

What Skills and Whose Standards: Why Are Students Underprepared?

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Abstract

It is quite apparent that “underprepared” describes a diverse group of students that varies with ability, educational background, income, and life experience. At the post-secondary level, there are several common questions that are pertinent to personnel who work with this group. First, what are the specific characteristics that distinguish underprepared students from other first semester students? Second, is underpreparedness a reflection of lack of ability, lowered high school standards, or other factors? Last, what measures can be taken to address the problems faced by these students in the classroom, and to minimize the impact on their learning and college success? At the post-secondary level, the initial source of the “underprepared” problem cannot be corrected, but rather the product, the skill level of students, can and is being addressed. In addition to examining the causes of underpreparedness, this paper will also look at what is believed to be a significant change in academic standards that contributes to the problem.

Problem Definition

With the practice of open enrollment policies beginning at many post-secondary institutions in the 1960's, colleges assumed a greater role in serving the needs of underprepared students. Dotzler (2003) noted that although the 1960's saw the beginning of widespread experimentation and study in developmental education and pedagogy, classroom practices have not changed significantly since then, except for the use of technology. He further notes that college curriculum typically is based on the premise that students have completed college prep courses while in high school, yet many students arrive on campus underprepared to succeed in the college environment. This position is supported by Weiner (2002) who noted that many students complete high school and arrive confidently on a college campus, only to find that they are academically underprepared for course work in the first semester. There are a number of reasons for this widespread trend that has been observed in most post-secondary institutions. But what do we do with confident students who are not prepared for the rigors of college? Levine (2005) noted that “our colleges open their doors to

kids who have grown up in an era that infiltrates them with unfettered pleasure and heaps of questionably justified positive feedback. Higher education has to avoid hitching itself to that pleasure-packed bandwagon". ("College Graduates Aren't Ready for the Real World", p. B12).

Rather than attempting to identify all of the variables that could result in a student being underprepared for college, some parameters will be established here, limiting the number of factors that will be discussed in this paper. First, the issue of cognitive ability will not be addressed here except to establish that current students are at least as bright as they were in the past. This assertion is based on SAT and placement test scores as well as the often exemplary performance of some students in traditionally challenging first semester courses. In short, although there are indeed underprepared students who are admitted each year, there is still a majority of students with strong intellect and high level college skills. A related, but somewhat different, issue is whether there is a percentage of students being admitted who simply do not possess the same degree of academic competence as students in the past and are not strong candidates for college. This could be the case, and some campuses might not be as select in their admission criteria as in the past, but the issue of "admissions standards" is not to be included in this discussion. The point being made is that although underprepared students are found on most campuses, as a group, they have the ability to pursue higher education if their academic skill level is raised to that which is needed to be successful at the college level.

For the purpose of this paper, "underprepared" students refers to any student whose academic skills fall below those determined to be necessary for college success and/or any student whose "college readiness skills" do not adequately prepare them for the rigors of college study and learning. "Academic skills," as used above, refer specifically to reading, writing, and math. "College readiness skills" include the use of strategies that lead to effective study, problem solving, and thinking critically, in order to progress satisfactorily through college level course work.

National Data Reflecting Student Achievement

In the mid 1990's it was established that approximately 75% - 80% of institutions of higher education offered at least one remedial or developmental reading, writing, or math course. During that time,

nearly all public two year institutions and community colleges offered remedial courses in these three areas. From the mid 1990's until the present, nearly 30% of first time freshmen have enrolled in one or more remedial course in at least one of these three subject areas. This trend is reflected nationwide. In 2001, "more than one third of Ohio college freshmen enrolled in remedial courses, a sign that the state's high school educational standards were below par" (Shane, 2001). Rather than arguing the merits of remedial courses for underprepared students, it is the position of this writer that they are necessary in order to narrow or close the gap between the skills demonstrated by underprepared students and those needed for college work.

However, not everyone agrees that the responsibility for developmental courses should be that of four year institutions. Kozeracki (2002) noted that although high schools are criticized for failing to prepare students for post-secondary education, four year colleges and universities are exploring policies that would shift the responsibility of developmental education almost exclusively to the community colleges. In support of the effectiveness of developmental courses, recent data indicates that they are indeed significant in preparing students for college work. According to McCabe (2000), 88% of remedial students pass college level English courses and 82% pass math classes following successful completion of a remedial course. This pattern suggests that although students might be underprepared for first semester college work, they have the ability to be successful once they have mastered the necessary prerequisites. A logical question to ask is why bright students are not prepared for college, having successfully completed high school. McCabe (2000) noted that a gap does exist between the academic competence required for high school graduation and the competence required at the college level. This raises the question of whether states should be required to administer exit exams prior to awarding diplomas to students who have completed all other requirements for graduation. But that practice creates other potential problems.

For example, in Massachusetts in 2002, 4800 seniors were denied diplomas for failing mandatory high school exit exams. In California, state school officials retreated from a plan that would have denied diplomas to tens of thousands of students likely to fail the state exams, which will not be enforced until 2006. In Florida in 2003, Governor Jeb Bush was hounded by protesters insisting that diplomas be provided to 14,000 seniors who failed the state exit exams there ("States Make Diplomas Count By Sticking With Senior Tests," 2003). Not surprisingly, many students who have not passed the exams, and

their parents, have complained that the exit exams are too stringent, not a fair measure of student ability, and should be eliminated. But complaints from students or parents about the soundness of the exams should not discourage their use, and requiring performance standards prior to graduation is gaining support. For example, doubts over the soundness of exit exams were dispelled by New York almost ten years ago ("States Make Diplomas Count By Sticking With Senior Tests," 2003). In 1996, critics predicted disaster when the state announced that all students would be required to meet the high standards for Regents diplomas, which had been earned mostly by college-bound students. But in the class of 2002, the first required to pass the four Regents exams, 93% of seniors graduated ("States Make Diplomas Count By Sticking With Senior Tests," 2003).

Early this year, Governor Mark Warner of Virginia, chairman of the National Governor's Association, looked at exist exams in 13 states and said that nine of those "that talked tough in 2003 had retreated and pulled back from their consequences" (Winter, 2005, p. A13). Without proven performance based on exit exams, perhaps there is indeed a credibility gap that suggests that although recent high school graduates are prepared for college level work, in reality, they are less prepared than in the past. The issue of standards and accountability then become significant, raising the question of whether high schools have lowered their standards or whether colleges have increased theirs, creating a gap in skills. If it is assumed by high school graduates that they possess the skills to satisfactorily complete college level courses, then why are college personnel expressing concern that too many students are not adequately prepared for first semester class work?

The Credibility Gap

Given that there is an apparent credibility gap between skills need to graduate from high school and those needed for college, there is more than one way to explain this situation. It could be that high school grades are inflated; that is, obtaining an "A" in a course does not require the rigor or knowledge that was required in the past. Perhaps an "average" grade in high school is now considered to be a "B," whereas years ago an average grade was considered to be in the "C" range. In addition, many first semester students do not recognize that their academic peer group in college is typically more academically competent than their peer group in high school. Given this reality, then high school graduates have an unrealistic expectation for what skills are needed and what performance is expected in order to receive

a comparable grade in college. And, they could also be continuing to expect a "B" grade for "average" performance, not realizing that "average" college work, unlike high school, often results in a grade of "C." One might expect that high school teachers would have an accurate understanding of the skills needed for college work as well as college grading standards, but nearly a third of them acknowledge that high school grades are not an accurate measure of learning. In a 2002 survey by Public Agenda, a public policy polling group, it was noted that 63% of high school teachers believe grades reflect a student's ability, whereas only 23% of college professors agreed ("States Make Diplomas Count By Sticking With Senior Tests," 2003).

Concern that grades in high school are not an accurate reflection of learning and a reliable predictor of ability is further supported in the results of a 1997 survey of teachers by a Georgia State University researcher, indicating that 86% of teachers said students' "efforts" were a part of their high school grades. If student effort, extra credit, graded homework, special projects, bonus points, etc. become a significant portion of a student's class grade, then actual learning and skill level can be questioned. If high school grade point averages are not reflective of ability, then it cannot be assumed that a high school diploma guarantees that a graduate has successfully mastered key information at the level expected by colleges. Unfortunately, the gap in skills extends beyond the transition from high school to college and is also reflected in the labor force. In a 2001 Public Agenda Survey, 78% of high school teachers reported that diplomas prepare students for the workforce, whereas only 41% of employers agreed that high school graduates were prepared for the work force ("States Make Diplomas Count By Sticking With Senior Tests," 2003). Employers also raise questions about the ability of high school graduates to satisfactorily complete job applications, write coherently, perform basic math computations, communicate effectively, and understand the responsibilities associated with being an employee. The Governor's Association issued a report in February 2005 reporting that "graduation requirements remain so universally inadequate that it is possible to earn a diploma anywhere in the nation and still lack the basic skills required by colleges and employers" (Winter, 2005, p. A13). Most of these concerns are similar to those expressed by college personnel. The question still remains unanswered: Why does this gap exist between the skills needed to graduate from high college and those required for college success and employability?

Variables Contributing to Underpreparedness

There are multiple reasons for the lack of academic preparedness observed in college students, and multiple areas that are impacted by it, and we will examine three of them. One of the primary causes of underprepared students was noted previously: the gap between the skills and requirements needed for graduation from high school and the skills needed for college admission and academic success. Whether or not there has been a lowering of standards for high school graduation remains a debatable issue, and if this issue is justified, an approach to addressing it had seldom been discussed on a national level until fairly recently. Needless to say, if lack of student preparation is due to lowered high school standards, then perhaps state required exit exams are one method by which mastery of skills can be measured, and steps taken to prepare students to acquire the required academic skills throughout their high school careers.

A second probable cause for the increase in the number of underprepared students falls within the broad heading of societal and cultural changes that often negatively impact educational progress. These demographics and trends include:

- In the mid 1990's, approximately 33% of children in this country were born to single mothers and lived in a single parent home (U.S. Dept. of Ed., 1996)
- Low income is a primary cause of educational underpreparation and underachievement.
- More low income, first generation students are attending college
- Children from two parent homes spend less time with their families now than in the past and have less emphasis on academic achievement.
- It appears that educational standards in high school have been gradually lowered during the last two decades, especially in the area of writing and critical thinking.
- The issue has been raised regarding grade inflation in high schools and whether a high grade point average accurately reflects learning and mastery of skills.
- There has been a societal trend in which parents are less supportive of public education and school personnel, expecting

to see high grades on report cards but not inclined to prioritize study and academic achievement.

All of the above characteristics result in a large group of students who are not as well prepared for college as they could be. A third broad area that impacts student learning and academic performance is thought to be reflective of the fast pace and desire for instant gratification characteristic of life in this country. It appears that several significant behavioral changes have occurred in adolescents during the last ten to fifteen years that have dramatically impacted student engagement in learning and their expectations about classrooms, teachers, and even their own performance. These changes and characteristics include:

- Students are now increasingly visually and kinesthetically sophisticated. They are not programmed to sit passively in a classroom and reflectively absorb language based auditory information.
- The visual sophistication of students is most applicable to multimedia, but not to printed materials that require substantial reading and comprehension.
- Current students appear to be best prepared to perceive and process data, facts, and chunks of information. This is consistent with Level I of Bloom's Cognitive Taxonomy, Information, and falls far short of the remaining five levels of learning that are expected in classroom discussions, research papers, and exams.
- The attention span of today's adolescents is estimated to be between ten and fifteen minutes, as compared with twenty to twenty five minutes a decade ago.
- First semester students increasingly prefer and expect a classroom to be active, interactive, and visual, in contrast with conventional college classrooms that are reflective and verbal.
- Even when students find themselves engaged in a classroom that is interactive and fast paced, many struggle to remain alert and engaged in a classroom that requires extended concentration, listening, and critical thinking.

- Many students are extrinsically, rather than intrinsically, motivated and anticipate reinforcement for maintaining interest and successful performance, minimizing the role of student effort and time.
- Students of today often demonstrate high self-esteem, but not high self-efficacy. That is, they maintain a strong self concept but lose sight of the fact that a successful outcome is based on, and consistent with, their effort and performance.
- Current students often appear to be lacking in depth classroom experience with effective problem solving skills, critical thinking skills, and defense of their own opinions.

In sum, underprepared students are a product of several combined variables. These include 1) the apparent gap between skills needed to successfully complete high school and those needed for college 2) societal and cultural changes that have had a dramatic impact on family demographics and, therefore, on education and, 3) the fast pace and desire for instant gratification characteristic of life in this country, but counter to the environment present in a college classroom. Students entering college are familiar with only the teaching and learning strategies to which they were exposed in high school. They need to prepare and/or adapt quickly to the teaching and learning strategies they will encounter in college. If their academic skill level is deficient upon graduation from high school, then remediation will have to occur at the college level. If there is gap in the standards and expectations between high school and the college setting, then the students will need to be made aware of these differences as quickly as possible so that they can begin to prepare for the reality of college level work. If the college classroom is not what the students expect, then they need to adapt to the difference and/or faculty can adapt to the change in students. College personnel are aware of all these variables and can use a variety of strategies to address the presence of underprepared students on campus.

Approaches and Strategies to Working with Underprepared Students

The definition of underprepared student refers to a deficit in reading, math, or writing and/or ineffective study and learning skills. But, these deficits can be addressed in such a way that students can learn the skills needed to apply their cognitive ability and achieve satisfactory academic progress. Some strategies, based on a team

approach that includes admissions, advising, a learning center, and faculty include:

- Use of standardized assessment to measure the skills of incoming students and require mandatory placement for those with weak skills.
- Identify the skills and characteristics of successful college students and use these as goals for underprepared students. These will include their academic skills as well as their study habits, time management, exam preparation, etc.
- Establish academic standards for developmental courses that are predictive of college success.
- Track student progress during the first semester and intervene early if there are deficiencies.
- Measure student achievement and outcomes upon completion of the first year.
- Teach problem solving and critical thinking skills during the first semester.
- “Front load” academic support services by teaching how to read for the purpose of learning, as well as teaching effective study skills.
- Require specific remedial course work in writing, reading, and math., as determined by the assessment results and evaluate their effectiveness.
- Expect student engagement in the learning process via active classrooms and encourage faculty to use a multisensory approach to teaching.
- Provide functional, meaningful, and collaborative learning activities integrally connected with their major.
- Foster a stronger campus connection via activities that increase students’ enthusiasm and sense of belonging via:
 - Summer programs
 - Mentoring (peer or professional)

- Learning communities
 - Tutoring and study groups
 - Community service and volunteer activities
 - Clubs and organizations
- Promote and expect student self-advocacy, independence, and responsibility.
 - Maintain high academic standards and expectations. Student skills and performance will improve according to the standards that are established

In sum, college personnel must work from a model of achievement, not from a deficit model, while emphasizing skills that lead to the individualized educational and career goals of underprepared students. As students experience success, their self confidence will increase. Self confidence will lead students to improve their motivation and persistence. The issues of student motivation and persistence are topics worthy of more discussion, but suffice it to say that it is difficult to be a successful student if motivation is poor and persistence is weak. Success, motivation, and persistence are cyclical, reinforcing each other and maintaining the continuity that is needed to successfully progress through each semester of college. All of the above variables combine to strengthen a student's sense of self efficacy; that is, students will expect themselves to be successful, based on their own efforts and performance, as they strive to meet the higher expectations and standards they will encounter on a college campus.

Implications

Since there are a number of variables that contribute to the status of an underprepared student, multiple strategies are required to effectively address the problem. Many of the causative variables are societally based and very difficult to remediate, including single parent families and consequent low socioeconomic status, grade inflation in the high schools, and lower academic standards required for graduation from high school. Add to these the characteristics that reflect current student preference and classroom expectations, including visual and kinesthetic learners who are not comfortable with reflective, language based teaching. Whatever the causal factors, the consequence is a gap that exists between the skills needed to finish high school and those required for college success.

Post-secondary institutions need not lower their academic standards and should begin to address the issues associated with underprepared students even before students start classes. Assessment of academic skills is a necessity, as is offering remediation and/or study skills and "learning to learn" instruction. If underprepared students are admitted to college, then academic support services are not optional. They are a necessity. Learner centered classes tend to increase student engagement and motivation, providing a greater sense of belongingness and accomplishment, increasing the likelihood of retention. Build on an achievement model rather than on a deficit model, focusing on academic as well as personal gains and success. Encourage students to choose a major prior to the end of their first year, as retention is increased when there is a clear connection between choice of major and current classes work. A course in critical thinking is recommended as a required course for all new students. Prepare students for what they should expect, using data that includes where each student's scores fall along a continuum, distinguishing between successful and unsuccessful students. Finally, provide opportunities for success, increasing confidence and establishing self-efficacy. Remember that perception is reality, and unless students are faced with concrete data, they are inclined to function based on their own perceptions, perhaps oblivious to the reality of the skills that are needed for college success.

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