The Bridgespan Group

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Reclaiming the American Dream

Commentaries

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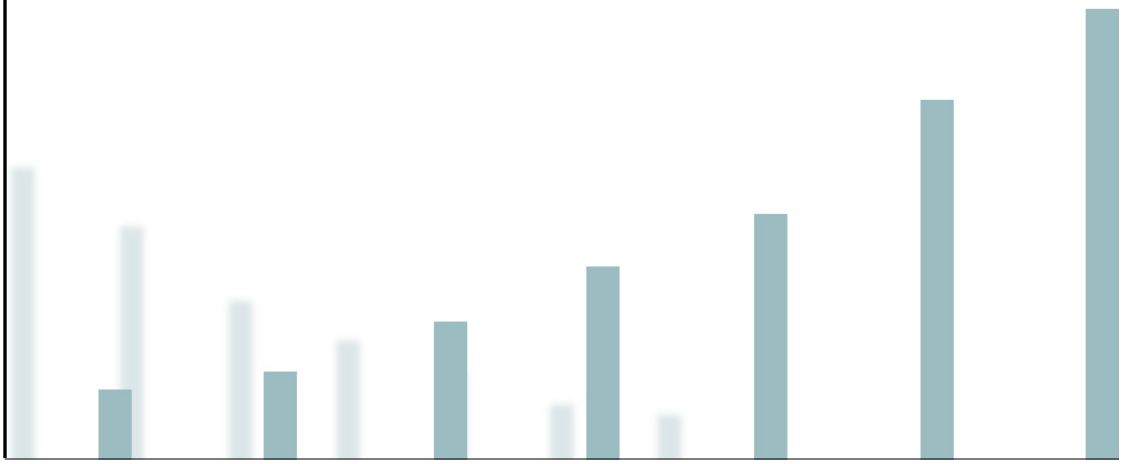

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Emphasize College—Not High School—Completion!

Chris Barbic
Founding Head of Schools
YES Preparatory Schools

Ensuring that ALL students, regardless of race or socioeconomic status, receive a first-class K–12 education is THE civil rights issue of our day. If we are to continue to be a nation of hope, where people can improve their quality of life through quality educational opportunities, we must ensure that those opportunities are not limited only to those with financial means. To that end, *Reclaiming the American Dream* is important for several reasons. First, it raises the "quality educational opportunity" bar higher than past reports highlighting the state of education in our country, by focusing on college, rather than high school, graduation. Second, it not only presents current, clear, and compelling data regarding the problem, but it also takes the discussion a step beyond past reports by providing specific recommendations that are backed with quality analysis. Lastly, the recommendations included in *Reclaiming the American Dream* are on point and align with reality. The support efforts mentioned in the report, and their degrees of success, mirror exactly our experiences over the last decade at YES College Preparatory Schools, where we have been working with low-income students in greater Houston to ensure 100% of them successfully graduate from four-year colleges and universities around the country.

The United States is ever increasingly becoming an "hourglass" economy, with the ticket to get out of the bottom of the hourglass and up to the top being a college degree. The steady stream of debates and discussions about quality education that focus on the high school dropout rate are irrelevant and outdated. Yes, a problem with the number of students leaving high school exists, but not enough attention is paid to the hundreds of thousands of students who do not drop out and who do successfully complete high school. It is my hope that *Reclaiming the American Dream* represents a new breed of educational reports that recalibrate the discussion and focus the outcome on college, not high school, completion rates for low-income students.

As a nation, we must center our national focus on these kids, because far too few of them are entering post-secondary education of any kind—let alone four-year colleges and universities. Failure to do so will result in an hourglass with a bottom far larger than its top. In this dangerous scenario of a vast underclass and a small minority of the population controlling the nation's power and wealth, the United States will look less like a world power and more like a third-world country. Low-income students completing high school represent the "low-hanging fruit" that with a strategic and focused effort can take the step to a four-year college or university, thereby charting a legitimate course towards a better quality of life.

In order for the public to be motivated to action, we must understand the seriousness and scope of a problem. For years, educational reports have effectively gathered statistics about the problems plaguing our schools, and these reports have presented the information in a clear and concise manner. Key decision-makers need more than this. We need a clear and practical action-agenda that will help leaders know which "levers" to pull in order to ensure more low-income students finishing a four-year college or university.

For the past decade, YES College Preparatory Schools has been preparing low-income students across greater Houston for success in four-year colleges and universities around the country. Our experiences bear out the most important point made in *Reclaiming the American Dream*: ensuring high school students take a rigorous academic course load. Students across the country need to be required to complete college-level work while still enrolled in high school. Whether it is Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), or dual-credit with a local university is less important than giving high school students access to this level of rigor. With strong academic preparation, our students at YES have been able to enter the collegiate environment with a level of confidence that has helped them overcome some of the social and cultural obstacles that go along with being a first-generation college-bound student.

In order for high school students to be in position to take a rigorous academic course load, they must arrive to high school working on grade level. The recent focus on high school reform is important, but without a similar emphasis on ensuring that middle schools are preparing students to enter high school on grade level, high school reform

efforts will fail. Large numbers of students across our nation are entering ninth grade two to three grade levels behind in math and English; expecting them to advance to the point that they are able to complete college course work in four-years is unrealistic.

The United States is a nation of “do-ers” who have time and again solved big problems with creative and ambitious solutions. College access for ALL students is the one of the most serious problems we face today. *Reclaiming the American Dream* not only offers great insight into how we begin tackling this problem but, more importantly, it lays out an action agenda to help decision-makers prioritize initiatives in a world of limited resources.

Reclaiming the American Dream–Starting Now

Dr. Michael L. Lomax
President and CEO
United Negro College Fund

The authors of *Reclaiming the American Dream* are to be congratulated for documenting, with more specificity than ever before, that we know what we need to do to enable low-income students to enter and graduate from college: consistently rigorous academic curricula, more financial aid, and more information about the availability of financial aid.

But while we are advocating for better high schools and more student aid, there are options that are available now, and that don't require changes in government policy. For example, student expectations about college, the importance of which the authors recognize, start at home and in the community. As early as elementary and middle school, long before students are thinking about careers, the adults in their lives need to treat college aspirations as a given, not an option, for whatever career the student may ultimately choose.

Also, as parents, community leaders and citizens, we all need to demand—and not settle for less than—the rigorous academic curriculum the authors correctly see as the foundation of college ambitions. And this curriculum needs to obtain for all students at all schools; there can be no general-education ghettoes where students receive an education that prepares them for neither college nor the 21st century workplace.

While we advocate for the next generation of high schools and students, we cannot overlook the low-income students already in the later years of high school, on the verge of going to college. They are the beneficiaries of the Gates Millennium Scholars (GMS) program, a 20-year, billion-dollar-plus program funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and managed by the United Negro College Fund (UNCF). The GMS program provides low-income minority college students with financial aid, leadership training, and networking and other kinds of support that promote college success.

The results have been remarkable. Independent research from the Institute for Higher Education Policy demonstrates that Gates Scholars are substantially more likely to

persist through the critical first two years of college and more likely to graduate, not only in comparison to other low-income minority students, but in comparison to the overall college population. The kind of support Gates Scholars receive is by no means a substitute for the challenges raised in the study we are discussing. But the GMS experience does suggest steps that, whether implemented in the near term through private philanthropy or more gradually with public support, are strong predictors of college success—even for low-income students whose high school experience may have included many of the shortcomings that the authors identify.

Finally, the high cost of college can also be attacked by controlling tuition increases without compromising educational quality. For example, tuition at UNCF's 39 private historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) averages less than half the average tuition at other private colleges. What kind of education do UNCF students get? Good enough that although just three percent of America's colleges are HBCUs and just 14 percent of the African Americans who attend college attend an HBCU, 50 percent of the African Americans who go on to graduate or professional school received their bachelor's degrees from an HBCU and, according to the National Science Foundation, nearly 30 percent of recent African American Ph.D.s received their undergraduate degrees from HBCUs.

I make this point not only to wave the HBCU flag just a little, but also to point out that although college tuitions are high, and have risen at a rate far higher than average family income, there are colleges, like those that belong to UNCF, that have made containing tuition a high priority and provide a strong and affordable option for low-income students.

Helping Students Succeed in a College-Ready Curriculum: The Texas Experience

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Barbara Scroggie Knaggs, Senior Director for Secondary School Initiatives
Robin Gelinas, Director of Policy Initiatives
Texas Education Agency

Reclaiming the American Dream, a study by the Bridgespan Group of low-income students and the support structures that had the most impact on their college enrollment and completion, emphasizes a recurring conclusion among reports on secondary school reform and college access: academic preparation is the key to ensuring that low-income students enroll and succeed in postsecondary education. The group's findings echo other reports that show that low-income students without sufficient academic preparation have little chance of enrolling in or graduating from college.

Leaders in Texas recognized the value of a rigorous academic core for all high school students as early as 2001. Texas was one of the first states in the nation to adopt a college-ready curriculum as the default curriculum for all students. Beginning in the 2004-05 school year, unless otherwise specified by their parents, ninth-grade students in Texas are enrolled in the Recommended High School Program, which includes four years of English, three years of math, three years of science, four years of social studies, and two years of a foreign language. Further, as a result of the recent passage of House Bill (HB) 1 in the third called session of the 79th Texas Legislature in May of 2006, the State Board of Education (SBOE) has been instructed to change the Recommended High School Program to include four years of math and four years of science.

The Bridgespan study recognizes that school districts will need to build support infrastructures that will enable all students to succeed in a college-ready curriculum. Accordingly, Texas' recent HB 1 legislation creates a new pool of funds linked to the higher graduation requirements and college readiness expectations for Texas high school students. Through this new allotment, each school district and charter school in Texas will receive $275 multiplied by the number of students in average daily attendance in grades 9 through 12 in the district. This infusion of funding by the Texas Legislature

will support the reinvention of Texas high schools around the central tenet that all students will have access to rigorous college preparatory coursework and educational options throughout their secondary and postsecondary careers.

Over the past three years, the state, led by Governor Perry and other elected leaders, has invested in a public-private partnership—the Texas High School Project—to boost graduation rates and to increase the number of high school students prepared for college and career success in the 21st century economy. To date, the state of Texas has dedicated $148 million in state and federal funding to the THSP. Private partners—including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation and Communities Foundation of Texas—have contributed another $112 million, making the THSP a $260 million joint venture. By redesigning existing high schools and creating and supporting new models with connections to postsecondary, the THSP seeks to create systemic and sustained high school excellence.

To make the high school-to-college transition more seamless for Texas students, the Texas Education Agency and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board are also working together to further define college-readiness and to establish vertical teams to align high school curriculum with the knowledge and expectations required for success in higher education. The findings of the vertical teams will be provided to the State Board of Education for consideration as they incorporate college readiness standards and expectations into the state's curriculum requirements.

Reclaiming the American Dream reminds us that participating in a college preparatory curriculum significantly increases the chances a student will enroll and succeed in college. Texas is taking steps to ensure that all high school students have the opportunity to take a college-preparatory curriculum and attend a high school with a college-going culture and high aspirations for all students.

Reclaiming the American Dream: A Latino Community Perspective

Sara Martinez Tucker, President and CEO
Hispanic Scholarship Fund

We are grateful for the opportunity to comment on the Bridgespan Group report, *Reclaiming the American Dream*. In examining the report's results and conclusions, we saw close alignment with a number of our own direct observations of the Latino community:

- College access and degree attainment are key factors for improving quality of life
- Academic rigor outweighs GPA and test scores in predicting college success
- Students' seeing college as the gateway to specific careers is a key motivator
- "Proxies," or surrogates, are crucial for low-income, first-generation college students

While the paper focuses on the supports that help all low-income students, we would like to provide some perspective on the issues and challenges, from our experience and Hispanic Scholarship Fund-commissioned research (MPR Associates, "A Gathering Force: A Survey of Two Cohorts of Hispanic Scholarship Fund Scholars," August 2006; Harder+Company study of 1976-1998 HSF scholars, 1998; RAND Education, "Goal: To Double the Rate of Hispanics Earning a Bachelor's Degree," 2001), that are specific to Latino students. For example, while peers play an important role in Latino student college aspiration, parents play an even greater role—a trend not as prevalent among, for example, African-American students. In the MPR study, both student cohorts rated parents first, and school personnel second, in terms of influencing their decision to apply to college. Likewise, the Harder+Company report identified "responsibility to parents and families" above "feeling different from other students," as key challenges to college matriculation.

Another example would be our impression of school administrators, teachers and counselors. HSF has conducted outreach events at hundreds of high schools across the

country. More often than not, we not only encounter cultures consistent with your description of “devoid of momentum,” but also attitudes about low-income, first-generation-to-college students that would exclude too many underserved children from the culture you describe as necessary for college aspiration and expectation. We consistently hear comments like “our job is to get them out of here able to balance a checkbook and ready to work in the jobs they’re suited for.”

We couldn’t agree more that, over the long haul, all school cultures must embrace your recommendations. Our big concern is the children that are lost to education while this transformation takes place. We know Latino students will account for two-thirds of the growth of the 15-19 year old cohort between 2000 and 2010. If we lose this generation of Hispanic students, the cost to this country for providing proxies for parental knowledge about college and family incomes that can afford a college education for their children becomes prohibitively high. Any implementation plan must include a transition strategy so that we don’t continue to lose underserved children at today’s rates.

Double the Number of Low-Income and Minority Students Graduating from College

Tom Vander Ark
Executive Director, Education
Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

While the cost of attendance picture is bleak (higher cost, less aid), there is actually moderately strong momentum on the college prep front. The number of students taking Advanced Placement courses has increased by about 10 percentage points per year for ten years. The percentage of incoming ninth graders that graduate college-ready has been increasing by 2.2 percentage points per year for a decade. However, those benefiting are most frequently “bubble kids,” those students in the academic middle for whom simply taking more rigorous courses is sufficient. This slow trend toward improved college preparation still leaves most low-income and minority students behind. As a result, in addition to the critical next steps noted in the paper, there are three strategies that will be needed to double the number of low-income and minority students that graduate from college:

1. **Improve high school preparation.** High schools can't raise the bar if most students arrive unprepared to participate in a rigorous curriculum. Elementary schools need to make more systematic efforts to help all students make the transition from learning-to-read to reading-to-learn. This requires using diagnostic data to drive primary instruction and instructional time. Middle grades should incorporate a content-rich, carefully sequenced curriculum that builds comprehension and problem-solving skills. Students struggling to meet standards should have access to a longer day and year.

2. **Increase high school options.** As young people mature, they gain a sense of their gifts, needs, and interests. To combat student boredom, promote creativity, and encourage persistence, cities should create a portfolio of options. In addition to district schools that share a common core curriculum, cities can leverage key assets and emerging industry clusters with thematic schools. High-quality alternatives can provide a highly personalized and supported route to

graduation. All students should have the opportunity to leave high school with college credit or an industry certificate.

3. **Increase college supports for low-income students.** Post-secondary education should identify and support low-income students that need more help to persist to degree completion. This will likely require a new level of accountability including performance transparency, completion incentives, and sanctions for unsupportive institutions.

Together with the reforms mentioned in this paper, we can double degree completion for low-income students. And that may be the most important single thing this country could do.

Reclaiming the American Dream: Commentary

Tony Wagner
Co-Director, Change Leadership Group
Harvard Graduate School of Education

This document brings together important research related to low-income students' college attendance and is a thoughtful analysis of critical success factors. However, its key recommendation that a "college prep" curriculum be implemented for all students requires a much more careful and critical analysis than the report offers.

There are several problems with "college prep" as a goal. First, in far too many schools, the conventional "college prep" curriculum not only does not prepare students for the rigors of college work, it is taught in ways that are all too often stultifying. We now know that the number one reason why students drop out of high school is boredom, not lack of skills. Subjecting more students to a conventional college prep curriculum, with its extreme emphasis on memorization, will likely have the unintended consequence of increasing the drop-out rate, without necessarily increasing students' readiness for college-level work.

Which leads us to a second problem with "college prep" courses in too many high schools. While they may satisfy admissions requirements for getting into college, they do not teach and assess the skills required to stay in and succeed in college. The report does not mention that half of all students who enter college never complete a degree. A recent Achieve study of college professors' views of the skills students lack (http://achieve.org/files/pollreport_0.pdf) reveals a great deal about the inadequacy of all too many "college prep" courses:

- 70% say students do not comprehend complex reading materials;
- 66% say students cannot think analytically;
- 65% say students lack appropriate work and study habits;
- 62% say students write poorly.

College preparation must be redefined in light of this study and the research by David Conley and others. In his “Standards for Success” project (http://www.s4s.org/cepr.s4s.php), Conley discovered that, with the exception of math, college courses do not require a specific body of subject content knowledge. Conley lists the following skills as essential for success in college: writing, reasoning, analytic thinking, and problem solving.

If we are to succeed with preparing more students for college success, then colleges—which are not mentioned in the action agenda of the report—must align entrance assessments with what we know are the essential skills required to stay in college and do well. States also need to create assessments for the skills outlined above, to replace multiple choice tests that do not assess thinking and communication skills. A model for the kind of test that could replace the SAT and state tests is the College Learning Assessment which is an online test of critical thinking, analytic reasoning, and written communication (http://www.cae.org/content/pro_collegiate.htm). Once better assessments are in place, it will become far easier to pressure high school teachers to develop new teaching methods, curriculum materials, and formative assessments that engage students’ minds and hearts.

The question is: can colleges and state legislators be persuaded to invest in assessments that will measure these essential skills? I continue to believe that a vital role the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation can play in this work is to sponsor research and development for more online assessments of thinking and writing skills and then make these more sophisticated assessments freely available.