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Should We Rethink How We Prepare Students to be College and Career Ready?

Changing mindsets

From my past 25 years in K-12 public education it has been my experience that preparing students for college and career readiness across our nation has been more or less a single minded approach. When we currently think of college and career readiness in most minds it means preparing students to enter college, namely four year colleges and all of the specific requirements that go into that particular process. Thus, when the term of college and career readiness comes up in most circles of K-12 conversation, it typically means that a student transitioning out of high school that is college and career ready has met each of the requirements to be accepted into a four year college institution.

It is there that we assume that by students being ready to enter college, we have set students on a stage for being equipped with the knowledge and appropriate career preparation tools to excel in college and thus a career of choice for their futures. We have been under the notion that the best way to a solid career path was to earn a four year degree which in some areas of perspective employment is very necessary. However, not all gainful career paths require a four year college degree to set students on a successful journey towards their employment future.

Rethinking the approach to career preparation:

In recent years, it has been noted by industry that the K-12 approach of “college for all” has eroded the workforce that has been largely responsible for the industrial and technology advances we have enjoyed as a nation transitioning from an education system that supported an agriculture based economy in our schools, to supporting an industrial based economy and workforce needs. Over the last three decades we have moved very quickly into a very technology driven economy in the 20th century where college and career preparation meant a four year college degree needed to be attained by all who sought gainful living wage employment in the 20th century.

As we have moved into the 21st century, the workforce needs and the way we prepare K-12 students for those workforce needs through high school and post high school planning has taken a slightly different approach or so it would appear as the need to do so. According to an article published in the Seattle times by Claudia Rowe, The old image of college as four years on an ivy-covered campus is increasingly giving way to programs that offer hit-the-ground-running career skills, often developed outside of libraries and lecture halls. (Rowe, C. (2016, November 6).

Should we prepare all students for four college entrance requirements only? Seattle Times, pp. A1-A3.

The trouble is, Washington State has beefed-up the amount of core academic requirements a student must meet in order to attain a high-school diploma. Washington State's newly adopted 24 credit graduation requirement appears to focus primarily on more rigorous core academics requirements and therefore seem to be at odds with the need of some 600,000 jobs forecasted in the next four years that will require specialized training or certification, but not necessarily a four year college degree. Meanwhile, state officials say the number of students enrolling in career and technical education courses (known as CTE) has grown, from 18.5 percent of all ninth-through-12th graders in the 2006-07 school year to 20 percent this year. Those numbers represent an overall average, of course. The reality between districts varies widely, with rural areas tending to offer more career-training programs than urban districts.

"There are a lot of young people who went out to college like we asked them to and had no idea why," says Ken Emmil, Assistant Superintendent for Career and College Readiness at the state Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. "We have a significant population of kids who graduate high school and go into college with no end in mind. (Rowe, C. (2016, November 6). Should we prepare all students for college entrance requirements only? Seattle Times, pp. A1-A3

Preparing students for 21st Century Careers

Over the course of time since the industrial revolution, post-secondary education has been viewed as an escalator mechanism of sorts, where within individuals who attain higher levels of education have increased incomes over time, an improved quality of life and greater access to educational and medical service (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013).

What remains clear to me in the second half of the 21st century is that we must change our counseling and guidance system in K-12 schools from a reactive guidance model that focuses on serving students who are under duress, at risk for failure or drop out, focus on those students who plan to attend a four year college and used in most all school sites as state assessment coordinators. In a comprehensive guidance model, counselors would engage with students on some of the afore mentioned focuses, however, the difference is that counselors would focus on all aspects of a student's social, emotional wellbeing as well as their college and career planning that would allow for more thorough college and career planning tool use and activities that support college and career preparation.

Washington State has a graduation requirement that states all students will be prepared for college and or a career upon graduation but has not clearly defined a specific protocol that would measure a student's readiness for college and career success upon graduation from high schools. Therefore, the vague description from the Washington State School Board Directors of what college and career ready means has left individual districts to determine what college and career preparation for students mean for their individual district.

If school districts in Washington State are left to interpret what college and career readiness means for all students, it will be the same way districts addressed the former graduation requirement of students needing to complete a senior project prior to graduation. The intended outcomes will look different with different expectations from school district to school district. There must be a more defined requirement for districts to adhere to, therefore making the college and career graduation requirement expectations uniform to all districts with the same set of

expected outcomes for student planning for college and career readiness and success upon graduating from high school.

Over the past three decades or so our student focus has been to graduate students and prepare them for success in completing a four year college degree which will lead to gainful employment and a larger lifetime earnings has left our nation ill prepared to fill the soon to be vacated careers by a skilled labor force with a nation of liberal arts degrees that do not apply to the skills and training needed to access many blue color careers. Preparing students for all post high school pathways seems to be the need of our state and our nation. We tend to forget that two year and technical degrees, apprenticeships, industry certifications, technical training, the military and four year college degrees are all viable pathways for students to be college and career ready upon graduating from high school. We need to make a paradigm shift in our approach to this work going forward in the 21st century or risk further eroding our workforce with less qualified workers prepared to enter these careers. We should prepare students during high school to access some type of higher education training post high school that will specifically prepare students for the expectations of their chosen career path.

Integrate career explorations into the curriculum in the elementary grades:

The popular preparation moniker currently is that college and career explorations exposure should begin as early as elementary school with planning to continue to be more definitively focused as students advance in grade levels. Starting the exploration process in high school has been deemed by many as too long to wait to begin having students focus and prepare for their futures.

Rethinking College Access and Readiness:

Preparing students for college in the mindset of many educators and parents has been thought of as preparing high school students to enter a four year college. That has long been the measurement of a high schools success profile, how many students they send to college each year. Moreover, how many they send to a four year college is the milestone of success when speaking in terms of college entrance. Little thought is put into the rationale for attempting to push all students through the four year college tube, except for the fact it is good to seek higher education at the bachelors level. However beneficial a college degree might be, as many Bachelor degree earners have found, it is good to seek higher education but with a rationale and purpose for doing so with a well thought out plan or course of what level of degree, certificate or technical training might be needed for the career a student seeks. Otherwise, students can find themselves with a degree that has left them deep in debt to attain with little gainful employment outlook for the degree they have earned.

Community and technical college student average age of attendance in Washington State is 28 years old. The community and technical colleges in Washington State tend to focus on recruiting the retrained worker rather than the high school senior. Thus, the data pointing to the average age of a community college student being students who are retraining for another career, need additional training after attaining a Bachelor degree or decided to delay their entrance into higher education for whatever reason. The data indicates again, most high school students are being prepared to largely attend a university after their high school completion. Programs such as Upward Bound, Gear Up, VIP Scholars are all programs that help facilitate student planning and preparation for college but these programs only exist mostly in urban or rural high schools.

They are not normally programs utilized by most school districts as a planning program preparing students for college, two or four year (Howard, Tyrone C., Tunstall, J. Flennaugh, T. K., 2016).

Upward Bound: Upward Bound provides fundamental support to participants in their preparation for college entrance. The program provides opportunities for participants to succeed in their precollege performance and ultimately in their higher education pursuits. Upward Bound serves: high school students from low-income families; and high school students from families in which neither parent holds a bachelor's degree. The goal of Upward Bound is to increase the rate at which participants complete secondary education and enroll in and graduate from institutions of postsecondary education.

Gear Up: This discretionary grant program is designed to increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education. GEAR UP provides six-year grants to states and partnerships to provide services at high-poverty middle and high schools.

Earning college credit while in high school:

Most students are encouraged to take a heavy load of college prep courses offered while attending public, private comprehensive high schools and some skills centers, especially private high schools. Advanced placement and International Baccalaureate and Cambridge courses are the courses students are most commonly encourage to take to prepare them for college entrance. Data tells us that many high school students do not take or pass the subsequent culminating assessment affiliated with each of those courses that would allow students to earn the college credit for the course while in high school. This would therefore seemingly cut down on a student's time and cost of paying for college. There are several other ways high school students can earn college credits while in high school. Tech Prep, College in the High School, and Running Start are all dual enrollment programs that high school student have access to and earn more college credits in but are seldom looked at with the same college prep esteem as AP or IB courses. The cost of taking some of these courses can be prohibitive for some students to take the final AP or IB exams to earn the college credit. Generally the culminating assessment is around \$85 for a student to take. College in the High School costs vary from college to college but there is generally a cost associated with each credit earned. Tech Prep and Running Start are generally cost free for earning credit. There may be some minimal administrative cost associated with these two models. Here is a list of the most commonly used programs that offer students the ability to earn college credit while in high school, therefore aiding their ability to adequately prepare for college by starting to earn credit while in high school and demonstrating to colleges that they are taking a load of rigorous course work that will prepare them to be successful with the remainder of their college program.



Dual Enrollment: Concurrent enrollment provides high school students the opportunity to take college-credit bearing courses taught by college-approved high school teachers. It is a low-cost, scalable model for bringing accelerated courses to students in urban, suburban, and rural high schools. Students gain exposure to the academic challenges of college while in their high school environment, earning transcribed college credit at the time they successfully pass the course. Concurrent enrollment also facilitates close collaboration between high school teachers and college faculty that fosters alignment of secondary and postsecondary curriculum. Sometimes called “dual credit,” “dual enrollment,” or “college in the high school,” concurrent enrollment partnerships differ from other models of dual enrollment because high school instructors teach the college courses.

College in the High School: High school students can complete University or college level courses and earn credit while in their own classrooms at their respective high schools with their own teachers. Students and teachers use the college’s curriculum the school or program has an articulation agreement with. Students earn a final grade over time; a grade does not depend on one exam. The credits that students earn are transferrable to most public and many private colleges and universities, depending on the course.

Tech Prep/Dual Enrollment _____: Tech Prep is an industry and education partnership committed to providing a highly-trained and motivated workforce, prepared to pursue lifelong learning in a changing technological society. Tech Prep provides occupational pathways for students by preparing them for technologically advanced careers and postsecondary education by emphasizing strong academic, technical, problem solving, and critical thinking skills. Tech Prep prepares students for the world of work and helps maintain a quality life in a changing society. Tech Prep is a national educational initiative. It includes a rigorous and focused course of study that provides students with essential academic and technical foundations that prepare students with necessary workplace skills

Running Start: Running Start is intended to provide students a program option consisting of attendance at certain institutions of higher education and the simultaneous earning of high school and college/university credit. Running Start was initiated by the Legislature as a component of the 1990 parent and student Students in grades 11 and 12 are allowed to take college courses at Washington’s community and technical colleges, and at Central Washington University, Eastern Washington University, Washington State University, and Northwest Indian College. Running Start Students and their families do not pay tuition, but they do pay college fees and buy their own books, as well as provide their own transportation. Students receive both high school and college credit for these classes and therefore accelerate their progress through the education system. The exercise of that right is subject only to minimal eligibility and procedural requirements, which are spelled out, in state administrative rules for more information.

Credit by proficiency exam: Are programs created by the College Board, which offers college-level curricula and examinations to high school students. American colleges and universities often grant **placement** and course credit to students who obtain high scores on the examinations.

Advanced Placement(AP): Advanced Placement (AP) is a program of college-level courses offered at many high schools. Courses are available in many subject areas, including English, history, humanities, languages, math, psychology and science. The focus is not on memorizing facts and figures. It’s on engaging discussions, approaching and solving problems together and

learning to write well. You'll get to study fascinating topics and ideas. Who knows? One (or more!) might just become the foundation of your future college major or career.

International Baccalaureate (IB): What is the International Baccalaureate? The IB is a high school program that doubles as a highly respected college prep curriculum. The IB program encourages students to think broadly, beyond the boundaries of their communities, and to see themselves as members of a global society. It has gained recognition and respect from most U.S. colleges.

Cambridge: The Cambridge Advanced International Certificate of Education (AICE) Diploma is an international curriculum and examination system that emphasizes the value of broad and balanced study. Alongside in-depth understanding of a variety of subjects, students also need to master a broader range of skills critical for success in university study and employment. The Cambridge AICE Diploma was first awarded in 1997 and has since become popular with a range of schools in different parts of the world. It encompasses the 'gold standard' Cambridge International AS and A Level qualifications, and offers students the opportunity to tailor their studies to their individual interests, abilities and future plans within an international curriculum framework.

The bottom line is, Washington State graduation requirements mimic the state college entrance requirements. Data tells us that not all of our high school graduates will attend a four year college. Current workforce trends indicate that our education system does not need to prepare all students for a four year college for post high school career training. Thus, the need to not do so has been reflected in current and national workforce data. Again, it is time to rethink how students are prepared for college and career readiness.

References:

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