Preparing high-school students for higher expectations

Something remarkable happened this year at San Marcos High School in Texas: The percentage of students planning to attend college more than doubled from the previous year.

Why? For the first time, the school made applying to college a graduation requirement.

Every high school in the country should follow its bold lead.

No, not every student will go to college. There will always be young people drawn to other endeavors. But all students and their families should make the decision from an informed and prepared position.

The consequences of not pursuing some kind of postsecondary education or training in today's economy are huge. I doubt most high-school seniors know the average worker with a bachelor's degree makes nearly $1 million more over the course of a lifetime than someone with a high-school diploma. Once upon a time, high-paying industrial jobs were plentiful. Today, most living-wage jobs require some form of education or training beyond high school.
It is one thing if teenagers know the facts, understand the application and financial-aid process and decide not to go to college. It is another if they do not consider college because society never considered them college material. For a disproportionate number of low-income and minority students, the latter is too often the case.

Before San Marcos High initiated the graduation requirement, Gabriel Tenorio was looking forward to finishing high school. The 18-year-old figured he would get a job at McDonald's after graduation.

But then advisers at his school explained the income disparities between those with some college and those without.

"It got me thinking," he said. "If I wanted a family, would I be able to support them working at McDonald's or something? Would I even be able to support myself?"

The staff at San Marcos did not expect students to figure out the application process on their own. In conjunction with a local community college, the school provided weeks worth of information fairs, individual counseling, parent workshops, campus tours and financial-aid seminars.

Students who could show proof of acceptance to college or any kind of vocational- or technical-training program were exempted from the requirement; some special-education students and a handful of regular-education students opted out.

Next year, about 75 percent of the mostly low-income, mostly Hispanic graduating class intends to go on to community college or another kind of postsecondary program. Tenorio is among them. He plans to start community college in the fall.

Most high schools do not go as far as San Marcos, but an increasing number are requiring students to plan for the future. It's a wise trend. Starting with next year's freshman class, all students in Washington state will be expected to complete a five-year plan in order to graduate. Some high schools have already implemented similar programs.
But the best ones start much earlier than high school. In truth, senior year is too late to start thinking about postsecondary education. Some districts and outside programs such as GEAR-UP get students thinking about college as early as middle school. That way, students can make informed choices about what courses to take.

An aggressive guidance program in the Franklin Pierce School District in Tacoma is being replicated in many other districts. The program starts in sixth grade and requires students to meet regularly in advisory groups and review academic goals with their parents and a counselor. Before graduation, seniors must present portfolios and discuss their future plans in front of a community panel. Other schools are starting to align high-school-graduation requirements with college-entrance requirements.

Obviously, the value of a college education cannot be measured only in increased wages. Individuals and society benefit from more education in countless ways. People with more education are healthier, less likely to be unemployed or in prison and are more likely to volunteer and vote. A better-educated population translates into greater tax revenues, better productivity and less reliance on government assistance.

The U.S. Department of Labor projects 22 of the 30 fastest-growing occupations in the next decade will require some postsecondary education. The majority will require a bachelor's degree.

Yet, our public-education system continues to steer many low-income and minority students away from demanding courses in high school that would prepare them for college. Many do not consider college because they have never been exposed to it or assume their families cannot afford it.

An equitable education system would help all students see college as a worthwhile — and attainable — goal.

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