Preparation for the 21st Century

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Preparing Our Students for the 21st Century
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When America’s first universities were founded in the 1600s, gaining a degree in higher education was an intellectual right of passage saved only for the most wealthy and privileged. Those few who could attend were destined to become the social, political and business leaders of society. A college education was meant to prepare them for that role.

In today’s global knowledge economy and hyper-connected world, many can have an impact on society through contributions across a variety of industries – not just a select few. Higher education today is meant to prepare the masses as they consider a much wider realm of possible career paths that are based on a certain assemblage of knowledge, rather than skills inherited or passed along through family.

As students work to achieve enrollment at the more than 4,800 universities and colleges across the U.S., their high school education is largely aimed at getting them into school – guaranteeing their right to an education – rather than helping them to earn a degree or prepare for a career.

Although it’s easy to blame the high school for not preparing students properly, that is not the root of the problem. Like many things, students’ success rate in post-secondary education is merely a symptom of a much deeper problem.

High School to College: An Evolution

More than 200 years of an evolving “secondary” or high school education program have brought us to today’s world of standardized tests, college-placement examinations and more, in an attempt to make every student “college eligible.” But this evolution has not been focused on the real need: making students “college ready.”

In the early part of the 20th Century, U.S. high schools prepared students for college in a way that made the degree-holding graduates the most well-educated in the world, which benefitted the economy immensely. In the mid-1940s, a G.I. bill sent thousands of veterans to pursue a higher education degree. By the 1960s, most students viewed college as their natural next step, with a Higher Education Act making a degree more financially attainable. By the 1970s, college was viewed as necessary to obtain a great career – not just a job. In less than 40 years, college enrollment jumped from 1 million in 1943 to more than 8 million in 1969.

The good news is that more and more U.S. high school seniors planned to go on to college, with an encouraging 90 percent of high school students in the ‘90s saying their goal was to get in. The bad news is that a large and growing number of students are not adequately prepared to perform at a college level. A 100-year progression of the high school-to-college relationship has resulted in many students working to get in rather than get ahead. This leaves a substantial divide between students’
concept of college and the reality of the experience. It's no wonder that, of the more than 20 million students enrolled in a college degree program, 50 percent will not graduate and 30 percent dropout in their first year.

These kinds of statistics are harmful to more than just the student. According to a 2002 U.S. Census Bureau report, a person with a bachelor’s degree will earn, on average, nearly twice as much over the course of a lifetime as someone with only a high school diploma. This is especially harmful for the more than 50 percent of entering college freshman who borrow funds, of which 20 percent will drop out and are therefore twice as likely to be unemployed. This creates a strain on the system as they become 10 times as likely not to repay their loans, according to the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education.

Beyond the financials, the U.S. Department of Labor noted in a 2006 report that 90 percent of the fastest-growing jobs in the new global knowledge economy will require at least some level of education or training post high school.

What can be done?

In theory, the best solution would be for high schools and colleges to work together to jointly establish standards and address this issue. That is easier said than done, as there are long-standing and deeply rooted differences between the college and high school education systems which make such collaboration difficult. Among these differences are funding; differing academic standards; teacher tenure tracks and qualifications; the general classroom or, in many cases, campus experience; and more.

The best high schools today are those that have developed a comprehensive curriculum which grows increasingly more challenging over time. Programs like this, combined with formal instruction on what life after education will be like – not just beyond high school, but also beyond a trade or college curriculum – is vital in developing students that are career ready and that understand the value of continuous and ongoing learning.

As businesses and industries quickly embrace new technologies and innovations, they are moving at a pace that is bypassing high school teaching and educational resources. Developing tools and programs for classrooms that teach the 21st Century skills students will require later in life – such as group problem solving and collaboration, online learning, using social media programs professionally, and more – is vital to their professional and even personal success. It will help them become life-long learners in a learning-centric world.

High schools are ultimately meant to be focused on providing students with a foundation for learning that will support their education and career goals for the rest of their lives. By not teaching them the (now) basic skills they need to be successful in the new Century, students are becoming increasingly ill prepared, making them less likely to compete in today’s global society.

To do this, we need to be focused on aligning state high school standards and assessments with the demands of college and career success in the 21st Century, requiring all students to complete a curriculum designed specifically to make them college and career ready. To ensure this, we need an assessment program designed to measure student readiness and a longitudinal system to track
students from K-through-20, mapping the progress of education.

The American Diploma Project Network is working to align the 50 states and D.C. on these and other goals, already gaining the support of 34 states which represent nearly 85 percent of all U.S. public high school students.

But we need 100 percent success, with 100 percent of high schools and higher education institutions and technical and trade programs on board. We need to recognize that today’s student not only learns in an entirely new format, but also that they require entirely new skills. We in the education industry need to recognize the world is moving quickly past us and we are at the core of our nation’s future growth and success. To continue to compete in a global world, the U.S. needs to secure our future by properly preparing students to succeed in higher education institutions or technical post-secondary programs.

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