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Are High School Students Really Prepared for College?

By Heidi Wickli

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In the United States today, high school student's aspirations for college are higher than ever before. Most students choose to further their education at a college or university to ensure success in their future. This life changing decision gives first year students the opportunity to create new friendships and grow academically. However, despite these positive aspects, most graduates enter college without the proper knowledge, skills and fundamentals needed to succeed. This is often due to the lack of preparation that many high school's fail to present their students with. Throughout their high school career, individuals are exposed to a comfortable, slow-paced environment, where they experience situations that are fundamentally different from those at the college level. These experiences, along with the lack of independence, confidence and expertise that is necessary for higher education, ultimately leave students unprepared for what lies ahead.

One of the main contributors to why students struggle within their first year of college is because they find their college courses to be structurally different from their high school courses. Some scholars have indicated that, "College courses move at a faster pace, often requiring students to read eight or nine books in the same amount of time it took them to read one in high school" (Conley 24). College courses are designed to cover the same material as some advanced high school classes but within a shorter period of time. To put this into perspective, one semester of college is the same as one academic year of high school. According to Southern Methodist University, "A college academic year is divided into two separate 15-week semesters, plus a week after each semester for exams" (Southern Methodist University). On the other hand, "The high school year is 36 weeks long; some classes extend over both semesters and some don't" (Southern Methodist University). High school classes have the opportunity to break down difficult ideas and topics because they extend over a thirty-six-week time period, instead of a fifteen-week semester. However, in order to get through the material that needs to be covered, college professors are forced to move at a faster pace than high school teachers. This abrupt change not only places stress on students, but also leads to the misunderstanding of key concepts and information required to succeed in the classroom.

Students often have a hard time with the transition to college because their high school experiences are significantly different than their college expectations. According to the National Survey of Student Engagement, "College courses require students to be independent, self-reliant learners who recognize when they are having problems and know how to seek help from professors, fellow students and other sources" (Conley 24). Unlike college, high school students are often provided with the materials they need in order to succeed in the classroom. This allows them to become comfortable with the environment around them because they are familiar with the structure of their classes and are able to rely on others for help. College professors, on the other hand, expect students to be able to identify where their problem lies when they do not understand information and seek help from other resources on their own. This expectation forces individuals to step outside their comfort zone and develop some sort of independence necessary for success. Students enter college with a limited amount of resources, therefore obtaining self-reliance and creating new friendships is key. The lack of exposure to unfamiliar environments is

one reason, among many others, that contributes to the troubles many students face within their first year.

Many high school classes also falter in appropriately preparing their students for the future because they lack attention to several key areas which are critical for academic success. It has been said that, “While high school English standards and courses tend to emphasize literature, most of the reading material students will cover in college or on the job is informational, such as textbooks, manuals, articles, briefs, and essays” (Olson 8). This proves that the type of material covered in a high school English class, along with others, does not directly correlate to the material that students will be exposed to in college. College courses assign projects that require students to elaborate, analyze, and think critically about what they are being taught while also applying it to the environment around them. Unfortunately, this is not an area in which first year students have had much practice with. Overall, it is not the students that are at fault for their inability to successfully execute these projects, but rather the standards that high schools have set in place.

In today’s society, countless high schools place their own standards and credentials over the ones that provide students with the most collegiate success. High school administrators are more concerned about the number of credits a student obtains rather than the credits that would be most beneficial to the individual in the long run. For example, many counselors only provide students with information about basic core classes instead of making suggestions about courses that would help them with their future careers and goals. Not only does this fail to provide students with the correct guidance, but also leaves them unaware of their full potential when moving forward with their education.

This perspective displays education as a four-year program that is completed when the student walks across the stage to receive their diploma. However, most individuals view their high school graduation as rather the beginning of their future education. Sonja Santelises, a Vice-President of K-12 policy and practice at the Education Trust, says, “Too many high schools are prioritizing credit accrual for graduation over knowledge and skill development. This approach treats graduation as the end goal rather than the starting point for future success, whatever path students choose” (Santelises 61-62). Without the proper guidelines, students are oblivious to the differences between the courses that would be more valuable to them and the credits that are just necessary to get a diploma. This misfortune ultimately deprives individuals of the knowledge and skills needed for their prospective college career.

Not only are high schools depriving students of the expertise and proficiency needed for their specific career choice, but they also fail to provide students with some basic fundamentals. Michael Kirst has said, “More than one quarter of graduates surveyed wish that their high school had done a better job of preparing them for success in key areas: study habits, communication, and math. More students feel unprepared in these areas in 2014 than in 2004” (Kirst). Throughout high school, students are never taught how to properly study material or how to appropriately communicate with others when they need help. Most individuals believe studying simply means memorizing the information required to pass the exam, rather than taking the time to learn the material and apply it in future courses. This approach prevents students from asking questions about confusing topics and ultimately deprives them of the confidence they need to succeed in a college environment.

Although many individuals support the idea behind the lack of preparation presented by high school education, it is important to acknowledge the perspectives that disagree. Some argue that many high schools do in fact prepare students for post-secondary education by offering various Advance Placement (AP) courses and programs such as Career and Technical Education (CTE). CTE include organizations, implemented in school districts, which specialize in preparing individuals with the technical fundamentals, knowledge and training necessary for future success. These types of programs not only allow students to get a head start on their college career, but also provide them with the skills needed to grow academically. For example, “High-quality CTE programs and pathways ensure that coursework is simultaneously aligned to rigorous academic standards and postsecondary expectations and informed by and built to address the skills needed in specific career pathways” (American Institutes for Research 2). These educational programs look very encouraging to many high school students and their families because of the promising potential they seem to provide.

Although this may hold true for some individuals, research shows that not every student enrolled in college credit classes or additional academic pathways have successful outcomes. According to Sonja Santelises, “Only 8% of high school graduates complete a full college- and career-prep course of study” (Santelises 61). This statistic shows that while these outside academic sources may sound encouraging, they are not always going to be effective. In order for these programs to work, students have to be willing to adapt to new environments and show signs of significant academic strength. These qualities may be difficult to see in some students because of the little of foundation high school provided them with.

Countless people would agree that high school exposes students to many different components, which contribute to the lack of knowledge and preparation they obtain before continuing their education. Individuals graduate high school familiar with a certain set of coursework standards, only to discover a whole new set of standards a couple months later. This abrupt change, along with the absence of certain skills and inability to be self-reliant ultimately add to the difficulty students face when transitioning into college. Although there are programs that exist to help ease students into the structure of post-secondary education, research shows that not many of them prove to be effective. Overall, the problem does not lie in the hands of the students, but rather the school systems that these individuals attend.

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