

Published: June 12, 2007

Prepared for What?

Matching Our Rhetoric to Reality

By James E. Rosenbaum

Despite all the rhetoric, “prepared for college” says much less than it seems, since many colleges don’t require anything besides a high school diploma for admission, and many students attend only briefly and drop out with few or no college credits. “Prepared to pass placement tests” is more meaningful, and we need to do more to make that standard clear and visible in high school, preferably in time for students to devote more effort to meeting the standard. Aligning high school tests with college-placement tests would be a valuable reform.

But while it would be desirable to have all students meet the standards for college-placement tests, it’s not clear that the labor market demands that. The top 40 percent of jobs may require greater academic skills than schools are currently producing, especially in math and science. The standards movement has gotten that part right. Many other jobs require some academic skills, and that is truer now than it was 30 years ago, when many well-paid jobs required no academic skills.

Research by the economists Richard J. Murnane and Frank Levy, however, suggests that while academic skills are required for many jobs, such jobs require communication, problem-solving, and 9th grade academic skills, not college skills. I found the same thing in interviews conducted with employers as part of a study of workforce readiness in Illinois. Many students don’t get these skills now, but that requires better high school instruction, not necessarily college.

Indeed, while the United States is trying to devise policy so that all students can handle highly skilled jobs, our society has many jobs that do not require such skills, and many students will not end up in highly skilled occupations whatever we might wish. Data from the [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) and research by Paul E. Barton at the [Educational Testing Service](#) suggest that over 60 percent of jobs don’t require any college degree at all, and many baccalaureate-degree holders report having jobs that don’t require college. Aiming to prepare 100 percent of students for the 40 percent of society’s jobs that require college skills makes good politics, but bad economics, and it will create a lot of disappointment.

But the bigger problem is that nearly all jobs require communication skills and basic work habits, such as regular attendance, motivation, and discipline. Employers I’ve

interviewed said they were able to redesign jobs around high school graduates' academic-skills deficiencies, but not around deficiencies in these "soft skills." Unfortunately, schools are not taking steps to improve students in these areas. In fact, the opposite may be occurring. If teachers are compelled to focus more on academic skills and test scores, do they devote less attention to soft skills and efforts to improve them? I'm seeing some evidence that teachers are spending more time on "drill and kill" exercises to boost test scores and less time on group activities that may foster soft skills.

There's also the potential that heightened academic standards will make low-achieving students even more discouraged than they are now, contributing to poor motivation, poor school attendance, and a sense that their efforts in school are hopeless. Such students could be needlessly facing frustration and failure over skills that they believe will never be useful to them again. Only 29 percent of 8th graders reach the National Assessment of Educational Progress' proficient level, and many enter high school several grades behind. We can't pretend that high standards have served these young people. I worry that the more we focus on skill standards that are distant and unrealistic for the bottom 40 percent of students, who have failed at these standards for many years, the more we lead them to behaviors that undermine their readiness for *any* jobs in American society.

Aiming to prepare 100 percent of students for the 40 percent of society's jobs that require college skills makes good politics, but bad economics, and it will create a lot of disappointment.

At the margin, some students will benefit from higher standards. However, for the students far below the margin, we need to examine what can be done to prevent them from being hurt. Many high school seniors have less than 9th grade skills, they aren't attending school, they aren't doing the homework, and they aren't staying awake in class. Exactly how the "higher standards for all" movement relates to these students and their needs is unclear. Simply offering them "college for all" dreams and delusions—especially given their 80 percent likelihood of dropping out of college with few or no credits—may be the wrong way to go. They may need something that differs from raised standards and traditional approaches to instruction.

Our political reluctance to prepare students for anything besides the top 40 percent of jobs may leave many students unprepared for *any* jobs. Traditionally, the nation has offered such people job-training programs, which rarely improve employment outcomes and might even confer a stigma.

Enhanced career and technical education offers one option. Economist John H. Bishop at Cornell University has suggested that, as a safety measure, students take a string of four sequentially arranged career courses as electives during their high school years. That approach provides students with alternative career options in case college doesn't work out, it provides good earnings payoffs, and it can also lead to college. A handful of career-oriented courses is not a large burden and can lead to valued jobs (for instance, in skilled trades) that don't require college degrees. Such an approach could be combined

with other standards-based education reforms and with the option of pursuing occupational coursework in community colleges.

Another key reform that could help many students in the labor market is to focus more on their acquisition of soft skills. Teachers' ratings of soft skills strongly predict work performance. Currently, employers don't use teachers' ratings because they mistrust teachers' judgments. However, by ignoring such ratings, employers deprive themselves of signals about students' work habits and social skills, deprive teachers of authority in the classroom, and deprive students of incentives for working hard in school. In other words, everybody loses.

Job-placement activities at schools and colleges, as well as individual faculty-employer contacts, are other promising ways to assist students. These contacts provide dependable signals to employers about students' capabilities, and dependable incentives to students for working hard in school and college. These effects are powerful. They motivate students who have never done well in school before, as studies by my colleagues and I of successful high schools and two-year colleges indicate (James E. Rosenbaum, Regina Deil-Amen, and Ann E. Person, [*After Admission: From College Access to College Success*](#), Russell Sage Foundation Press, 2006).

High schools have the responsibility to serve all students and prepare them to fit into productive roles in the larger society. Politicians like to make grand promises of getting all children to be doctors and lawyers. But education policy should focus on meeting the needs of the entire society and all students. Otherwise, we will offer only dreams and delusions to roughly half our young people, who will not only fail to earn a college degree, but also will lack the basic work habits needed to have any productive, respectable job in society.

James E. Rosenbaum is a professor of sociology, education, and social policy and a faculty fellow at the Institute for Policy Research at Northwestern University, in Evanston, Ill.