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Academically under prepared for college: Why a P-16 system is

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Academically under prepared for college: Why a P-16 system is needed.

Abstract

The intent of this paper is to examine the problem of the recent high school graduate who is not academically prepared to pursue college level work. The author reviews the literature to define the problems under prepared students face when they have to take remedial courses. How taking remedial courses impacts the likelihood of earning a degree is discussed. It also addresses what is perceived to be the cause of academically under prepared students: lack of alignment between the high schools and postsecondary education. A recommendation is made in support of P-16 alignment.

Activity at Salem Community College in response to remedial needs of students is presented

Introduction

Salem Community College is a two year, open access public institution located in rural Salem County, New Jersey. The college serves approximately 1300 students. Over the past four years, the college has seen a twenty nine percent increase in enrollment (SCC website). Much of this enrollment increase is attributable to an increase in the number of students who are enrolling in college immediately following high school. Many of these students are arriving at college not academically prepared for college level work. The college has had to increase the number of developmental (non college level) courses that it offers. This is an area of concern.

Students who must take developmental courses begin their college journey with many disadvantages: .Not only do they have to take non-college level courses, they must pay for them. These students must complete their developmental classes before they can move into their intended major, thus adding more time to earn a degree. Research indicates that students who begin at the developmental level are more at risk for not completing their degree (Alliance for Excellent education, August 2006).

The intent of this paper is to examine the following:

- The extent of the problem of academically under prepared students
- Perspectives on the cause of students not being prepared for college level work
- A recommended course of action

Background

In its 2007 report to the nation, the College Board indicated that seventy five percent of high school graduates are entering college (College Board, 2007, ¶ 6). This is good news when

you consider that recent studies have provided detailed research indicating that a high school diploma will no longer prepare an individual for a job that will pay a living wage; postsecondary education is essential to economic success. This is further supported by the news that jobs requiring at least some postsecondary education will make up more than two thirds of new jobs. (The League for Innovation in the Community College, 2007, p. 2; Gandal, 2006). Unfortunately, there is also bad news to report. Along with the increased participation of high school graduates in post secondary education, has come a large population of students, who are not prepared for college level work.

The demands of college and work are dramatically different today than a generation ago, but American high schools remain virtually unchanged. (Achieve Inc., 2005, p. 4). State and federal efforts to improve education standards have focused more on providing a strong foundation for learning in the early years than on ensuring students have the skills and knowledge they need at high school graduation (Barone et al., slide 11).

Findings

Too many high schools maintain a general track that fails to give students the skills they need for success in either college or the workplace. “One of the most unrelenting challenges facing higher education is the large number of students in need of remediation—the formal coursework in reading, writing and mathematics, and the academic support services, provided to students who need help in meeting academic requirements” (Greene, June 2008). Nationwide, 42 percent of community college freshmen and 20 percent of those at four-year institutions enroll in at least one remedial college course(, 2006, ¶ 6). In New Jersey, the problem is worse: It is estimated that in New Jersey, seventy eight percent of students entering college are in need of at least one remedial course (The New Jersey High School Redesign Steering Committee, nd.).

This lack of academic preparation is forcing colleges to offer, and require remedial courses to large numbers of students (Alliance for Excellent education, August 2006).

Remedial courses are expensive to operate. Colleges often have to hire and train additional staff to accommodate the growing remedial needs. Additional support services are also needed to assist these students. For students, having to take remedial courses presents a number of problems.

Students who have to take remedial courses are delayed entry into their intended major. Remedial courses must be completed before enrolling in college level course. Remedial courses are extra courses that the students must take. Students pay the prevailing tuition and fees rates for them. These courses add extra time to their degree plans. Remedial courses are not credit bearing. In addition to adding time to the degree completion, having to complete remedial courses delays students' entry into the workplace. Students are disappointed when they learn that they must complete remedial coursework at college. Many students feel as though they should not have to take the courses; unfortunately college policy is that there must be demonstrated proficiency at the college level before students can advance. Taxpayers feel as though they should not have to pay twice for this level of coursework.

It is estimated that the nation loses between $1 billion to $2 billion annually to provide remedial education to students at public universities and community colleges paying for remediation to students who recently completed high school (Alliance for Education, 2006; Achieve Inc., 2005, p. 4). This is because we are paying double for those skills. Deficits in basic skills cost businesses, colleges and under prepared high school graduate as much as $16 billion annually in lost productivity and remedial costs. Employers in Michigan, for example, spend about $40 million a year just to teach workers how to read, write and perform basic math

operations. (Achieve Inc., 2005, p. 4). To make matters worse, the degree completion rate of students who begin at the remedial level is much lower than those who start out academically prepared.

Research indicates, “Students who need remediation are more likely to leave college without a degree, becoming more likely to earn less than if they had gotten a college diploma. The leading predictor that a student will drop out of college is the need for remedial reading. While 58 percent of students who take no remedial education courses earn a Bachelor’s degree within eight years, only 17 percent of students who enroll in a remedial reading course receive a BA or BS within the same time period”(Alliance for Excellent education, August 2006, expression 4). The problem of academic under preparedness is a joint one. It has been created by the high schools that graduate these students and by the colleges and universities that admit them (Boser & Burd, January 2009; Spellings, 2006).

At the high school level, it was found that a “key component of our national achievement problem is insufficient alignment between K-12 and higher education. Studies show the overwhelming majority of both college and high school faculty and administrators are unaware of the standards and assessments being used by their counterparts in the other sector” (A Report of the Commission Appointed by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, 2006, p. 7). The Alliance for Excellent Education (2006) points out that “weak curricula, vague standards, and lack of alignment between high school content and the expectations of colleges result in the need for remediation”. The Spellings report (2006) stated, “Not all states require high school graduates to take at least Algebra II—a threshold course for college-level success in math-based disciplines including engineering and science. Forty-four percent of faculty members say

students are not well prepared for college-level writing, in contrast to the 90 percent of high school teachers who think they are prepared "(p. 7).

The Chronicle found in companion national surveys, one of college faculty members and one of high-school teachers, faculty and teachers differ significantly in their assessments of students. When asked about students' overall preparation for college, 84 percent of faculty members compared with 65 percent of teachers say that high-school graduates are either unprepared or are only somewhat well prepared to pursue a college degree. Almost one-fourth of faculty members say that students are not prepared. Only 12 percent of teachers agree with that assessment. When asked about recent high school graduate students' abilities and attitudes in several specific areas, faculty members say that students are inadequate writers, have trouble understanding difficult materials, fall short in knowledge of science and math, have poor study habits, and lack motivation. Unlike faculty members, teachers feel that high school graduates are fairly well prepared in writing, science, and math. (Sanoff, 2006).

Although every state has academic standards for students to meet in high school, very few have successfully connected those standards to the requirements for success in college and the workplace (Achieve Inc., 2005, p 6). The nation's high schools bear most of the blame. In order to graduate students prepared for success, high schools must align the content of their coursework with the skills and knowledge students need in today's increasingly competitive and demanding world (Alliance for Education, 2006). One way to deal with the lack of preparedness is through P-16 alignments.

Our current pre-kindergarten to college education system is best described as 'a patchwork of unfocused academic policies and programs that fail to adequately prepare students for college or the workforce" (Boser & Burd, 2009, .5). P-16 alignments are systems that allow

students to move more smoothly between traditional elementary and secondary schools into higher education. P-16 education builds on previous work in standards, assessment, and accountability (2000, p. 1).

P-16 has two fundamental goals: (1) to raise the achievement levels of all learners, and (2) to close the achievement gap among groups of learners. (Van de Water & Krueger, 2002). "The ultimate goal of a P-16 system is to improve student achievement by getting kids off to a good start, raising academic standards, conducting appropriate assessments, improving teacher quality and generally smoothing student transitions from one level of learning to the next. Some proponents label this a "seamless" system to underscore the need to recognize the interdependency and common goals among preschool, elementary, secondary and postsecondary education" (Van de Water & Rainwater, 2001, p. 2). P-16 needs to be seen as one complete system rather than various systems that work independently of each other. Each level is a feeder for the next level. Everyone at every level must execute their function to prepare students to move on to the next level.

Since the 1980's the nation has been focusing on school reform. State and federal efforts to improve education standards have focused more on providing a strong foundation for learning in the early years than on ensuring students have the skills and knowledge they need at high school graduation (Achieve Inc., 2005, p. 4). This focus which has led to many initiatives, including No Child Left behind (NCLB), has focused only on the P-12 sector. There is no state created educational standards or assessments for the express purpose of increasing college enrollments or success (Conley, 2003).

College and high-school leaders must work together to align standards. Schools in every state have established academic standards that have become the foundation for curriculum,

testing, and accountability systems from elementary to high school. In every state today, students can meet the requirements for high school graduation and still be unprepared to successfully enter college and the workplace. (Cohen, Lingenfelter, Meredith, & Ward, 2006, p. B20).Our standards have not kept pace with the world students are entering after high school (Achieve Inc., 2005). Their exists a gap between the skills learned while in high school and the skills needed to pursue college and the workplace. To close this gap and better prepare students for college and the workplace, states must first ensure that high school standards reflect the real-world skills and knowledge students need to be successful after they graduate (Achieve, 2009, ¶ 1).

The Department of Education recommends that, "States must adopt high school curricula that prepare all students for participation in postsecondary education and should facilitate seamless integration between high school and college….The effort underway in a number of states to align K-12 graduation standards with college and employer expectations should be implemented in all 50 states "(U.S. Department of Education, p. 17). No state has a fully integrated preschool through university system. A number of states have set up statutory or voluntary governance structures wherein leaders across systems assume joint responsibility for P-16 outcomes (, 2004, p. 3). Examples of initiatives are California's Early Assessment Program (EAP) and Georgia's P-16 initiative.

Developed by the California State University (CSU) system in partnership with the California Department of Education and the State Board of Education., the EAP is designed to test students' proficiency in mathematics and English and to reduce the likelihood that students will have to take remedial classes once they enter college. The program provides a college placement exam in the state testing program required of all 11th grade students, using the CSU's

admission s placement standards in math and English.(U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p. 18)

The P-16 initiative in Georgia began in 1995. It the oldest and most developed in the nation. The University System of Georgia's office for P-16 initiatives has a budget of about $12.8-million, with about $3-million coming from the state and $9.8-million from federal and private grants. It has sought to make P-16 reform manageable by setting up panels and offices to tackle such tasks as improving teacher quality and finding ways to ensure that education agencies share information that will help them track students' progress . The P-16 network partners with the Governor's office, the Department of Education and the Department of Early Care and Learning. The Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education also participates and plays an equal role. (Krueger, 2006; Schmidt, 2006)

As a result of Georgia's P-16 imitative, reports have documented increased enrollment in preschools, a rising number of high school graduates and the implementation of teacher preparation policies that are designed to raise achievement levels of students from diverse backgrounds According to the Pathways to College Network, Georgia's P-16 initiative has helped close achievement gaps between high- and low-income students and between minority and "majority" students The number of students taking and scoring higher on advanced placement exams has also risen . P-16 is no longer considered a reform effort in Georgia, but business as usual (Kruger, 2006 p2-3)

Across the nation, governors, state superintendents of education, business executives and college leaders are working to bring value to the high school diploma by raising the rigor of high school standards, assessments and curriculum and aligning expectations with the demands of postsecondary education and careers. To facilitate State efforts, in 2005, Achieve,(an

independent, bipartisan, non-profit education reform organization based in Washington, D.C. that helps states raise academic standards and graduation requirements, improve assessments and strengthen accountability) launched the American Diploma Project (ADP) (Achieve, 2009, expression 1).

The ADP is an initiative created to ensure that all students graduate from high school prepared to face the challenges of work and college (Achieve Inc.). In 2006, The ADP created a series of institutes that bring together K-12, postsecondary and business leaders from America's Diploma Project (ADP) Network states to define the core knowledge and skills in mathematics and English that graduates need for college and career readiness and to strengthen their high school standards as necessary. ADP Network states have committed to the following four actions:

- Aligning high school standards and assessments with the knowledge and skills required for success after high school.
- Requiring all high school graduates to take challenging courses that actually prepare them for life after high school.
- Streamlining the assessment system so that the tests students take in high school also can serve as readiness tests for college and work.
- Holding high schools accountable for graduating students who are ready for college or careers, and holding postsecondary institutions accountable for students' success once enrolled (Achieve Inc., expression 1)

The ADP Network states participating in these institutes include Arkansas, Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Hawaii, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oklahoma,

Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Virginia and Wisconsin. Of these 22 states, half – Arkansas, Arizona, California, Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, Oklahoma and Tennessee – have adopted aligned standards. The progress made in this area demonstrates the power of voluntary, state-led efforts in developing aligned standards (Achieve, 2009, expression 3).

For high schools to improve, in addition to the curriculum changes, they will need information from colleges about how well students are performing, particularly in their first-year of course work. By sharing their challenges and successes in carrying out a college-ready curriculum, secondary educators can help college professors and administrators refine first-year courses, as well as improve teacher preparation and professional development (Cohen et al., 2006, p. B20).

Conclusions

The research is consistent: Throughout the nation, recent high school graduates are arriving at colleges and universities unprepared for college and the world of work. More than ever, the innovative and productive capacity of the United States depends on the knowledge and skills of our people. Advanced education has become essential in the 21st century: low-skilled, well-paying jobs are increasingly scarce, and higher skills, adaptability, and the capacity to add value in the workplace are essential for economic security (Achieve Inc., 2005, p. 4). For individuals, higher education and preparation for success in higher education have become urgent priorities (Second To None in Attainment, Discovery, and Innovation: The National Agenda for Higher Education, 2008, expression 2). This lack of academic preparation has led to an increase in the offering of remedial classes on college campuses.

In many colleges more than half the freshmen take one or more remedial courses to learn skills that they should have acquired in high school (Second To None in Attainment, Discovery, and Innovation: The National Agenda for Higher Education, 2008, expression 5). These courses bring with them a number of issues for the college, students and the taxpayers.

For the college, having to offer remedial courses is to do the job of the high school. Remedial courses require faculty training and additional academic support services for the students. Students are disappointed to learn that they must enroll in remedial courses.

Remedial courses are not credit bearing. They do not count towards the degree. They are charged at the prevailing tuition rates. They add time to a student's degree plan therefore delaying entry into the workplace. Research suggests that students who enroll in remedial courses when compared to students who do not have to take these courses are not as likely to obtain a degree. Taxpayers reject the idea of paying for remedial courses.

The skills presented in remedial courses should have been obtained while the student was in high school. Having to take and pay for remedial courses at college amounts to retaking courses that are providing skills that were already paid for .What can be done about this?

Recommendations

We got into this situation because we have focused our efforts on reforming the P-12 sector and have not paid attention to connecting high school to postsecondary education or the new demands of the workplace. We have allowed our P-12 and postsecondary education systems to be disconnected. This "disconnect" if allowed to continue will cause us great harm.

If we continue with things as they are, not only do will we create a generation of high school graduates unable to perform at the college level, we are risking the ability of our nation to

complete in the global marketplace. This disconnected system will have far reaching consequences for decades to come. A solution to the problem has been presented.

The U S educational system has got to be connected from the early learning through the postsecondary years. The public recognizes that education policy decisions are made separately by statewide K–12 and higher education governing boards. In a 2003 public opinion survey of 1,000 Americans, more than half agreed "the system does not work well and better coordination is needed to help students go from high school to college and succeed once they are there" (Achieve Inc., 2005, p. 20). Each level must be connected to the next.

Put quite simply, we must connect the disconnected. This is the intent of the P-16 system. In a P-16 system, elementary and middle grade standards and coursework adequately prepare students for the new high school expectations. Postsecondary leaders and the business community would work with K–12 educators to verify that the high school standards reflect the skills and knowledge high school graduates need to succeed in entry-level, well-paying jobs and credit-bearing courses at any college or university (Achieve Inc., 2005, p. 6). If we create a true "P–16" system, we would help better prepare all students for college and work, and bolster American competitiveness. The continued lack of alignment, in which elementary, secondary and postsecondary schools function independently of one another will continue to cost us dearly" (Landgraf, 2007, p. 1). Salem Community College is prepared to engage in alignment with its local high schools

Salem Community College Initiatives

Salem Community College has responded to the large demands for remediation by doing more than offering remedial courses and support services. The administration has started a number of initiatives to help minimize student needs for remediation. They include sharing

remedial needs of high school students with school personnel, administering college placement testing to all students in their junior year, providing online tutorial assistance to students in need of remediation and establishing P-16 as an institutional strategic priority.

During the past academic year, high school principals and guidance personnel were made aware of the remedial needs of their recent graduates. The purpose in doing this was to inform the high schools of the fact that students were graduating from their schools unprepared for college level work. This information was surprising to many, especially when included on the lists were names of students who had graduated near the top of their graduating class. As a result of this discussion, the College agreed to assist the high schools with preparing students for college level work. The first step in the process was to administer the Accuplacer, college placement test to all high school juniors and seniors.

Accuplacer is a self paced computerized test created by the College Board that is used by all 19 New Jersey community colleges and the majority of public colleges to assess students' preparedness in English and math. Salem recognizes that academic preparedness is a good indicator of college success. Therefore, by administering the Accuplacer to high school students, the need for remediation could be identified early. Students who are identified as needing remediation in English or math would have time to work on these skills prior to graduation from high school. To assist with this process, the developmental math and English faculty created a series of exercises for student use.

The exercises are made available to students online. In this manner students can work on their skills as needed. Upon completion of the online tutorial, students can be retested.

Salem Community College is committed to working with the high schools to help prepare its students for success. The College has identified P-16 as a strategic priority for its

2010-2012 strategic planning process. Dr. Contini, president of Salem Community College has stated that of the seven priority items that were identified for the strategic planning process, he saw P-16 as the most important. According to him, ". We have got to be able to help the schools do a better job of preparing their students for college and in turn we need to prepare students for the world of work or transfer to a four year institution. This is our job". Based on the things that Salem Community College is doing in response to the remedial needs of its students, the College is well on its way to executing its role in P-16 alignment.

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