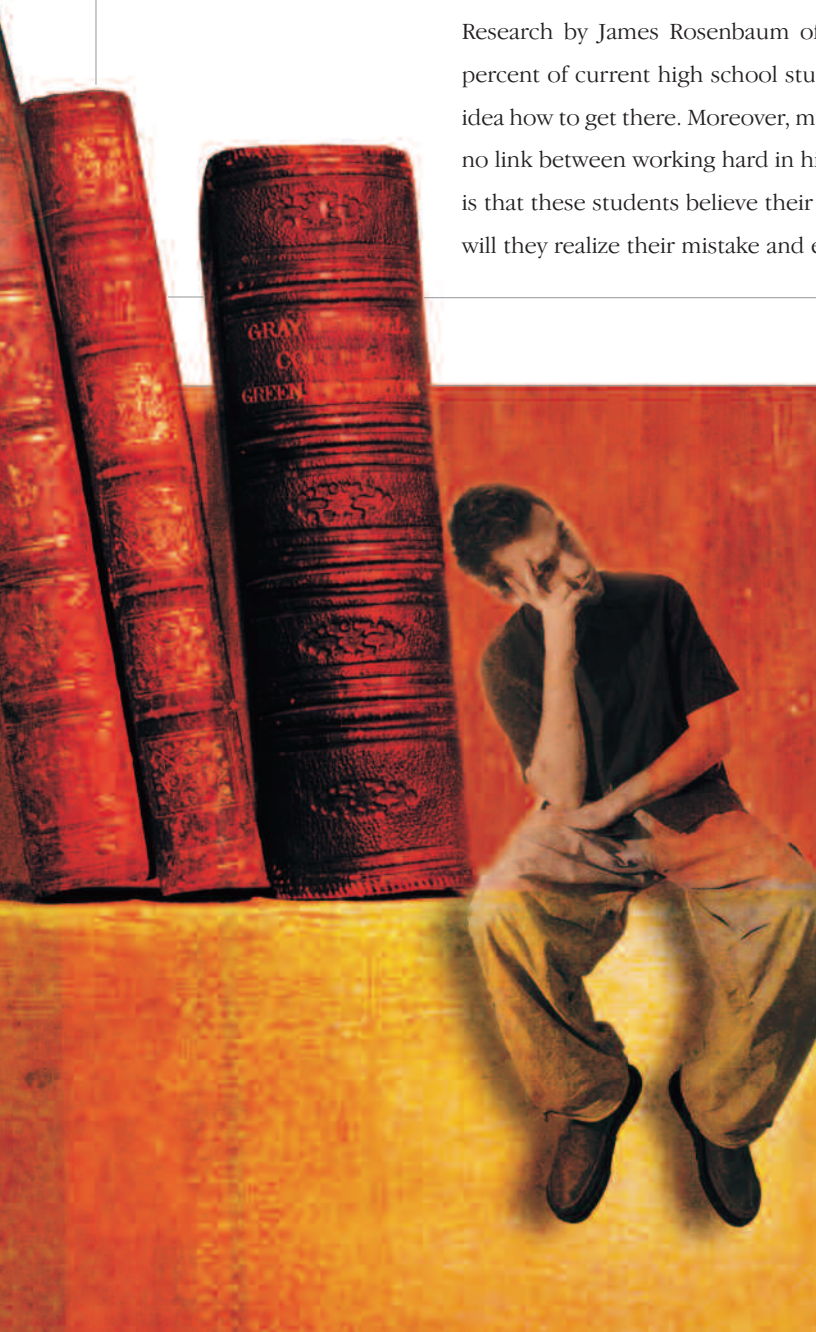
If the doors to our community colleges are to remain open — and they must — we should continue to meet students on their own terms. But it does not follow that community colleges should ignore the importance of a high-quality high school education. Indeed, community colleges could be influential institutions in demonstrating that working hard in high school has a tangible payoff. This can only be accomplished in concert with high schools.

1. Link Curricula to High School: Community colleges should link their curricula more closely to those of local high schools. One of the best ways community colleges can encourage greater student effort in high school is to show how courses required in high school develop skills for college-level work. Kirst and his colleagues show in their research that high schools and colleges rarely engage in activities that bridge the curricular divide. This incoherence frustrates students, families, teachers and counselors.

Kirst and his colleagues recommend that K–12 standards and assessments be closely linked with the standards and assessments of postsecondary institutions. Such explicit connections will serve as clear and powerful incentives for students to increase their academic efforts in high school. With their open enrollment policy, critics often see community colleges as lacking standards. This perception reveals a fundamental misunderstanding about the relationship between what high schools are teaching and what community colleges are requiring, given the number of remedial students they have.

2. Stress Both Access and Standards: Community colleges should devise an outreach message stressing both access and standards. Far too often, community colleges fail to stress academic rigor as much as they advertise access. Perhaps this results from a concern that talking about high standards and essential skills will discourage students from attending.

Community colleges must stop apologizing for their standing in higher education. The open admissions policy does not mean a free ride. It does not denote a place without academic standards or a place that serves merely as a “high school with ashtrays.” While community colleges should revel in their standing as open-door



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institutions, they should also emphasize the standards by which students will be evaluated.

3. Communicate Success: Community colleges should do a more effective job of communicating the success of their graduates. Community colleges have not been especially effective in communicating this to legislators, policymakers and constituents.

More often than not, community college leaders are drawn into debates about the success of their institutions in relation to four-year colleges and universities. As the least well-funded post-secondary education institutions and the ones that open their doors to the least qualified students, it is no wonder that community colleges rarely win such a battle. The result is an image that is seen by prospective students as the institution of last resort.

But there is plenty of good news to combat this image. For example, research from various sources demonstrates that community college students do as well as or better than students who begin their college careers at a four-year institution. Couple that with the relatively low cost and geographic accessibility of community colleges and you have an academically viable and cost-efficient institution that will draw prospective students from other institutions.

Transfer success is only one measure of a community college's effectiveness. The number of students earning the A.A. degree, placed in jobs, and earning vocational certificates also represents important measures of an institution's success.

4. Offer Check-Ups: Community colleges should offer academic "check-ups" to high school students. Unless students understand their skill levels in basic subjects such as English and mathematics, they will be unable to reach realistic targets.

The regular measurement of what students know and what they need to know for college success is essential. Many community colleges have begun working with local high schools to administer placement exams to sophomores and juniors. The exams reveal the extent to which students have the skills to succeed in college-level courses. By providing students with information early about their academic progress, the placement exams can help them to improve their skills before graduating from high school.

But it isn't productive simply to administer more tests; such examinations must provide diagnostic information to allow students and teachers to pinpoint academic strengths and weaknesses. Last year, for example, the College Board administered the PSAT to more than 3 million sophomore- and junior-level high school students. Each received a specific academic diagnosis that showed how well each had mastered important academic knowledge and skills.

In addition, over one-third of U.S. community colleges use the College Board's ACCUPLACER assessment, an Internet-based suite of English and math placement examinations. Some of these institutions administer ACCUPLACER to high school juniors and seniors to assess student readiness for the community college. Providing this kind of information to high school students gives them an opportunity to prepare themselves for college. It also reduces the possibility that students will need to complete remedial courses.

Some will argue that students are over-tested. But current testing is focused on exit examinations that do not provide students with information to make mid-course corrections in preparing for college. The introduction of examinations in the sophomore and junior years helps students measure their potential for college success.

5. Help Counselors Counsel: The introduction of diagnostic academic data will strengthen the role of high school counselors. Rosenbaum and others have reported that many high school counselors have turned away from their role as advisors to one as "information brokers." Rather than provide students with an appraisal of academic skills and how this translates to college success, many counselors prefer to help students with the mechanics of the application process. Rosenbaum writes:

Some counselors, instead of quashing students' educational dreams, prefer to let them pursue educational goals for which they may be unprepared. This is understandable. Most school districts lack the resources to provide enough counselors for individual attention. Moreover, advisors have shied away from discouraging any kind of educational pursuit. This is a consequence of the criticism they received in the 1970s and 1980s, when they were accused of tracking students, especially those who were members of under-represented groups.

This problem is compounded for students planning to attend community college because counselors interpret the open admissions policy as the ultimate fallback position. The mantra among many counselors is, "Just go to the community college and you will be fine." But without specific academic skills, they will not be fine. Parents and teachers also are guilty of assuming that students planning to attend a community college need no grounding in basic academic skills.

The implementation of these recommendations will show how high school performance translates into college academic success. For marginal students who do not appreciate the efficacy of working hard in high school, recasting the American community college as accessible but academically demanding will signal the importance of the secondary school curriculum.

It is important to emphasize that the recommendations presented here demand that community colleges communicate effectively that they are committed to the success of all students because of their open-door policy and rigorous curriculum. While community colleges stand for second chances and must continue to do so, first chances are almost always better. In the words of Damon Runyon, "The race may not always be to the swift... but that's the way to bet."



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