

# College for All?

*The college-educated share of America's population has barely increased in years. The key to reviving mass higher education may be to rethink the divide between high school and college.*

BY KEVIN CAREY

IT WOULD HAVE BEEN UNDERSTANDABLE IF PRESIDENT Barack Obama had ignored education in his first speech to Congress. There were other things to worry about in February 2009: an economy in free fall, health care costs threatening to bankrupt the federal government, a nation bleeding in two protracted foreign wars. Obama had said little about education on the campaign trail. Yet when he took the podium, he made a bold declaration: By 2020, America would regain its historical international lead in college attainment.

Months earlier, Bill Gates had announced a similar priority for his charitable foundation, the richest on the planet. After years of focusing on improving education for students in kindergarten through 12th grade, the Microsoft billionaire had set his sights on college. As would Obama, he called for a major increase in the number of adults with college degrees. Together, the most powerful man in the world and one of the richest created a rare moment of purpose and clarity in American education policy.

But effecting a major increase in college attainment is a daunting task. The percentage of American working-age adults who have graduated from college has hovered around 40 percent for years, with roughly 30 percent holding four-year degrees and another 10

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percent associate's degrees. Obama and Gates were calling for a rise in the college attainment rate to nearly 60 percent in less than a generation, even though many public colleges and universities were already bursting at the seams, and cash-strapped state legislatures were handing down further punishing budget cuts.

Moreover, to succeed in college, students need to get a decent high school education. Many don't. Drop-out rates in urban high schools are catastrophic. And while 70 percent of the nation's 3.3 million high school graduates go directly to two- or four-year colleges every year, and still more enroll by their mid-twenties, less than half of all students are exposed to a legitimate college preparatory curriculum in high school.

Such harsh realities have led a growing number

**Doubts about the value of a college education are growing. Among those recent graduates lucky enough to find a job, about half have taken positions that do not require a college degree.**

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of critics to question the realism and wisdom of the new college attainment agenda. Some don't believe that the economy can absorb a huge influx of degree holders. That argument has been heard before. In the 1970s, Harvard economist Richard Freeman, author of *The Overeducated American* (1976), landed in *People* magazine and on the front page of *The New York Times* with his prediction that a glut of degree-bearing workers would lead to falling wages for college graduates.

Instead, wages of college-educated workers rose dramatically relative to those of less educated Americans over the following decade. In the mid-1970s, graduates earned about 40 percent more than people with high school diplomas. The gap has relentlessly widened since then and stands near 100 percent today. In fact, college graduates are the only category of workers whose real pay has increased since 1979.

A more controversial argument against wider higher education comes from Charles Murray, coauthor of the controversial *Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (1994). Murray, who believes that intelligence is strongly determined by genes, contends that "no more than 20 percent" of the population, and probably closer to 10 percent, has sufficient intelligence to earn a legitimate four-year college degree. Internet billionaire Peter Thiel, meanwhile, not only warns of a dangerous higher education "bubble" but is paying a bounty to a select group of talented young people who have agreed to drop out of college to pursue entrepreneurial ventures.

Yet there is strong evidence that America needs more people to earn college degrees, not fewer. The Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce has projected that if current trends continue, the nation will produce three million fewer college graduates by 2018 than the labor market will require. That's because the economy continues to reorganize itself in ways that favor people with the knowledge and skills that college degrees represent. As economists Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz have argued, America's economic dominance during the 20th century stemmed in significant part from educational investments that began in the 19th century. "The nation that invested the most in education," they wrote, "was the nation that had the highest level of per capita income."

Other nations have noticed. Data from the Orga-

nization for Economic Cooperation and Development show that highly industrialized competitor nations have increased college attainment faster than the United States in recent decades. A few nations, including South Korea, have even surpassed us in the proportion of the national population from ages 25 to 34 that holds a bachelor's degree. When associate's degrees are included, we fall to ninth place in college attainment. Meanwhile, America's population is becoming increasingly diverse, with the greatest growth occurring among Hispanic citizens who have below-average college attainment rates. Helping new generations of Americans graduate from college will be crucial to the nation's future prosperity.

There are opportunities to improve college preparation at all levels, beginning with early childhood education. But high schools have a special place in the process. For far too many students, high school is where college aspirations effectively come to an end.

This observation is not new. Sputnik-era reforms sought to improve high school mathematics and science education, and the landmark 1983 federal report *A Nation at Risk* focused primarily on the shocking lack of academic rigor in secondary education. More recently, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan singled out for reform the so-called dropout factories, a group of approximately 1,750 high schools that have graduation rates of 60 percent or less and produce a disproportionate share of the nation's dropouts. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, high school math and reading scores have been flat for decades.

One reason for this poor performance is that there has never been a serious effort to establish consistent high standards in America's secondary schools and to hold schools accountable for achieving them. The federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and its antecedents focused primarily on elementary and middle school, requiring only one round of tests in high school. Typically, students are given three subject-area tests (in reading, math, and science) in the 10th grade that require little more than eighth-grade skills to pass. From that point on, high schools in many states are subject to only minimal external accountability for

how much students learn. For many students, the consequences of this neglect come quickly. One-third of students attending four-year colleges and nearly two-thirds of those attending two-year colleges are required to take remedial courses.

In recent years, a group of governors and nonprofit organizations has been developing the Common Core State Standards, essentially a shared curriculum tied to college and career readiness, which all but a few of the states have pledged to adopt. The federal government has contributed hundreds of millions of dollars to developing high-quality assessments of student learning tied to the standards. If these efforts are implemented with fidelity, the great majority of American high school students will for the first time take well-designed tests that were specifically crafted to measure readiness for college and careers—whether those students plan to apply to college or not. High schools will still need talented teachers and other resources to help students meet the standards. But at least the schools will have a common foundation to build on.

Another reform proposal comes from Robert Schwartz and two colleagues at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. In *Pathways to Prosperity*, a report published earlier this year, they argue that many students are ill served by a unitary “college for all” strategy, and that America should look to the European system of high school and college vocational training as a model. They favor an expansion of “work-linked learning,” bringing employers and others into schools to help create new occupation-based education opportunities for some students.

However, the contention that high schools are too focused on the traditional route through college is something of a straw man. It may be the case that certain upper-income suburban enclaves are gripped by the “college for all” fever. But most students don't live in places like that. Indeed, the percentage of students who enroll in four-year colleges without adequate curricular preparation suggests that too few students are being prepared to earn a bachelor's degree. The European system, moreover, is nested in a larger environment of private-sector unionization and government-supported occupational training that is scarcely imaginable in the United States. At the same time, the risk is greater in more heteroge-



neous America that disproportionate numbers of low-income, minority, and immigrant students would be channeled into working-class tracks.

The *Pathways* authors are right to insist that our education system must do a better job of serving students who are unlikely to obtain a four-year college degree. Even if we meet the Obama-Gates college attainment goals, millions of people will be left without college credentials in an economy that pays good wages for little else. The key to helping those students—and all students—is to erase the arbitrary and damaging dividing line between high school and college.

The nature of public education changes profoundly at the point when young people reach the end of high school. Yet in intellectual terms, the freshman year of college is little more than grade 13. Starting around grade 10 and continuing through roughly the first two years of college, students make the transition from acquiring foundational skills to applying them in pursuit of broader knowledge in math, language, the humanities, and the physical and social sciences. The vast majority of students progressing through these grades take the same small group of courses: precalculus, biology, psychology, English composition and literature, American and world history, and so on.

The years between grades 10 and 14 are also the leakiest segment of the education pipeline, a time when students drop out of high school, fail to enroll in college, and drop out of college by the hundreds of thousands every year. Many colleges could also be characterized as “dropout factories.” Among students who enroll as first-time full-time freshmen in four-year universities, less than two-thirds graduate within six years. Among all new college students, the on-time graduation rate is less than 50 percent. In 2009, more than 350 four-year colleges and universities reported a six-year graduation rate of 30 percent or less.

A logical way to get more students through this education choke point is to eliminate some of its artificial barriers. We could begin by extending the public subsidy for education all the way through grade 14. In our system of public education, all students are fully subsidized to take courses such as precalculus at age 17, and must be taught by a licensed teacher. At age 19 or older, students wanting to learn exactly the same

thing get a partial subsidy from a wholly separate set of state and federal sources and receive instruction under a completely different regime of curricular standards and professional norms. This makes little sense. As initiatives such as the Common Core State Standards are implemented, it should become possible to require colleges and universities to grant credits for all the basic courses of grades 10 through 14, even if students happen to take some of them in high school. This will help students move more quickly through the system, and thus cut the expense of acquiring a degree. But more changes will be needed.

While American higher education is diverse in many ways, encompassing a variety of missions and constituencies, it is remarkably *undiverse* when it comes to awarding degrees. Every institution grants the same two- or four-year credentials that signify little more than how many hours the bearer sat in classrooms. Newer institutions such as Western Governors University (WGU) are turning that equation upside down, awarding degrees when students demonstrate defined competencies, regardless of how long it took to achieve them.

WGU is a fully accredited nonprofit institution founded in the 1990s by the governors of 19 western states that now enrolls 25,000 mostly adult students online. It currently focuses on occupation-specific fields such as education, business, and health care. But efforts are afoot to expand the model into more traditional academic fields.

The WGU experiment points to a future public education system in which public subsidies are tied to commonly understood goals for learning, not how old the student happens to be or where he or she happens to live. In increasingly digital learning environments, it will be possible to track, store, and summarize evidence of learning in ways that render traditional time-based credentials obsolete. The federal and state governments should help people learn what’s worth knowing, and when they learn it, government should make sure they have evidence of their knowledge and skills that can be used in their pursuit of employment and further education. A system rebuilt on such principles would look much different and better than what many students suffer through today. ■