Without much public discussion, the United States has been moving toward a policy of universal higher education. American high schools have quietly adopted a college-for-all approach, moving away from preparing students for work. James Rosenbaum, professor of sociology, education, and social policy and chair of the program in human development and social policy at Northwestern University, exposes common misperceptions about college and the labor market that underpin the college-for-all policy. He describes the barriers—often constructed inadvertently by colleges themselves—that many new college students face, and he suggests innovative procedures that help break down those barriers and provide supportive pathways through college for disadvantaged students.

College-for-All: Misperceptions about the New Rules of College and the Labor Market

College may be the right course of action for many students, but not for everyone. College degrees improve job outcomes—but only, of course, for students who can earn a degree. Students who do poorly in high school have very little chance of attaining any college degree. Indeed, their chances of earning just one college credit are less than 50-50.

In the worlds of education and labor, the playing fields have
changed drastically and, likewise, new “rules of the game” have arisen. Yet several misconceptions persist that reflect a lack of understanding of changes in colleges and the economy. Students and educators should know these rules, but they are not likely to because many high school effects are too long-term to be easily seen and understood.

The new rules can be summarized succinctly:

As a result of open admissions and the fivefold growth in community college enrollment over the last four decades, all students can attend college. However, low-achieving students need to be warned about their likely prospects: about 31 percent of all college entrants and, as referred to above, 52 percent of students with average high school grades of C or lower, earn no college credits whatsoever.

All students can plan to earn a college degree; but if they are unprepared, they should be made aware of the need to take remedial courses for which they will not earn college credits. One broad survey of community college students found that 47 percent of respondents taking remedial courses thought the courses gave credit toward a degree. The problem was worse for African Americans and Hispanics (over 50 percent). In light of today's realities, even if students have college plans they must still prepare for work. All career plans should include multiple options, particularly for students who have a poor likelihood of completing college.

Because high school students see low-achieving seniors attending college but don’t often see them drop out, many (40 percent according to one survey) believe that high school is not relevant to their future careers and, not surprisingly, are less motivated to work hard in high school. Students need to know that college plans do require increased school effort, or else their college degree completion will at best take more time or, more likely, be derailed.

Although high school grades and test scores have little relationship to short-term outcomes since anyone can enroll in a college, they strongly predict ultimate educational attainment and long-term outcomes, including long-term earnings—even after controlling for educational attainment. Further, high school records have an impact if students enter the labor market without college credits or a degree. And, contrary to popular belief, there are many good jobs available that do not require a college degree.

College-for-all advice is based on the premise that today’s labor market requires a college education. Although average earnings are higher for those with college degrees, it is easy to misread these numbers, as the averages conceal much variation: college degrees do not always have payoffs, and some high school graduates get good jobs. A college degree is not a requisite for many rewarding and fulfilling jobs. Researchers who delve deeply into the subject find that employers do not really require college-level skills from job candidates. While jobs require higher skills than in the past, research with employers has shown that the skills needed today can often be provided in high school. Jobs increasingly require strong high school level skills—math, reading, and writing at a ninth-grade level. Unfortunately, over 40 percent of high school seniors lack ninth-grade math skills, and 60 percent lack ninth-grade reading skills. Additionally, employers report that they need “soft skills” (good work habits and social skills) more than academic skills. Indeed, soft skills are strong predictors of job performance and future earnings, and high schools can provide these skills as well as colleges can.

Thus, it is important that students be told that they can improve their chances of getting good jobs by working hard in high school, where soft skills can be learned and where, for some students, vocational as well as academic courses will enhance their employment prospects. The college-for-all mentality is creating the false message that nothing can be done for those who do not attend college when, in fact, school staff can play a critical role in providing students with information and resources to help them make choices that will support their own long-term goals before it is too late.

Barriers Raised by Colleges

Community colleges have rightly been praised for democratizing higher education and making it accessible to all people regardless of economic or educational background. Research, however, shows that students face many significant barriers to college completion.
Briefly, bureaucratic hurdles—enrollment forms, class registration, financial aid applications, and so on—are abundant. Additionally, students face a confusing array of hard-to-understand choices because of the wide variety of programs community colleges offer, each having different requirements for their various degrees and certificates. To make matters worse, students must seek out assistance on their own—community colleges rarely assign students to counselors or advisors. And counselors are scarce in community colleges, where the ratio of students to counselors is typically 800 to 1. Given the paucity of counselors and the complexity of program offerings and requirements, students report that even if they do manage to see a counselor, they often receive conflicting or wrong information, and therefore enroll in either unnecessary (and sometimes unnecessarily or very difficult) courses. Mistakes are easy for students to make, but they are hard to detect, and they delay students’ progress, cost extra money, and threaten their persistence.

Finally, while community colleges boast a variety of class time offerings—including evenings and weekends—the result is often that needed courses are scheduled at vastly different times of day, schedules change each term, and some courses are not offered for several semesters. Thus it can be extremely difficult for students to coordinate their class schedules with outside work and family commitments, and every new term requires changing work and child-care arrangements.

Breaking Down the Barriers

Research shows that private, occupational community colleges—which offer accredited two-year degrees and focus on occupational preparation—offer some useful ideas about how to break down the barriers commonly faced by students. The procedures these colleges use directly address the barriers described. The results of their efforts are clear: national data show that just 11 percent of African American students who begin at public two-year colleges complete a degree within five years, whereas 57 percent do so in one of the private occupational colleges studied.

Occupational colleges minimize bureaucratic hurdles by assigning students a single individual who works through the entire enrollment process with them. Another staff member fills out financial aid forms with each student (and his or her parents if desired). Each student is required to meet regularly with a single advisor who assists in selecting courses and monitors academic progress through a student information system that quickly detects problems before they become serious.

The highly structured programs offered by occupational colleges make advising a relatively simple process. Students are organized into cohorts, which makes it easy to know what courses students have had and what they need. Courses that typically would be taken in a program are offered back to back, decreasing commuting time and making it easier to continue to work. The same course schedules are offered from one term to the next, so child care and work arrangements need not be continuously rearranged. Finally, every program offers the courses necessary for students to make progress every term.

Policy Implications

Several policy implications arise from the college-for-all environment that prevails in the United States today. First, society needs to give students clear information about the achievement prerequisites for college courses and for good jobs. Students must realize that high school grades are important for their future careers. Although any single grade is imperfect, when averaged over a high school career, grade point averages are the very best predictor of how students will do in college and in the labor market.

In turn, high schools can improve the information they convey to employers. Because students’ work habits and social skills are hard for employers to see, high schools can
create appropriate ratings that help employers identify students with these soft skills. One high school has developed a new “employability rating,” which informs employers about students’ work habits and social skills. Employers have found this rating helpful and have used it for hiring, and students have quickly realized the value in learning these skills. Such ratings, if accepted by employers, can provide strong incentives to students.

Research on community colleges suggests new procedures they might employ to reduce the difficulties experienced by disadvantaged students. It is useful to think about whether the findings have possible implications for four-year colleges. Can four-year colleges devise procedures that will provide adequate information and support to students whose parents can provide neither? Do current norms about unstructured exploration and course choice pose special difficulties for disadvantaged students, whose prior experiences do not always provide the requisite information to make informed choices? It is possible that a very structured curriculum for perhaps the first two years—as opposed to the free intellectual exploration that has in many respects evolved into a “shopping mall” model—may help level the playing field between students from elite preparatory schools and inner-city schools?

Conclusion

Universal higher education is a wonderfully idealistic policy. Yet, it is unrealistic and unnecessary in the United States today. It is unrealistic, so we pretend to offer open admissions into college, when in fact unprepared “college” students take high school courses in college buildings, without realizing they are not earning college credits. It is also unnecessary. The labor market requires only high school skills for many good jobs, but high schools give diplomas to many students who lack these skills. Employers inflate their requirements to college degrees because they cannot get any other signal that students possess high school skills. In other words, poor information is the reason students have unrealistic goals and employers require unnecessary college credentials.

Undoubtedly, American higher education has taken some bold steps and accomplished some revolutionary reforms in providing broad access to new groups of students. The revolution, however, is incomplete. Universal higher education poses many new challenges, and we will need innovative solutions to address them.

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