

Beyond College For All

We are not doing some students a favour by encouraging them to go to college.

By James Rosenbaum

Over the years, more and more high school students have been encouraged to attend post-secondary education. High school guidance counselors, who used to be gatekeepers, often no longer warn students if their chances of success in college are poor. The new policy has at least five important policy implications.

First, many “college-bound” students are really work-bound. Many students who plan college degrees are almost certain to drop out of college.

In fact, it is highly predictable which college-bound students will enter the labour market with a high school diploma as their highest degree (often with no college credits), although they did not plan or prepare to do so. High school graduates with low grades who are unprepared for college have an 86% chance of dropping out.

Second, many students in college are not college students. Indeed, 40% of college students report taking at least one remedial course, many report taking three or more remedial courses and, since some students do not realize that their courses are remedial, the actual numbers may be even higher.

The higher the number of remedial courses a student takes, the greater the chances that student will drop out of college. Students are taking courses in college buildings, but they are not college courses. They are paying college tuition to take remedial courses — high school-level courses that confer no college credits. Students expect that a two-year degree will take two years, but this is unlikely when they need to take remedial courses.

Third, even after entering college, many students are unclear about requirements. Community colleges do a good job of spreading information about their open-admissions policies, but they do not disseminate information about remedial courses, dropout rates, or the re-

quirements for taking college credit courses. So as not to discourage students, some community colleges avoid telling them that they are in remedial courses or that their courses are not conferring college credit, even after they have taken several such courses.

Fourth, although the labour market requires higher skills than in the past, many good jobs do not require college skills. There has been a large increase in the need for *high school*-level skills — math, reading, and writing skills at a grade 9 to grade 10 level, yet close to 50% of all 17-year-olds cannot read or do math at a level needed to get a job in a modern automobile plant.

We need to improve youths’ skills, but the skills that are needed can be provided in high school. Students do not need to go to college to obtain these skills.

Fifth, postponing college may be a desirable option for some students. Many students enter college when they are older, often after several years of work. More than half of the students in two-year colleges are older than 24, and about one-quarter of them are over 35. Their age and employment may give them the experience to make better course choices.

Although counselors’ college-for-all focus hurts many students, these counselors have good intentions. They do not want to discourage students or to close off their options too early. But by withholding information about the requirements for college-credit classes, counselors prevent students from knowing what high school efforts would prepare them for real college courses.

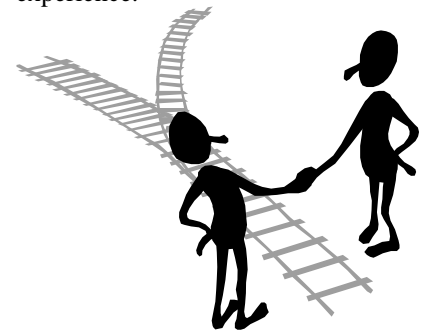
Without such information, students have little incentive to make an effort in high school, to know their realistic chances of getting some college credits, and to know how much time and tuition it will take before they start getting college credits. Counselors should give students in-

formation about the requirements for college-credit classes, their likely prospects, and what high school efforts would prepare them for college.

Counselors should also give students information about back-up options — good, well-paid careers that do not require college. Such jobs do exist, in a wide variety of fields: construction, trades, clerical, administrative, technical, printing, graphics, financial, and social services.

Unfortunately, guidance counselors rarely know about such jobs and their requirements, so they will need training in this area. Alternatively, other staff could provide this information to students. Some vocational teachers already help some students whose academic achievement is poor to get jobs with career potential, so their role could be expanded.

The college-for-all focus prevents students from seeing that they must make an effort in high school if they are going to get some benefit from college, that college enrolment is not helpful to all students, that some jobs offer good career prospects, that high school can help students meet the requirements for better jobs, and that delayed college entry may improve their chances of benefiting from the experience.



(Adapted with permission from Beyond College for All Career Paths for the Forgotten Half, published by the Russell Sage Foundation. Dr. Rosenbaum is professor of sociology, education, and social policy at Northwestern University.)