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ABSTRACT

Some of the things parents can do to prepare Canadian high school students for success in college are outlined. Helping students prepare for a university education is very important at this time because of new job skill requirements, a potential shortage of university teachers in Canada that may reduce the number of students admitted to college, and the increasing numbers of students who will apply. It is essential that students select their high school courses to satisfy the prerequisites for admission to the university program of choice. Parents can help students find out about requirements and financial aid available. They can also help students prepare for life on campus without many of the sources of support they had at home. Coping skills are very important in the first months of college life, and parents can help students develop these skills. As students develop a sort of social cushion, they can begin to learn "tricks of the trade" from each other, especially in developing writing skills. Parents can encourage students to use all the resources available from the university and their social networks. Some special initiatives are available for students with various forms of physical or learning disability, and parents can help students find out about these programs. In addition to helping students obtain information and develop survival skills, parents can help them in the transition to college by encouraging the belief that they will be able to manage challenges they encounter. (SLD)

PREPARING HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS FOR SUCCESS IN UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

By

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PREPARING HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS FOR SUCCESS IN UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

Let me begin by thanking you for inviting me here and by commending you on your interest in determining what parents and teachers should be doing to prepare students for success in post-secondary education. Because I am joined on this panel by a college president, I presume you wish me to address your topic primarily with reference to the *university* context, which I shall do mainly from the perspective of the institution I know best – Carleton University here in Ontario – although much of what I'll say is true across the country.

Helping students prepare for success in university is particularly important nowadays, for a couple of reasons. First, as you likely know, the federal Department of Labour's recently updated Job Futures manual reports that

> . . . some form of post-secondary job education or training will be required for 72 per cent of the 1.3 million new jobs expected to be created in the Canadian economy between last year and 2004 . . . up from 60 per cent of existing jobs in 1998.
>
> The share of jobs requiring a university degree will rise to 23.4 per cent by 2004 from 16.7 per cent in 1998. The manual says the demand for knowledge workers, such as accountants, engineers, business graduates, teachers, lawyers, doctors and scientists, means that "no broad fields of study at the university level are expected to experience limited labour market conditions by 2004".
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Only 5.8 per cent of all new job openings will be available for people who don't finish high school.
>
> Source: "Dropouts need not apply," *Ottawa Citizen* (Monday, August 28, 2000), p. A1.

So your interest is strategically sound.

Secondly, three demographic factors are charging toward us with significant implications for university-bound students. We expect that both the number of high school graduates and the proportion of them applying to universities (for the reasons I've just mentioned) will increase considerably over the next several years. Moreover, here in Ontario we have the "double cohort" challenge wherein – especially in 2003, but probably for a year or so before and after that as well – there will be unusually large numbers of students finishing studies at high school and seeking admission to university, as the applicant pool will include both grade 12 and grade 13 graduates. And this bulge is coming along just at the time when the largest mass of retirements in history will be hitting the university professoriate. The combination of these factors means that – at Carleton, for example – on average, we will have to hire one new faculty member per week for the next ten years. Since we'll be competing for them with our sister institutions across Canada and around the world – and with non-university employers in the public and private sectors who will be facing a similar problem at the same time – it seems doubtful that we'll have the capacity to accept all of the applicants who are qualified for admission. This means that the competition for entrance to universities and the difficulty of advancing into later years of study will be rising. Consequently, your interest is well-founded.

So let me respond to it by offering a few suggestions as to how you could be helpful to your students, something I used to try and do as a high school teacher and counselor in British Columbia. I'll do so with reference first to those preparing to apply for admission, then to those beginning their studies on campus, and finally to those with certain disabilities. My comments are based on discussions I had last month with the Carleton officials who are responsible for each of these areas.

Applying Students

Universities are terribly complex places. Because the research function is of crucial importance to them, they thrive on specialization – which means that it is very difficult to sort out what they have to offer and, therefor, what one wants to apply for. And yet, for this same reason of specialization, it is essential that students get their high school course selections right in order to satisfy the prerequisites for admission to the university programs of choice. Guidance counselors can help, but they are busy people and they can't know it all; so it is largely up to the students to seek out the information they need in order to make these decisions. And parents can be of tremendous assistance with this – first, by making sure their teenagers look into it and, secondly, by helping them do it.

In general, university admission decisions are based on high school grades – which we know are not perfect predictors of post-secondary success, but they are the best generic indicators we have. Occasionally, high school grades are weighted in admission decisions depending on which high school awarded the grades. And in certain fields of study, admissions are based on the review of other factors in addition to marks – such as community activities for Social Work, analytical essays for Humanities, auditions for Music, interviews for Industrial Design, and portfolios for Architecture. You, and the students you're helping, need to know what the admission requirements are for certain fields at given universities – and there are numerous sources of information you can tap to get this information. These include, in Ontario: the publication called *Info* and the cd-roms called *School Finder* and *College View*, which are sent to all high schools in the province; the Ontario Universities Fair put on each September by all of the province's universities together at the Toronto Convention Centre; and a wide range of resources

from each individual institution – such as official Calendars and booklets, information nights in high schools from coast to coast, annual Fall Open Houses and March Break programs, informative web-sites containing "frequently asked questions", campus tour centers that operate every day, scheduled appointments with faculty members or recruitment officers, tele-counseling with students or parents who call, etc. You can certainly help by steering your students toward these resources and joining them in their interpretation.

The same is true in the money domain. We find that some families don't know how expensive university is or don't do their financial planning well. Many forms of financial aid are available and it's not difficult to find information on them and on the kinds of expenses you can anticipate. But you and your students have to make the effort to seek it out and study it. So these are some of the ways in which you can be helpful with students planning to apply for university admission.

Beginning Students

Once they get to campus, many of our students experience a significant transition crisis. The sources of support that they're used to just aren't there any more. Their teachers have other important things to do besides teach them, and it's not their job to tell students what to do or remind them when to do it. University staff, as researchers, are as engaged in learning as their students, their schedules are flexible so they're not always available, and they don't see themselves as being in a directive role. They are not *in loco parentis* and, certainly for students who leave home, their *own* parents aren't there either. Furthermore, universities are huge and diversified places; so students may rarely see any of their old friends on campus. They must learn

to become independent adults and take care of their own needs in what amounts to a new and strange "city" where they are unfamiliar with the "rules of the game". This can be rather terrifying at first, and we lose some as a result of this transition anxiety. It is important for parents to empathize with this, and you can understand it simply by reflecting on the stresses you experienced during major transitions in your own lives – moving to another town, changing or losing a job, marriage or death of a loved one, etc. The important things are to keep in mind that you made it through, to inspire your students' confidence that they can too, and to convey the joy that comes from making it by getting up after you've tripped.

We've found that this kind of hardiness is essential for survival in university life. Many students have a fear of failure and lack the independent self-esteem necessary to this hardiness, and our psychologists have identified the importance of developing a "social cushion" to buffer these obstacles. By this, they mean giving priority during the first six weeks on campus to developing a new network of contacts with whom students can talk things over when the inevitable difficulties arise. From such conversations they eventually learn the necessary strategies for time management, getting to class, devoting at least two hours to study for each hour of instruction, and all sorts of other "keys to success".

These are coping life skills and, especially in the first months at university, they are at least as important as academic skills. As parents, you can give assurances that such transition stresses happen and that students shouldn't be too hard on themselves but should, and can, learn to pick themselves up and get on with it.

However, by mid-October, with this "social cushion" in place, it is time for them to shift the balance to a heavier concentration on academic skills. And here, too, there are transition

challenges. An important one is in the crucial area of writing, of which there is a lot on our campuses. The difficulty arises from the fact that one writes for different purposes at university. Many high schools teach students how to "follow the rules" in putting together the "five-paragraph essay", entailing an introduction, three main points and a conclusion. This is a good lesson for *all* high school students, the majority of whom won't go on to university. But it doesn't always apply to the assignments that *we* give them. University essays need to be content-based more than structure-driven, because professors want to know if their students understand the meaning of what they're writing about and the purpose for which they're writing it. Consequently, the appropriate format for a book review is quite different from that for a lab report, a thesis or a log – and these many varieties cannot possibly all be taught in high school. This frequently leads to a loss in "linguistic control" by students and that can scare the heck out of them, often resulting in grammatical deterioration which can be dangerous – something that we've noticed is most prevalent at the major points of academic progression (on entry to first-year studies, third-year studies when the concentration on subject majors begins, and graduate studies).

We've found that, again, social networks can help – conversations in which students pick up the "tricks of the trade" from each other, learning to start writing before they've finished reading what they're writing about, and interspersing reading, writing and conversing activities; in this regard, we've been encouraged by the growth in group writing projects at the high school level. Similar observations could be made about math and computer skills; indeed, some of our faculty members have been surprised and disappointed at how many incoming students don't have the computer skills necessary for effective web-based instruction or even e-mail chat groups, both of which are becoming common at universities across the country.

Professors, as I've indicated, do not view themselves as responsible for providing students with these basic academic skills. However, the universities as institutions recognize that it's a problem which requires help and so all of them have a large array of service units to foster such skills. There are offices responsible for offering free writing tutorials, math tutorials, library familiarization courses, study habit workshops, and the like. How parents can help is by ensuring that their students know about these services, realize that it's O.K. to use them, talk with their social networks about how to access them, and take full advantage of such resources – after all, these are among the things that they (or you) are paying for through their tuition fees!

Disabled Students

I'll finish with a few words on disabled students. Some of our universities have become quite accessible to academically talented students with various forms of disability. At Carleton, 7 ½ per cent of our students have certified disabilities, and half of these are learning disabled. If you have a student who is experiencing learning difficulties for reasons you don't understand, it would be well worthwhile to have him or her undergo a proper learning disability assessment. These tests are now quite reliable in identifying students with average or above-average intelligence who display a significant gap between intellectual ability and academic performance. With the results of such tests in hand, we can provide a variety of accommodations for our learning disabled students – such as extra time to complete assignments and exams. Ontario is a leader in this regard, having granted generous funding for such accommodations and for a series of pilot projects to provide enhanced programming for students with learning disabilities that involve close liaisons with high schools. Many of these initiatives are under the jurisdiction of the

Learning Opportunities Task Force, chaired by Betty Stephenson – and I understand that one of them operates at Conestoga College.

Similar accessibility and accommodation arrangements are in place for students with various kinds of physical disabilities – although moreso on some campuses than at others – and for them, too, there is considerable financial assistance available to obtain the learning aids that they need in order to succeed at university (up to $7,000 per year with the appropriate receipts). Here again, the important thing for parents and teachers is to be aware of these provisions and to help disabled students become self-advocates, with an understanding of their difficulties and an ability to explain them so that the appropriate assistance can be made available to them.

Conclusion

In returning to the question I was asked to address this afternoon, I think we can identify three main ways in which you can prepare students for success at university:

(1) help them obtain and assess information on offerings, requirements, and supports;

(2) help them appreciate the survival skills for studying, coping, and independence; and

(3) help them anticipate transition challenges and develop the confidence and desire to surmount them.

My main point is that students must learn to do these things themselves; it is simply a part of growing up, which is what happens for most people at university. But this learning can be quite traumatic, and parents or teachers who understand its nature can be invaluable in lending a well-placed boost here or a well-directed nudge there – and then "letting go" when it starts to take.

I hope I've been of some assistance in helping *you* to gain that understanding.

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