**College Readiness: Are Different Definitions Driving Inequality?**

Education Week - [Marc Tucker](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/top_performers/) on January 19, 2017

Years ago, the best students were encouraged to take two or three Advanced Placement (AP) courses.  Now they are told that they don't stand a chance of getting into a really selective college unless they start taking AP courses in their sophomore year and then pretty much fill their schedules with them in their junior and senior years.  To get into the best colleges, students have to take and do very well on a full slate of AP courses and, if they [are required to](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2015/07/27/a-list-of-180-ranked-schools-that-dont-require-act-or-sat-scores-for-admissions/?utm_term=.ddd94385c7d2) submit them, their ACT or SAT scores need to be very high.  To be fully competitive, they also need to have a solid record as a leader in their school and a contributor to their community.

This, of course, suggests that the standard for being "college-ready" at the elite colleges has been moving steadily up in recent years, to the point that only superb achievers need apply unless their parents are prepared to become multi-million dollar contributors to these schools' endowments.

But regular readers of this column will remember me telling you about a study that [NCEE did a few years ago](http://ncee.org/college-and-work-ready/) of what it takes to be prepared for the first year of the typical two-year college in the United States.  We found that the most often required first-year mathematics course for most students, regardless of major, is a course called College Mathematics or College Algebra.  But, notwithstanding its name, it is really Algebra I with a bit of geometry or statistics—content that is supposed to be taken in middle school.  Most high school graduates, however, are not ready to succeed in that course.

The literacy picture is just as bleak: most first-year college texts are written at the 12th grade level, but many community college instructors have to prepare PowerPoint summaries of the texts because their students cannot comprehend them. It turns out that the typical high school text is written at the 7th or 8th grade level.  The typical community college instructor reported to our researchers that they do not assign much writing because their students cannot write and they do not view themselves as teachers of basic writing skills.

One could reasonably conclude from this study that the majority of high school graduates are not ready for what used to be a high school curriculum.  But one could also conclude that most of our colleges have decided to take whatever they can get, as long as they can fill their seats.  Judging by the reports we have gotten from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the average performance of our high school students [has hardly changed at all in forty years](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/top_performers/2015/11/the_naep_results_time_for_a_long_perspective.html).  But this overall conclusion may mask a steady decline in standards for most high school students and a dramatic rise in standards for our top high school graduates.

But how can it be that the requirements of success in college have been greatly ratcheted up in our elite higher education institutions and, at the same time, been eviscerated in the majority of our colleges?  And how can it be that we are able to create an adequate supply of young people who can meet the soaring requirements of the elite institutions, and, at the same time, fail to enable our high school graduates to meet the puerile standards of most institutions?  And, finally, if this portrait is accurate, what does it mean for the future of our country?

Here's what I think may have happened.  What I am about to share is not a research finding.  It is sheer speculation. I believe two things might have happened at much the same time.  First, as the baby boom generation worked its way out of our colleges and universities, the institutions, determined to keep up the level of their enrollments in the face of a steeply declining supply of applicants, lowered their standards of admission in order to keep enrollments up.  The majority of institutions took anyone who had a high school diploma and, in most cases, the diploma was little more than an attendance certificate.  To this day, no state requires more than an 8th-grade-level of literacy to get a diploma.

Because their funding was based on enrollment, these institutions decided it was more important for their long-term fiscal well-being to fill their seats than it was to limit enrollments to any specific standard of literacy. Once that decision was made, the die was cast and there was no incentive for either high school students or high school faculty to raise their game or even to maintain their prior standards.

But, at the same time, in the real economy, low-skill, high-wage jobs were disappearing fast.  The demand for relatively low-skill workers was rapidly declining, first because of outsourcing, later because of advancing automation and rapidly increasing demand for highly-skilled, creative and very well educated people.  The people who had these skills were increasingly concentrated in a limited number of states, cities and suburbs that are home to leading universities and high technology firms.  These are people that Richard Florida has dubbed "The Creatives."  Florida describes them as searching for enclaves where they could find people very much like themselves, intellectual stimulation, rich cultural resources and, not least, spouses who were also well-educated and highly skilled.  These people, who were in high demand and could live, more or less, wherever they wish, looked for public school districts that could get their children into the world's leading universities so they could grow up to live as well as their parents.

Voila!  Those are the parents whose children begin to take AP courses in their sophomore year and fill their schedules with them in their junior and senior years.  They use their excellent connections to get their children high-profile internships and opportunities to build health care clinics in Haiti in their summers and, in between, they get them the equipment and coaching they need to make it onto the varsity teams for competitive sports.  These hugely ambitious people communicate very high expectations to their children, who have virtually unlimited support as they seek to meet those expectations.

I am no romantic.  It is certainly true that the opportunities for the children of the wealthy have always been quite different from the opportunities for the poor in this country, and those differences have been compounded by race and ethnicity.  But the [evidence is accumulating](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/top_performers/2016/10/separate_but_equal_it_wasnt_then_it_isnt_now.html) that those [differences are being magnified](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/top_performers/2016/11/lets_try_a_thought_experiment.html) many times over by forces that are shaping a society that is different, not just in degree but in kind, from the one many of us grew up in.

Robert Putnam, in his wonderful book [*Our Kids*](https://www.amazon.com/Our-Kids-American-Dream-Crisis/dp/1476769907)*,* describes how he grew up in a town in which the children of the wealthy mill owner went to the same schools, played on the same teams, and went to the same ice cream parlor as the children of the people who worked in the mill, people who taught their own children that it was just plain wrong to flaunt their relative wealth in front of kids, like Putnam himself, who had much less money.  And Putnam describes how that kind of real democracy died in his hometown and was replaced by a community in which the children of the rich have little or nothing to do with the working-class kids.

Putnam's story is a story about changes in the relationship between owners and managers, on the one hand, and workers on the other.  Richard Florida describes, as I said above, how the rising professional class, of which Putnam is one as Florida is himself, have been progressively cut off from the working class.

The rapidly increasing social class and racial isolation of the last four or five decades has been accompanied by another kind of isolation—a wide and growing gulf between those who go to 'college' but who enter with little more than middle school knowledge and literacy and those who have far more.  Increasingly, the people in the latter camp live apart, in their own enclaves, marry one another, and create a set of expectations and cultural supports for their children from birth forward that are simply not available to a large and growing class of people whose prospects are increasingly grim.  What I have just described has become the crux of our politics.

I used to think that it was the forces that account for widening income inequality that have resulted in increasing inequality of education opportunity and there is certainly much truth in that.  But what if it is no less true that widening inequality in educational standards is leading to widening income inequality?  What if these forces are strengthening each other?

So what does 'college ready' mean in the situation I have described?  I'll posit four different definitions: 1) the current functional standard for the high school diploma, which varies from a minimum of maintaining a sufficient attendance record for 12 years of schooling to the most widespread standard in the United States: the ability to reach an 8th grade level of literacy; 2) the ability to succeed in a typical first year community college or state college program, which would require the ability to read at the 12th grade level and to do mathematics at the middle school level (no state now demands this much to get a high school diploma); 3) the ability to function at a level that would give the student a reasonable chance of engaging in a career that would enable him or her to attain a middle class standard of living in an age of increasing automation (writes well; has a sound understanding of basic concepts in science and can apply them to complex problems, has a good command of the fundamentals of algebra, probability and statistics and understands why liberty, freedom and democracy are so important and what it takes to maintain and nourish them--I must point out that it is unclear whether most *college graduates* meet this standard) and 4) ready to be a serious candidate for admission to a highly selective college.

Here's my point: to the extent that states set graduation standards by specifying grades on standardized tests that students must take—some do, some don't—the standards are typically set by a political process in which state officials in the best of circumstances decide how high the standard can be set without generating too much pushback from the parents of students who fail to get a diploma. Compounding the problem, some states with test-based graduation requirements have waived them for students who simply complete their regular course work or who take online 'credit recovery' courses set to vanishingly low standards. Once standards are lowered, of course, it is far harder to raise them than it was to lower them.

I believe, for the reasons just offered, that the effective standards for most American high school students have been lowered over the last 30 years at the very time that the actual academic requirements for access to a middle class way of life have been steadily rising and can be expected to rise further in the years ahead. At the same time, standards at the upper end of the distribution have risen dramatically, but only for a relatively small band of highly advantaged elite students who, by virtue of having met those standards, will be uniquely positioned to ride the next wave even as the majority of students struggle for the rest of their lives.

The most responsible policy would be to raise dramatically the standards we set for most students, to the third definition of 'college ready' described above.  Paradoxically, we can expect the greatest resistance to such a move to come from the parents of poorly educated students who are afraid that raising the standards will disadvantage their children.  This is a democracy—we cannot raise the standards without first persuading those parents that their children have more to fear from standards that are too low than from standards that are too high.  Therein lies the core challenge for education leaders in the years ahead.