Improving College Completion Rates and Cutting Times to Completion

Preparing Students for the Academic Rigors of Post-Secondary Education, and Exploring Alternative Options

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Video Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OpTM0YRRVws

Summary: While college can be an ideal opportunity for academic, social, and professional development, many students enter the post-secondary environment unprepared and without a good idea of what they want to do in life. Based on data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), there is both a decline in college completion rates and an increase in the time to graduate, making college a very expensive endeavor. Other good options exist - these include vocational/technical schools and apprenticeship programs for students who are not interested in an academic environment, doing volunteer work, joining the workforce, and taking a “13th year” or attending a community college for those who are not quite ready for the rigors that a 4 year college demands. To help students make the decision of whether or not to attend college and to make them aware of the challenges that higher education entails, we have designed a brochure that gives high school students many of the cold, hard facts of current college enrollment and completion rates and discuss some ideas for alternative options to college.

College - The “Default” for High School Graduates

Since the 1970s, college attendance rates among high school graduates have been steadily climbing – from 30% in 1972 to 50% in 2010, reaching an all-time high in 2008 (1). Driven by the motivation to attain a higher salary and better quality of life, many students choose to attend college in order to realize these goals. In other cases, parents elect to send their children to college, in the hopes that it will help them attain a better quality of life. It has very much become the ‘norm’ for students to attend college, and in many cases it is simply seen as ‘the next step’ after high school. Additionally, labor problems such as the 2008 economic recession have ignited many students to attend college in the hopes that a degree will help them to maintain job security and a consistently demanded skill set.

A recent Pew research study showed that rising enrollment rates can be tied to an ‘expanding base’ of students who graduate high school or attain the equivalent credentials of high school completion (i.e. GED diploma). More students are graduating high school and fewer students are dropping out of high school – 9.7% of students dropped out in 2008, compared to 18% in 1967. Interestingly, the proportion of individuals that go to college as a result of completing high school has not increased, indicating that the rise in college enrollment is due to an increase in the number of eligible students (2). This statistic supports the idea that college has remained the ‘default’ for millions of graduating high school students, who may not have an actual idea of
what they would like to do. However, it is important to explore other factors that may be influencing college enrollment in order to achieve an accurate assessment of college readiness and completion rates. Arguably the most important factor in influencing students to attend college is the economic one - the ability to make more money with a college degree.

**The College Premium**

The difference in earnings one can expect to attain if they go to college as opposed to just attending high school is known as the college premium. There are two prevailing explanations for its existence: the first, postulated by Schulz in the 1960s and further explored in the 1970s by Becker and Mincer, states that the college wage premium arises due to the increased productivity of college graduates, which is a result of the skills that college students attain during their education. The second, brought forth by Spence, states that the ability to complete college indicates a higher innate competency than a high school graduate (3). College graduates are more able to enter the growing “information economy” job market while those with only a high school diploma, being unprepared for the more technical positions, enter the manual labor market.

Today’s generation enjoys a larger college premium and greater benefit from attaining a bachelor’s degree than ever before. Despite current issues with unemployment and student debt, college graduates make on average $17,500 more than their high school graduate counterparts. Meanwhile, an individual with a two year degree/some college enjoys only a $2,000 increase in annual salary, indicating the importance of completing a 4 year degree for someone that sets the course towards post-secondary education. Additionally, individuals with a bachelor’s degree have a 3.8% unemployment rate, whereas high school graduates have an unemployment rate of 12.2%. Strikingly, these gaps in wages and unemployment have risen significantly since the 1960s, when the wage difference between a high school graduate and a college graduate was only around $7,500 (4). The declining value of a high school diploma indicates that it is necessary for students to attain additional training after graduating high school. As we have shown, college is an excellent option to help bolster a high school graduates chances of success, and more students than ever are going down this path. However, low college completion rates and abnormally long times to completion indicate that students need better preparation if they are to realize the benefits of a college education. Additionally, students should consider other avenues of attaining skills that can confer similar economic benefits to college.

**Low College Completion Rates**

While it is certainly good that more of high school graduates are entering college in an effort to educate themselves and be more marketable in today’s job market, many students enter college unprepared for its rigors. Recent studies have shown that growing enrollment rates have not resulted in a proportional increase in college completion. This is quantified by the ratio between BA/BS degreed students and those that have “some college” listed under their education status. This ratio has shown a decline from 1972 to 1992, and has continued to see some decline (5). The current statistics also paint a rather disappointing picture: 4 year graduation rates currently lie at 39%, and 6 year completion rates lie at around 59%. While this is an improvement from
1996 graduation rates of 33% and 55%, it is still a low rate that should be improved upon in order to prevent wasting time, money, and effort (6).

One of the variables that have been used to explain this incongruence is the changing proportion of academically adept students that are accepted and enroll in college. For example, one study by Bound et al. that used scores on math tests showed that from 1972 to 1988, the amount of students from the bottom quartile who attend college has more than doubled from 21.7% to 44% of students enrolling in undergraduate programs. Similarly, enrollment in the second quartile has increased from 37.7% to 66.5% (5). This is troubling, especially since math scores have been shown to be one of the prime indicators of college success. A review of college preparedness conducted at the National Postsecondary Educational Cooperative showed that academic success and intensity is the greatest indicator of college success. This study showed that high school grades are the greatest predictor of college success, as well as the coursework taken during high school. 9 out of 10 students that complete high school level math, science, and English go on to graduate high school, compared to 62% of students who do not take these courses (6). Clearly, and expectedly, academic success and preparation in high school sets up a student for success in college. Thus, the statistics in the Bound report, that indicate the increasing amount of lesser performing students entering college, is a logical explanation for current low college completion rates.

Current reports on college preparation, both academic and personal, are sobering. ACT scores from 2012 indicate that 60% of high school seniors do not have the skills necessary to succeed in college (7). Kuh et al. showed that despite the fact that 90% of high school seniors intend to go to college, 47% spend 3 or fewer hours a week studying. As the average amount of time spent studying per week in college is about 14 hours, this shows a significant gap in academic expectations between high school and college. The fact that two thirds of students who study 3 hours or less have mostly grades of A or B further brings home this discrepancy. Clearly there is a need for students to be exposed to college level work, so as to adequately prepare them for the post-secondary environment (6). Currently, 31 million Americans have completed ‘some college’ but do not have a degree (8). By better preparing students, we can reduce this amount.

**Increasing Average Completion Times**

In America, it has become the standard to judge 4-year college completion rates on a 6-year time frame. Similarly, 2-year college completion rates are rated on a 3 year time frame. A report done by Complete College America has shown each additional year of college costs students an extra $15,000 a year in public 4 year institutions, and an additional $9,000 a year for students in community colleges. When factoring in lost wages, this amount increases to $70,000 dollar per year for bachelor’s degree holders (9). As student debt reaches above one trillion dollars with no end in sight, it is more important than ever for students to be able to complete college in a timely manner, but there are several factors working against them. Some of these include: large amounts of remedial classes, unguided course plans, excessive degree requirements, and a large degree of responsibility. While some of these are unavoidable, it is evident that many can be alleviated through careful communication between colleges and students. Additionally, students should ensure that they are ready for college by taking all of the prerequisite courses before they enter college. 1.7 million students take remedial coursework during college, costing taxpayers 3
billion dollars and effectively making them pay twice for students’ education – once to learn it
in high school and again in college. Even worse, Complete College America reported that 4 out
of 10 students are taking some sort of remedial class, and only 1 out of 10 students who take a
remedial class graduate (9)! Clearly there is a need for better preparation at the high school
level.

In addition to being better prepared, students should have a focused idea of what they want to do
in college. This way, they do not waste time and money taking courses that do not contribute to
their graduation. Students’ lack of focus is reflected in the statistics: students take an average of
14 additional credits in college, about the equivalent of an entire semester. This costs students
about $7.7 billion in tuition, and costs the public $13.5 billion in education spending (9). Instead
of taking remedial courses in college, students should have exposure to multiple fields and
classes, either at the community college level or through experience gained in the real world.
This way, they will also have a better idea of what they want to do and will hopefully have a
more streamlined college experience.

**Lesser Prepared Students Entering College**

The increase in the amount of high school students going into college means that students from
lower scoring percentiles are entering college. This is in many ways a good thing – more
students are attending college, particularly those who may have not had the opportunity to do so
in past years. However, it is important to provide these students with enough support and to
ensure that they are ready for college before they ever enter academia, in order to prevent
unnecessary money on remedial classes and the retaking of failed classes that students are not
prepared for. Additionally, we have seen that more students from lower socioeconomic levels
are entering college. While this is excellent and demonstrates the potential for education to
improve social mobility, students from these strata have lower high school grades and worse
college preparedness than students of higher socioeconomic status (6). This means that efforts
should be focused on bolstering preparedness of these students.

**Improving Outcomes: “13th year” / “Postgraduate Year” / “Gap Year”**

A 13th, postgraduate or gap year functions somewhat like a prep school where students engage in
another year of secondary schooling getting them ready for what and where they aspire to
be/go. In Europe and Canada, students typically attend school for 13 years prior to going to
college. In the US, students attend an extra year of schooling to improve their grades so they can
get in to that Ivy League school or other school of their choice. The postgraduate year may also
serve as an "alternative school"; as a place for students with an IEP that might be viewed as
repeaters or those not successful in the traditional setting and need more time to get it all
together. Significant populations of 13th year students are athletes that may need to spend an
extra year improving their academic record and their SAT scores due to the tougher academic
regulations set forth by the National Collegiate Athletic Association that 4 year institutions with
athletic scholarship programs are required to follow. The private prep schools that enroll athletes
have full-fledged athletic programs so that the athletes can improve their skills, getting bigger
and stronger, enabling them to not lose a year of eligibility at the college level. This extra year
comes at a significant cost though, ranging from $5000-$12,000.
Students wishing to better prepare for college may opt to take preparatory (or remedial) courses at a local community college, enabling them to gain the knowledge that they should have learned in high school, but didn’t. Spending a year or so taking preparatory courses would enable students to hit the ground running at a 4 year institution. It is a smart financial move as community college credits/courses are usually far less expensive than public or private 4 year institutions. By getting these out of the way, students can successfully start their 4 year degree program upon entering college, essentially shortening their degree program and the costs associated with those extra years of education. Taking preparatory courses at a community college confers great benefits: students can still take college courses, but at a slower pace and with more focus on study skills as well as mastery of material. Thus, students gain college credit, college experience, and important study skills all at a fraction of the cost of actually attending college (14).

13th year, non-college programs have been implemented in community colleges. For example, a program offered by South Seattle Community College in Seattle, Washington caters to students from underrepresented and low-income families and provides them with funding opportunities for attending college. While these programs largely focus on giving students that would not be able to attend college the opportunity to do so, they also greatly increase college readiness. 40% of students enrolled in the program increased their college readiness on placement exams by an entire course level. Of students enrolled in the program, 70% said that the 13th year program prepared them for college, while only 30% said that high school did so. About 40% of regular students placed into college English, while 50% of 13th year students did, and over twice as many students in the 13th year program placed into college level math. Fall-winter retention rates were 20% higher, and 2nd year retention rates were 10% higher (10). Clearly, a transitional year has the potential to benefit many students who may need additional preparation for college. While this program is hosted by a community college, students enrolled in the program are not considered college students, and thus can take advantage of the greater freedom in choosing their coursework and pace of study, while preparing themselves for a real college environment.

Some high schools also have postgraduate programs that provide high school students with the skills necessary to succeed in college. In New Jersey, the NJSEEDS program is aimed at low income and underrepresented students, which is significant as these students have some of the lowest college retention rates. NJSEEDS aims to improve academic performance with 3 different programs that are geared towards improving academic performance at the elementary, middle school, and high school levels. The high school program is called the College Preparatory program and begins in 10th grade and continues until the summer after high school, with students meeting every Saturday to go over math, reading, and comprehension skills. The numbers show that this has turned out to be a very successful initiative: 2041 students have graduated from the 3 programs, and 95% were placed in selective schools with enough financial aid to allow them to matriculate. Nearly 114 million dollars in financial aid have been leveraged from middle and high schools, and persistence rates for graduates of the College Preparatory Program are at 97%, compared to 31% for students with a similar economic profile! 98% of students enrolled in college in the 2014-2015 year, with most enrolling in highly selective universities (11). Clearly, this is a preparatory program that works, but students must seize the opportunity early on as the college preparatory program starts in 10th grade.
Community College
For students that have already graduated high school but are unsure of or unprepared for a 4-year college, an option is to attend community college and attain an associate’s degree. This is a much better option than jumping straight into college because it allows students to take a wider range of courses and to still graduate with a degree. For example, students at Brookdale Community College in Monmouth, New Jersey can graduate with a degree in “Math and Science,” which offers a much broader selection of courses than a degree from the mathematics or sciences departments at a 4 year institution. Additionally, should students find that college is “not for them,” it is much easier to still complete a degree while receiving some benefit from their investment. Even if they choose to drop out, they do so at a much lower cost than if they had dropped out of a 4 year institution (12).

Vocational and Technical Schools
It is highly unlikely that all students that apply to and attend college have the desire to attain a post-secondary education. It is more likely that these students felt pressure from friends, family, and society to attend college. In many instances, these students would fare better learning a trade, one that would give them the opportunity to work with their hands, or outdoors instead of in an office. Plumbers, welders, electricians, carpenters, and other technical vocations are highly demanded skills that provide a very viable lifestyle, and one that may suit those that do not feel as comfortable in an academic environment. Economically, the decision to go to trade school is certainly reasonable. Although the difference in median income between individuals graduating from technical school and those graduating from college is about $11,000, one must consider that technical school takes two years, compared to four for college. When considering that the average duration of college is 6 years, and that vocational school graduates make on average $35,000 dollars a year, this means that a trade worker graduates $140,000 a year richer. Additionally, college costs an average of $127,000 a year, whereas vocational school only costs about $33,000 a year. Thus, the difference between a bachelor’s degree holder and a trade worker is not as significant, at least in the early stages of one’s career. Of course, bachelor’s degree holders have more opportunities for career advancement, but an ambitious electrician or plumber can start their own business and make significantly more money (13).

Other Alternatives
Many students feel pressure to go to school, graduate, and get a job as soon as they graduate from high school. While some students may have no other option due to financial or family obligations, if a student does not have any particular impetus to attend college, then they should not immediately go. Some organizations even offer to pay for students to travel in return for some type of service. Travel is one of the most important activities an individual can engage oneself in, and provides a type of education that cannot be found in the classroom. Students get to engage with individuals from all different walks of life and learn about all types of different lifestyles and occupations. Upon returning, one may find that they have found the path that they desire, and can attack college with focus and determination.

Another option for students is to enter the workforce directly. This can allow students to explore a field at the entry level to see learn something about the field to determine whether this is the
correct path for them. Many trades offer apprenticeship programs, where an individual can work under an experienced tradesman, gaining money, experience, and hours to put onto a resume. Most industries have a place for a high school graduate to work, just at the lowest levels. However, the exposure in that field can pay dividends if they choose to go to college, because they will be saving time and money once they set their course. Finally, volunteering is an excellent option to provide a service to the community, gain experience, and to possibly achieve a sense of direction. Whatever path a student chooses to take, they should know that college is not the only one, and success can be attained in many ways. Should a student then choose to go to college, they will have the drive and determination that many young people are lacking.

Community Action: Informing High School Graduates About Alternatives To College
Our focus was to inform students of the rigors of college and the level of preparedness one must have to attend college, as well as alternative options that they have in the years after high school, whether in trade school or in transitional programs. A brochure was designed to hand out to high school students in the New Brunswick area. The brochure contains information on local transitional programs and encourages students to explore trade schools and apprenticeship programs. Most of all, it conveys the message that college is not something that needs to be done directly after high school, and that students should take time to explore their interests and abilities before committing to the intense academic and social milieu of college. The brochures will be made available to students at local establishments that are frequented by high school students.
Be Prepared for College

Did you know...

...that in 2012, 60% of high school seniors were deemed “not ready” for college, based on academic test scores?

...that the average duration of college is 6 years?

...that only 39% of college students graduate in four years?

...and only 59% graduate in six?

...that an additional year of college costs a graduate an average of 70,000 dollars in lost wages and tuition?

...that the current student debt has reached 1 trillion dollars?

College is a seminal time for personal growth and the development of skills needed to successfully enter the workforce in this “information age.” However, with the rising costs of college and the stringent academic demands of the post-secondary environment, it is important to “know yourself” – know what you want to do, what you can currently accomplish in college, and whether college is the right choice for you.

Before you “take the plunge” into college, consider whether you have developed the skills necessary to succeed. Look at your test scores, aptitudes, and general attitude towards education. There are many options if you don’t believe you are ready. And if you don’t want to go to college, there are many other ways to gain highly demanded skills that can lead to success!

A 13TH YEAR?

Community colleges, such as Brookdale Community College, offer courses that can be taken for college credit. These courses can be taken during the senior year of high school, or after college. Many of them offer certification, and you can even attain an associates degree after two years.

Additionally, there are specialized programs known as “13th year” transitional programs, where, after graduating high school students can learn the skills and habits needed for success in college. South Seattle College in Washington hosts such a program and it has shown much success in preparing students for college. See if such programs exist in your area!

ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

What if you have decided that you do not intend to go to college at this point in your life? If you are feeling pressure from family and friends to attend college but do not see any personal benefit, consider these other options:

Trade School

Vocational and trade schools offer students the opportunity to learn skills that are in high and consistent demand. Have a knack for working with your hands? See yourself in the workshop or outdoors instead of in the classroom or office? There are many possible occupations that can pay as well as (or even better than) a job attained after graduating college.

Only 2 out of 10 of the fastest growing occupations require a bachelor’s degree. Electricians, masons, welders, and plumbers all play an absolutely essential role in modern society that can never be outsourced or automated. Thus, you should seriously consider whether vocational school is right for you.

Sources and Suggestions for Further Reading

References

Letter to the Editor

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Dear Online Editor of Education Week:

Please consider my post for publishing in the online edition of Education Week. Feel free to contact me at my email with any questions.

The transition from high school to college represents a major milestone in the lives of many young people. However, this transition also entails a significant increase in the amount of responsibility, discipline, and motivation expected of students in their new academic environment. While students who enter college with a set goal that they are passionate about often display these traits (or learn them very quickly), many students who are directionless yet feel as if they have no other choice but to enter college do so and end up unhappy, performing poorly academically, and deep in debt. With college retention rates at an all-time low and student debt continuing its uncontrollable climb, it is important that students realize that there are many alternatives to college, as well as preparatory programs that allow for an easier transition into the post-secondary world. In order to spread the word about such programs, I am collaborating with Dr. Julie Fagan at Rutgers University.

I plan to take action regarding this issue by designing a brochure to hand out to students in the New Brunswick area. If this is successful, then I will continue to hand out brochures to other schools in surrounding districts. From personal experience, I can say that neither myself nor many of my peers were aware of the demands and expectations that were to be placed upon us in college when we were still attending high school. It is important to educate students on the issue early, as most students begin applying to colleges halfway through their high school careers. I believe that this will help to save time, money, and grief for both students and taxpayers. I thank you for your time, and feel free to contact me with any questions.

Regards,

Pavel Vaysberg