Cakewalk to College

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Jackson Toby

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The most important contributors to the miserable performance of students in high school and, to, a lesser extent, in the lower grades are the country's colleges. What have the colleges got to do with it? Simple: They're too easy to get into.

Oh, yes, Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Swarthmore, Brown, Wesleyan, NYU and a handful of other colleges and universities have 10 or more applicants for every place in the freshman class. Students aiming at such institutions keep their eye on their prized goal -- admission to a selective college. They study hard in high school and compete desperately to produce an outstanding resume.

But they are a tiny segment of the 9 million students enrolled in four-year colleges and the 5 1/2 million in two-year colleges. For most high school students, getting into college is not a problem. For the bulk of American colleges a warm body is sufficient.

Consequently, American high schools contain many students who spend more time at malls than doing homework, which many of their teachers have given up trying to assign. Prof. Laurence Steinberg concluded after a monumental survey of more than 20,000 American high school students that about 40 percent were just going through the motions. Steinberg pointed out the consequences of being "disengaged" from the educational process:

"The amount of time American teenagers devote to more intellectual or academic pursuits is quite meager. On average, American adolescents spend less than 1 hour each week reading for pleasure, and one-fourth of high school students say they never read at all. Seventy percent of high school students devote less than 5 hours weekly to homework, while only 5 percent spend 20 hours or more each week on their studies outside of school."

At the same time, at least 40 percent work at part-time jobs and spend most or all of their earnings on personal expenses: clothes, recreation, cars. So a third of all college entering freshmen require remedial courses.
The late president of the American Federation of Teachers, Albert Shanker, put his finger on the culprit, the colleges. They do not provide strong incentives for students to do well in high school:

"If they know they have to work hard, listen in class and come to school every day with their homework done in order to get into college, they'll do that. If they know they can get by with less and still get into college, that is what they'll do."

Shanker rightly assumed that a majority of American youngsters want to attend college, partly because they have been told that they need higher education to get a good job later, partly because college is where young people go. (Two-thirds of American high school graduates enroll in college, although fewer than half actually graduate.)

Contrast the American system of higher education with the Japanese university system, where every university requires a rigorous entrance examination. As a result, Japanese youngsters expend tremendous effort in the primary and secondary schools in order to prepare for college entrance exams. They are convinced that their futures depend on admission to a good college; they know that this requires learning a lot in primary and secondary school, and they believe that, with effort, they can learn what is necessary. As a result, Japanese high school students do two and three times as much homework, on average, as American high school students and know a great deal more when they arrive at college.

This being so, what will help more than the billions to be spent on "fixing" the problems at the primary and secondary levels is reducing, not increasing, access to college. The trouble with Pell Grants and other forms of "financial aid" to high school graduates who want to attend college is that they promiscuously help everybody: good students as well as students who can barely read and write. Thus the existence of financial aid that does not depend on academic performance either in high school or college undermines a major incentive for studying. An honest political candidate might want to point out this truth some time, but sad to say he'd never get elected.

The writer is a sociology professor at Rutgers University.