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Students are increasingly less prepared for college

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Regional

Students are increasingly less prepared for college

Those of us who have been teaching in higher education for some time have developed a suspicion that high school graduates are increasingly less prepared for college. Now two reports that were published within a few days of each other are confirming that suspicion.

The first of these reports, titled “The Condition of College & Career Readiness 2015,” is the ACT annual report on the progress of U.S. high school graduates relative to college readiness. ACT stands for American College Testing, a college readiness assessment based on a standardized test for high school achievement and college admissions first implemented in 1959.

Based on nearly two million students who took the ACTs for the 2015 graduating class (about 59 percent of the 2015 national graduating class), the results show that 31 percent of the ACT-tested graduating class are not meeting any of the college readiness benchmarks considered minimum to expect success in college. That is, nearly one-third of high school graduates are not ready for college. Given that 87 percent of the 2015 ACT-tested graduates aspired to postsecondary education and that 69 percent of that graduating class actually enrolled in an institution of postsecondary education, that means that a large proportion of students are, simply put, going to fail in college. No wonder retention of students has become an increasing problem for colleges and universities.

The other report, based on the scores from the SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test), gives us an even bleaker

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. Letters from Academia

picture. This report was generated by the College Board, a private, nonprofit organization created in 1900 that has been administrating the SATs since 1926. It shows that the majority of students taking the test are not ready for college-level work or career-training programs. According to the report, the performance on the SAT for the class of 2015 is in decline, with average scores for reading, math and writing at their lowest levels in nearly a decade.

Only about 42 percent of test-takers, around 712,000 students, met a benchmark that indicates they're likely ready for college-level work or career-training programs. The benchmark is based on a combined score of 1550 or higher for math, reading and writing. Furthermore, the statistics indicate a great ethnic divide. While 61 percent of Asian and 53 of white test-takers reached the benchmarks, only 33 percent of Native Americans, 23 percent of Hispanics and 16 percent of African-Americans met those benchmarks. This shows that more than 60 years after the landmark decision by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka* – that was supposed to guarantee the same educational opportunities to all, regardless the race – students of different ethnicities still receive different levels of quality in their educations.

Scores are down in all categories. The average score for reading comprehension was 495, down from 497 in 2014. Math scores averaged 511, down from 513. Average writing scores are 484, down from 487. The top score possible in each category is 800. These scores have been in decline since 2006, when the means were 503 in reading, 518 in math and 497 in writing.

These data are consistent with international comparisons where the U.S. high school students show below average performances in science and mathematics. Even high school students from Slovakia perform better than their American counterparts.

This is really bad. It shows that the high school system in the country continues to fail despite numerous reforms including “No Child Left Behind,” which started in 2002. They have been unsuccessful in achieving their goal of improving the education of our kids. But that is only part of the problem.

Other problems are cultural in nature and parents are part of those problems. For example, we see an increasing presence of “helicopter parents” on college campuses today. They advocate for their students, but too often it comes down to fighting their battles for them. This behavior generates not only a sense of dependency among people who are already adults, but also creates the idea that if the student fails the reason must lie somewhere other than with the student.

We also see an increasing attitude among students that all that counts are grades, rather than actually

learning. Therefore, it becomes for them all about preparing for the exams. And whatever shortcuts they can take, the better. The problem is that there are not shortcuts in getting a good education. It requires hard work and discipline.

Another cultural problem is the belief that everybody is wonderful and there should be praise for all, no matter how mediocre performances are. Many students who come to college get shocked when getting a “B” (which is a good grade) because all what they got in high school were “A’s.” Unfortunately, many teachers (at all levels) have opted the easy way of given everybody “A’s.” This practice generates grade inflation, a phenomenon from which not even elite colleges and universities escape.

If you add to this other factors such as the lack of skills in the areas of time management, communication and team-work, then we understand why future generations are failing.

It is not enough to proclaim our concern about these facts, or to expect that the federal government is going to come up with another education reform that miraculously will solve this problem. It is up to all of us to infuse a sense of responsibility, moral rectitude and commitment in society. If we don't we will lose the battle for the future.

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