

It's Time to Tell the Kids: If You Don't Do Well in High School, You Won't Do Well in College (or on the Job)

By James E. Rosenbaum

Every year I ask my college class how many students have seen a high school teacher cry, and most students raise their hands. When I ask what provoked the crying, most stories are about teachers who threaten to give students bad grades and students who do not care. When I ask my colleagues the same question about their high school teachers from one or two generations ago, virtually none can recall such tears. This is not a systematic survey, but it suggests a big change.

Today, nearly all high school seniors believe that they are going to college—and that bad grades won't stop them. They are right: With the dramatic increase in open admissions colleges, it is true that they can go.

But as I report in my recent book *Beyond College for All*, students who perform poorly in high school probably won't graduate from college—many won't even make it beyond remedial courses. High enrollment rates and low graduation rates are well-known facts of life in most open admissions and less selective colleges (both two- and four-year). The tight connection between high school preparation (in terms of both the rigor of courses taken and grades received) and college completion are well known to statisticians, researchers, and policymakers who follow such matters.

But research suggests that students still do not understand this connection. Consider the following: Seventy-one percent of the class of 1982 planned to get a college degree. Ten years later, 63.9 percent of those with A averages had attained an A.A. degree or higher, but only 13.9 percent of those with C averages (or lower) had done so (Rosenbaum, 1998, 2001). (In a more recent cohort [the class of 1992], students with C averages or lower fared a little better; 20.9 percent attained an A.A. degree or higher within eight years of graduating from high school [Rosenbaum and Gordon-McKeon, 2003]). As of 1992, 84 percent of high school seniors planned to get a college degree (NELS, 1992); but data from the high school classes of 1972, 1982, and 1992 tell us that *only 45 to 49 percent of students who enter college and earn more than 10 credits actually earn a bachelor's degree*—many even fail to earn 10 credits (Adelman, 2004). For students with high school averages of C or lower, *the chances that they will earn even one college credit are less than 50-50* (Rosenbaum, 2001). Do your students know that? Do your colleagues? Did you know that?

Despite the availability of open admissions institutions and increased student aspirations for college degrees—factors that increase college *enrollment*—the easiest-to-use predictor of a student's likelihood of *graduating* from a two- or four-year college is still his or her high school grade point average.* Although any single grade is imperfect, when averaged over a high school career, the grade point average is an excellent predictor of how a student will do in college. This has always been true and there is no reason to expect it to change. Unfortunately, our well-intentioned efforts to encourage all students to go to college regardless of their grades inadvertently gives them the impression that high school grades don't matter.

In this article, we will look at the facts, indeed the tragedy, behind the façade of widespread college entry—and at what we can do to change the picture, either by increasing the odds that college enrollment will lead to college graduation or by helping students find more productive, successful post-high school paths.

New Dreams, New Misconceptions

The past 40 years brought three radical social transformations that together have dramatically increased the percentage of students who want to attend college. First, the earnings advantage of college graduates has grown (Grubb, 1996). Second, college—especially community college (a minor factor in the prior generation)—

has become much more accessible. In the past four decades, while enrollments at four-year colleges doubled, enrollments increased five-fold at community colleges (NCES, 1999). Third, and perhaps most remarkably, virtually all community colleges adopted a revolutionary policy of open admissions. Unlike many four-year colleges, virtually all two-year colleges opened their doors to admit all interested high school graduates, regardless of students' prior academic achievement. Even high school graduates with barely passing grades are routinely welcomed because almost all two-year colleges offer a wide array of remedial courses. Indeed, in many cases, students do not even have to be high school graduates because most two-year colleges offer these students access to some non-credit courses, including GED courses.

These three transformations have dramatically altered the rules of college attendance and given students remarkable new opportunities. However, as with all revolutions, there are also unintended consequences. The revolutions spawned a set of myths—we'll call them misconceptions—that combined to send a message to students: Don't worry about high school grades or effort; you can still go to college and do fine. This message has not been sent to high achievers aiming for prestigious colleges, where grades and scores matter—and the students headed there know it. But it is the message that students who know little about college have received—particularly those whose parents did not go to college. These students (and their parents) are being misled with disastrous consequences. Their motivation to work hard in high school is sapped; their time to prepare for college is wasted; their college savings are eaten up by remedial courses that they could have taken for free in high school; and their chances of earning a college degree are greatly diminished. Further, the effect on many colleges has been to alter their mission and lower their standards.

This article reviews some of the misconceptions spawned by these three revolutions and rebuts them—and considers how schools can mitigate the terrible impact these misconceptions are having on individual students and, inevitably, on the overall school environment.

Misconception 1: College success is not linked to high school preparation.

A national survey (NELS, 1992) found that 84 percent of high school seniors in the class of 1992 planned to get a two- or four-year college degree. Even students with bad grades, low test scores, and poor high-school attendance planned to complete a college degree. Attaining a college degree can be difficult even for students who have worked hard and done well in high school; for those who haven't, it is nearly impossible. Look at the table below on grades and college completion for the class of 1982. On average, 37.7 percent of seniors with college plans earned a two-year or higher degree. But low high school grades cut students' chances markedly—only 13.9 percent of seniors with averages of C or lower completed college. For this 13.9 percent, open admissions at community colleges provided an extremely helpful second chance. However, for the vast majority of students, the other 86 percent, their second chance was only another experience of failure. Shouldn't we tell the students: If you want to graduate from college, exert the effort and get good grades in high school?

In the class of 1982, 86 percent of college-bound students with poor grades didn't graduate from college.				
Average high school grades	As	Bs	Cs or lower	All

Percentage attaining A.A. or higher	63.9	37.1	13.9	37.7
Percentage not attaining any degree	36.1	62.9	86.1	62.3
Seniors with college plans (A.A. or higher) who complete an A.A. degree or higher within 10 years of high school graduation.				
Source: <i>Beyond College for All</i> ; High School and Beyond data.				

Misconception 2: College plans lead to increased school effort.

It is often assumed that planning to go to college makes students more motivated, giving them reason to work hard in high school. Unfortunately, this is often not the case. For many decades, work-bound students believed that high school achievement would not influence their future careers (Stinchcombe, 1965), but now many college-bound students also hold this belief. In a survey of over 2,000 seniors in 12 urban and suburban high schools, researchers found that almost 40 percent of college-bound students believed that school effort had little relevance for their future careers (Rosenbaum, 1998; cf. Steinberg, 1996).

Misconception 3: High school homework doesn't matter for college success.

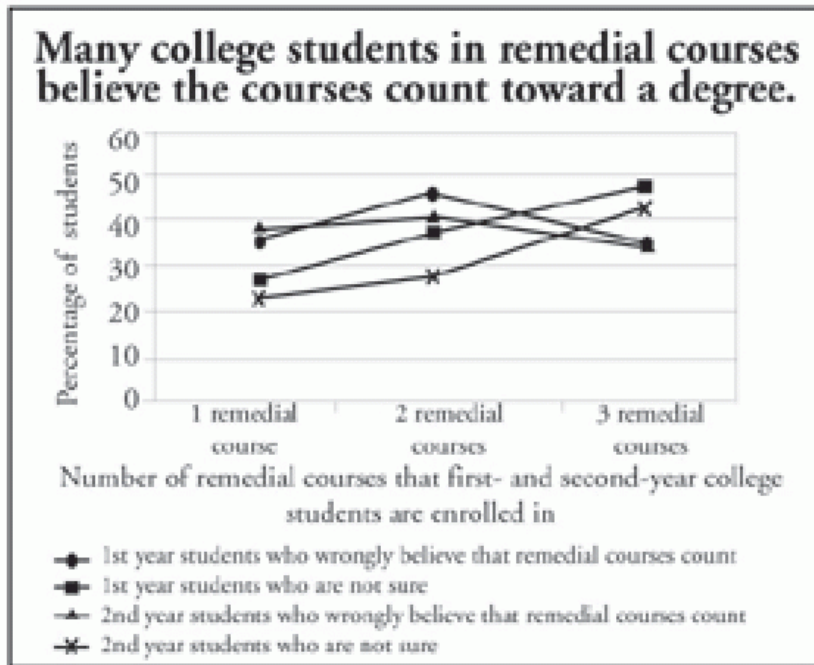
Since open admissions policies allow everyone to enter college, no matter how poorly they do in high school, some students report that they can wait until college to exert academic effort. But research shows that effort during high school is absolutely essential. Take homework, for example: Students doing no homework end up with 1.2 years less education and 19 percent lower earnings than average. Students doing 15 hours or more a week of homework attain almost 1.5 more years of education and attain 16 percent higher earnings than average. This 2.7-year spread in educational attainment and 35 percent spread in earnings are both extremely large (especially considering that these outcomes are associated with variation in self-reported homework time in high school).

Misconception 4: Going to college means taking college-level classes.

If you are taking classes in a college, are you taking college classes? Not necessarily. Many college students" are actually in remedial courses—high school-level classes (or even lower) that give no college credits (Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum, 2002). The best estimates of the extent of remedial education come from careful analyses of college transcripts from national samples of students in the classes of 1982 and 1992. From 1982 to 1992 there has been substantial improvement in the need for remediation *among students entering four-year colleges*. Forty-four percent of those from the class of 1982, but only 25 percent from the class of 1992 (still too many), took at least one remedial course. Unfortunately, there has not been a similar improvement *among students entering two-year colleges*. Sixty-three percent of those from the class of 1982, and 61 percent from the class of 1992, took at least one remedial course (Adelman, 2004). A more recent survey in two urban community colleges found that 25 percent of students were taking three or more remedial courses (Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum, 2002).

Moreover, in an effort to reduce students' feelings of inferiority, college advisors often downplay the fact that courses are remedial. As a result, *many students do not even realize the nature of their coursework*. In one

research survey, students were given a list of the colleges' remedial courses, asked which ones they had taken and whether the courses counted toward a degree. From interviews with administrators, the researchers knew that none of these courses counted toward a degree. Unfortunately, most students did not (see chart below). Among first-year students taking three remedial courses, 36 percent reported that these courses counted, and another 48 percent were not sure. Even among second-year students taking three remedial courses, 36 percent believed the courses counted for college credit and 44 percent were unsure (Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum, 2002).



Misconception 5: Going to college for a two- or four-year degree takes two or four years.

How long does a two-year associate's degree take? If you think the answer is obvious, you are wrong. At one community college, a top administrator confided that because of remedial needs, a "two-year associates degree" takes full-time students an *average* of 3.5 years to complete. Statistics like this are not widely known—with three serious implications. First, since the remedial courses often carry no credit, students who plan for two-year or four-year degrees discover that they cannot complete their degrees in the time they have scheduled or within the budget they have planned. Second, their failure to collect credits is exacerbated by the "secret" nature of the remedial courses; discovering after 1.5 years that you are still two years away from a two-year degree is not only demoralizing, but may present virtually insurmountable time and budget problems. Third, high school students heading toward college do not understand college remedial placements. They know that their older peers who graduated high school with poor grades went on to college—and they assume they can, as well. But most high school students probably do not realize that these "college students" are not accumulating college credits and are unlikely to graduate. This partial picture may encourage lax academic effort and college-for-all fantasies on the part of many high school students—maybe even on the part of school faculty. (These fantasies are fed by high school administrators who boast about the high percentage of students they send to college—but neglect to mention how few graduate. More on this later.)

Misconception 6: School counselors should not offer discouraging words about the hard work necessary for college success.

Given the widespread public belief in the misconceptions above, counselors rarely discourage college plans or suggest alternatives. A recent study in eight diverse urban and suburban high schools found that even if students had poor grades, school counselors did not dissuade them from attending college, *nor did they warn students when they had poor chances of college success* (Krei and Rosenbaum, 2001; Rosenbaum, Miller, and

Krei, 1997). National data suggest that these practices are widespread. While only 32 percent of a national survey of seniors in 1982 indicated that their counselors urged them to go to college, 10 years later, fully 66 percent of seniors made the same statement (Boesel, 2001; Gray, 1996). Indeed, 57 percent of seniors in the bottom half of the academic rankings reported that counselors urged them to attend college.

In interviews we conducted with counselors, it was clear that counselors who do wish to warn students that they are unprepared for college believe that they lack the authority to do so (Rosenbaum et al., 1997). As one counselor said, "Who am I to burst their bubble?" At the same time, counselors report that when they warn students that they are unprepared for college, parents complain, and principals support the parents. Counselors are not sure they have the authority to be candid and to report that students are not well prepared for college. The following example, though just an anecdote, offers some sense of the pressures that counselors feel. A student with an IQ of 70 wanted to be a doctor, and although the counselor tried to explain the difficulties this student would face, he ultimately advised the student to attend "a two-year college first and see how it goes."

Clearly, some counselors do not feel free to give their professional opinions. If they are too candid, they can be accused of "low expectations," even if their concerns arise from students' school records. When counselors fear they may have to pay for honestly explaining students' future options, they back away from doing so. They not only yield to parents' wishes, but they sometimes change their initial advice to avoid trouble. Many counselors report that they advise students with D-averages to attend a community college and later transfer to a four-year college. One student with a D-average wanted to apply to Harvard, so his counselor suggested that he could begin at community college and then look to transfer to Harvard after two years. The college-for-all mentality is a perfect way to avoid unpleasant issues that are likely to arise as students make plans for the future.

In the past, counselors often acted as "gatekeepers," advising low-achieving students on alternatives to college (Cicourel and Kitsuse, 1963; Rosenbaum, 1976), including providing advice about which non-college training options could lead to well-paid, respected occupations and even using their contacts to place non-college-bound students into respectable jobs. (For more information on the importance of high school for the non-college bound, see the sidebar "[All Good Jobs Don't Require a College Degree....](#)")

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If heavy-handed gatekeeping by counselors has indeed become less common, no one will grieve its loss; only two generations ago, counselors often had a decisive, sometimes secretive, impact on which colleges students would apply and go to. But if counselors are not giving students the information they need about the requirements for completing college, then many students may be aimlessly drifting through high school and community colleges without any notion of what requirements they will have to meet to earn a degree. In that case, gatekeeping has not ended, it has only been deferred, and many students will haplessly find themselves failing out of college without any forewarning of what is happening. Today, many students are making college plans that are not likely to be realized. Parents, administrators, counselors, and teachers must work together to understand the connection between high school effort and college success—and to convey this reality to students. It should go without saying that counselors can't take on this countercultural mission on their own. In the next article, high school staff can see what students need to know to be prepared for college; for distribution to students, a college fact sheet can be found here: "[What You Need to Do in High School If You Want to Graduate from College.](#)"

The New Rules of the Game

Beyond the negative effect that the college-for-all push has on individual students, there is the broader negative effect it has on high schools' academic climate. Seeing that college access is guaranteed, some students believe that they can challenge teachers' authority and suffer no penalty; some teachers may respond to their diminished authority by leaving the profession or by reducing their demands on students (Sedlak et al., 1986). While these changes have their greatest impact on low-achieving students, even high-achieving students will be in classes where teachers' authority is questioned, and such students may wonder if they could prepare for college with less effort.

Those looking for justice may see it in the finding that unmotivated students will end up worse off—stuck with remedial classes, fewer college credits and degrees, and lower earnings. But this is not a happy ending. Students waste their high school years, disrupt high school for others, drag down the standards in high school, and force colleges to provide high school courses as an increasingly larger segment of their curriculum.

How can we improve the situation? Since the playing field has drastically changed in the world of higher education, new "rules of the game" have arisen. New high school practices must be established to match them. These new rules of college can be summarized succinctly:

All students can plan to get a college degree; but if they are unprepared, they must be willing to repeat high school courses in college, spending the extra time, money, and effort in non-credit, remedial courses.

- All students can attend college, but low-achieving students should be warned about remedial courses and their own unlikely prospects for graduation.
- College completion, as opposed to enrollment, requires increased high school effort. If students delay their academic effort until they get to college, the delay will make degree completion take longer, cost more, and be less likely.
- Policies to improve students' preparation for college do not remove a school's obligation to provide students with information about their college prospects.
- Students whose college prospects are dim should be provided good information about alternatives to college that can lead to a successful employment life. These students can also be informed about opportunities to attend college later in life.

School staff could play a critical role in providing information and resources to help students make choices that will support their own long-term goals before it is too late. Unfortunately, it seems that students are not getting this information, nor is there a clear mandate for high school counselors or teachers (or, for that matter, administrators) to give this advice. How could a better job be done in this area?

1. High schools should monitor and publicize the academic preparation and college completion rates of their college-bound graduates. It is common practice for high schools to trumpet the percentage of kids they send on to college—as if this were the major indicator of a high school's success. Instead of focusing on just the number of seniors who go to college, high school administrators should monitor their graduates' preparation for college-credit classes (through, for example, achievement test scores and success in the first year of college) and brag about that: College preparation, not college attendance, is the real achievement. They should also inform students about degree completion rates for prior graduates (by showing the percentage of students who earn college degrees broken down by grade point average, for example). In addition, high schools should provide information about various local colleges, including degree-completion rates and the average number of years students took to complete their degrees.

2. High schools should require students aiming for college to take modified college placement exams.

Society needs to give students clear information about the achievement prerequisites for college courses. Since colleges already give tests to assess whether incoming freshmen are assigned to credit or remedial classes, one solution is relatively straightforward: These tests could be modified and given to high school students to tell them whether they are *ready* for college-level work. If colleges do not want to prepare a new test, they could recommend an existing one or simply give high schools the previous year's freshman placement exams. These exams could be given to high school seniors, and a modified exam could be given to high school sophomores, to tell them whether they are making satisfactory progress toward college. If not, students must improve their achievement, revise their goals, or accept the fact that they will have to take remedial courses in college.

Having high school students take college placement exams may appear unnecessary since more and more states are developing high school exit exams. But in many states the high school exit exams were developed to assess minimum competence. So every year many students pass a high school exit exam, but then do poorly on a college placement exam and end up in remedial courses. According to a recent study that compared 66 state high school exams (35 in English and 31 in mathematics) to a set of standards for university success found that just three of them (all in English) could offer useful information about students' preparation for college (Conley, 2003).

In 2000, Kentucky became the first state in the nation to pass a state law creating an online mathematics assessment developed specifically to let high school sophomores and juniors know if they are ready for college-level algebra and calculus. Called the Kentucky Early Mathematics Testing Program (KEMTP), the test assesses Algebra I, Geometry, and Algebra II and was developed by high school and college mathematics teachers from Kentucky. This purely diagnostic assessment does not become part of the high school transcript and is not used for admissions to college; it does give students (and their schools) immediate feedback on which topics they have—and have not—mastered and urges students to use the one to two years they have left in high school to address those weaknesses. (To learn more about KEMTP, go to www.mathclass.org/welcome-kemtp.htm(link is external).)

3. High schools should clear up the misconceptions. Counselors are the front line here, and they'll need a lot of support. All school personnel should be well-armed with the facts and encouraged to convey them to students. And the facts are clear: High school performance matters. Hard work in high school matters. Doing homework matters. Taking rigorous courses matters. Getting good grades matters. All of these are closely connected to whether students succeed in college. (And, interestingly, they're also closely connected to whether non-college bound students succeed in their jobs.) High schools should also make sure students are well informed about college remedial courses, specifically: These are the courses they will be enrolled in if their high school work is not up to snuff; these courses do not bear college credit; taking them amounts to paying for an education that could have been had for free in high school; and students who have to take several of them almost never reach college graduation. (The sidebar "[What You Need to Do in High School If You Want to Graduate from College](#)" is a student-friendly fact sheet on the importance of high school achievement for college.)

4. High schools should serve college- and work-bound students equally well. Teachers, counselors, and administrators dream of students working hard, doing well in school, and graduating from college. It is a wonderful dream—but that doesn't mean it is in every student's best interest. Those who haven't done well academically and those whose interests are not in the liberal arts are best served with an honest look at their current chances in college and a serious examination of the alternatives, such as training opportunities and job placement assistance. The fact is, despite the economy's growing preference for college degrees, there are many good jobs available to high school graduates. (For more information on the importance of high school for the non-college bound, see the sidebar "[All Good Jobs Don't Require a College Degree...](#)") Postponing

college is also a viable option. 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 (NCES 1999). Their age and employment may give them the experience to make better course choices, the maturity to be more disciplined students, skills that will help them pass some courses, and perhaps even employer-paid tuition benefits.

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Too often, we think students' problems are inside of them, and we blame students' poor motivation. However, most students tend to be motivated if they see incentives for effort. But in the case of high school performance, we obscure what is at stake for most students. While top quartile students (those aiming for highly selective colleges) are told the incentives for better grades and test scores, the vast majority of students get the impression that high school achievement, grades, and test scores are irrelevant.

Students must realize that high school grades are important: Grades strongly predict future careers. There are strong incentives for school effort and students can improve their adult attainments by improving their high school grades. Although most colleges are not selective—and most unselective colleges (and most employers) ignore grades in selecting applicants—even unselective colleges and employers discover that youths with better high school grades are more successful in attaining college degrees and higher earnings.

The American educational system has taken a bold step in making college accessible to so many students. However, the revolution is still incomplete, and research has identified a number of difficulties in educators', parents', and students' understandings of college and what it requires. This revolution poses new challenges and a set of unintended consequences. We will need thoughtful solutions to address them.

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*Grade point average is the easiest-to-use predictor of college success. Research by Clifford Adelman (1999), however, shows that the intensity and quality of one's high school curriculum is actually an even more powerful predictor. But since course content and teacher expectations vary widely from school to school, making use of this indicator can be difficult. Nonetheless, the gist of both Adelman's and my research is clear: College-bound students should take the most difficult courses possible and work hard to earn the highest grades possible. To read more about Adelman's findings, see [High School Preparation Is the Best Predictor of College Graduation](#). ([back to article](#))

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