

College Material

Tapping Rural Areas for the Next Generation of College Students

STEPHEN E. ABBOTT

While many efforts to reform high schools target large cities, a quiet minority located at the fringes of American culture has been relatively overlooked. Low-income, rural students suffer many of the same social maladies—such as severe poverty and widespread drug abuse—as urban minority children, and they are comparably disadvantaged when it comes to college access. Further aggravating the situation, these students also endure geographic and cultural isolation as well as the fallout from stagnant local economies.

Today, cautiousness and skepticism about college remain powerful forces in many rural schools and communities. The reasons for this are far more complex than simple obstinacy or unwillingness to accept economic and technological change—it usually has more to do with local values and traditions.

Promoting college without seeming to disparage other options or career choices is an ongoing challenge. “Not everyone is going to become a doctor or lawyer” is a sentiment often expressed in rural America. Behind this statement is the tacit assumption that a college degree is useful only as means to attaining high-status, white-collar jobs. Yet this reasoning is no longer an accurate reflection of either today’s diverse job market or the increasingly higher qualifications needed for even entry-level positions in industries that have not historically required a postsecondary degree. The sentiment also exposes a deeper problem: college education is not always seen as an asset; in some communities, it may even be viewed as an act of hubris.

It has been apparent for many years that the old industries that once supported rural areas are not only vanishing but are also unlikely to ever return. Still, the consequences of this trend have been slow to saturate public awareness, which means that a compelling pro-education message must do far more than relay information—it must cultivate a sense of urgency regarding the need to radically improve our public schools and send more of our students on to college. But this sense of urgency has yet to percolate through many communities.

Maine’s challenge

In Maine, we have 130 publicly funded high schools, and fewer than 12 percent of them serve more than 1,000 students. Most of the high schools are located in low-income, rural areas that face dwindling enrollments, budgetary cutbacks, high faculty-turnover rates and other significant challenges. Maine has never had a strong college-going tradition or a large number of college-degree holders—only about one-fourth of Maine’s

population age 25 or older has earned at least a bachelor’s degree, which is well below the New England average. The state needs bold, imaginative solutions or this self-perpetuating legacy will continue unabated.

Since 2003, the Great Maine Schools Project, a statewide high school reform initiative funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, has been working to strengthen Maine high schools and send more Maine students on to higher education. Our organization is guided by the belief that *every student has the right to graduate high school prepared to enter and succeed in college*, and that promoting college has to be engineered from the bottom up. In other words, a pro-college message cannot simply be tacked on to 13 years of public schooling that may vary dramatically in quality. We also believe that effective school reform cannot take hold in a vacuum, which is why we have adopted a “schoolhouse to statehouse” approach that concentrates as much on changing the culture of our public education *system* as it does on reforming individual schools.

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The assumption that some students are simply not “college material” can become ingrained in every level of the public education system, as evidenced by common practices such as sorting students according to perceived ability. Since poor children, minorities and students whose parents did not attend college usually make up the bulk of lower-track ability groups, de-tracking classrooms is just as much about promoting equity as it is about improving achievement. Increasing college-going rates—and, just as importantly, college-persistence rates—must begin with an academically challenging, college-preparatory curriculum for every student. Still, a common fear expressed by secondary educators is that droves of students will drop out if expectations are raised or if some peripheral electives are phased out to make room for core academic courses. The goal becomes “keeping students in school,” not educating them well. The result: some students graduate knowing calculus; others leave high school without even basic math skills.

Getting creative

One of the most promising strategies for increasing student achievement and postsecondary enrollments is “Early College,” an experience that can dramatically increase achievement and college aspirations while

keeping students in school. The many Early College programs we support have been remarkably successful in engaging at-risk youth, and they present strong evidence that raising expectations does not inherently lead to widespread failures or greater numbers of dropouts. There are many forms of Early College, but the model we advocate allows juniors and seniors to take classes at a nearby college for both high school and college credit. This on-campus immersion experience has been crucial to the success of our programs, which all specifically target underperforming and low-income youth who may not intend to enroll in higher education or who may also be the first in their family to attend college.

Although counter-intuitive, “promoting” struggling secondary students into college classes works—the experience gives them a greater sense of autonomy and maturity, and can defuse hostilities they may feel toward their high school. Far from discouraging these students, the tougher college coursework usually rekindles their interest in learning and builds a greater sense of self-confidence. We have also seen students in our programs find a renewed motivation to improve their high school grades, and the partnerships created between public schools and colleges present new opportunities to reshape academic expectations at the secondary level. When high school educators observe their students succeeding—even thriving—in college classes, it can stimulate schools to rethink the course of studies they offer students.

Because Early College programs are embedded within the high schools and communities that are already familiar to students, they present a less intimidating transition between high school and higher education. By investing

in additional support systems, offering financial incentives and marketing the program to underperforming and underrepresented students, an Early College program can attract a diverse cross-section of students, including those who had never considered college an option.

Although we have seen firsthand the enormous potential of Early College, our organization is still searching for ways to make these programs more sustainable. Much of this work can be accomplished by postsecondary institutions as a matter of enlightened self-interest. At one of our Early College sites, students from a single high school now make up 12 percent of the institution’s total enrollment. Because Early College students can be placed into under-enrolled classes and program-coordination costs are usually minimal—and since students often choose to attend institutions they are already familiar with—subsidizing these programs can be a wise long-term investment strategy for colleges and universities.

Our ultimate goal is to extend Early College opportunities to students in every corner of Maine—but we cannot accomplish this alone. Early College is a strategy that will benefit both public schools and institutions of higher education, as well as the students they both serve. The fates of higher education and public schools are intertwined. If we truly want to increase the aspirations and educational attainment of more students, we need to start thinking more creatively and embrace new ways of working together.

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New Hampshire’s Get Ready for College Initiative STEPHEN RENO AND RENÉ A. DROUIN

New Hampshire’s population is projected to grow only slightly between 2005 and 2015, with much of the growth in the age 55 and over segment. The state’s large employers are concerned about where they will find college-educated individuals to fill a myriad of positions in new or rapidly growing industries.

Meanwhile, though New Hampshire is tied for first among all states in per-capita income, four in 10 Granite State residents have not earned a high school diploma. We cannot rely on importing educated people to meet future employment demands, nor do we want to see jobs exported elsewhere.

To ensure that New Hampshire is able to “grow our own” future employees, the University System of New Hampshire in October launched a “Get Ready for College” initiative, with support from the New Hampshire Higher Education Assistance Foundation (NHHEAF) Network Organizations. Get Ready for College is a comprehensive effort to

encourage students in grades 6 through 12 to aspire to and prepare for college.

In the first phase of the initiative, organizers sent every guidance office in the state colorful posters explaining why it’s never too late to prepare for college and what sixth-through 12th graders can do to “get ready.” The posters were followed by brochures geared to students and families and a website with resources categorized by grade (www.yourusnh.com). In addition, a 20-minute “School is Cool” video targeted to eighth-graders will feature students at USNH institutions talking about obstacles they overcame to get into college, provide a look at life on a college campus, and offer messages about the earning potential of a college graduate versus a high school dropout.

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