

NOT TRULY COLLEGE PREP

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In mid-May, ACT—the major alternative to the SAT— released a nationwide study of last year’s high school graduates. The sobering conclusion of that study was that only about one-fourth (26 percent) of the high school students who take a complete college-prep curriculum (four years of English and three years each of mathematics, science, and social studies) are prepared to do college-level work.

This means that of those high school graduates who have completed the curriculum that purports precisely to prepare them for college—those in what we used to call the academic track—three-quarters need remedial classes.

Of those students who did not take the “academic” curriculum, only 14 percent were deemed college-ready in all four test areas, and over one-third were not prepared in any of them.

Cynthia Schmeiser, president and chief operating officer of ACT’s Education Division, called this situation “shocking.”

The ACT report confirms what anyone of reasonable acumen should have known long ago: Our high school courses are simply not doing what they are obliged to do. Those courses are not the stepping stones to future academic progress that they should be, and they are not portals to lifelong learning or to skilled employment.

Anyone who roams from class to class within a given high school will find that the Algebra 1 class taught in one classroom is not likely to be even approximately the same as the Algebra 1 in another classroom. Such an educational tourist will even discover that in some classes called ‘Algebra 1,’ no algebra is taught at all. This has a snowball effect throughout the school.

If someone then goes from school to school, the variances of content between courses with the same title, let alone the grading standards, are so wide that one would be tempted to conclude that many course names in our public schools are merely decorative and symbolic.

Frequently, students are allowed—even encouraged—to do work that is totally unrelated to the course in which they are enrolled. According to Kati Haycock, director of the Washington-based pro-standards Education Trust, “A course may be labeled college-preparatory English. But if the students have more than three-paragraph-long assignments, it is unusual. Or they’ll be asked to color a poster. We say, ‘How about doing analysis?’ and they look at us like we are demented.”

Consequently, the number of students who need remedial work in college is growing every year.

The impact is particularly profound on our low-income students. According to a study by the National Center for Educational Accountability, based in Austin, Texas, a majority of low-income students who received credit for a college-preparatory curriculum in Texas needed remediation when they reached college.

The ACT report shows that what is true in Texas is true across the nation. According to the report, “many high school students are not learning the content implied by the titles of the courses in which they are enrolled.”

The ACT report also makes it clear that the push to compensate for systemic deficiencies by adding honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses is misguided. Even a significant number of students who took these courses were not ready for college-level work.

The number of AP examinations taken in this country has more than doubled in the last decade. This is frequently cited as an example of positive progress in our schools. It is not.

Even though students who take these courses do better than those who do not, they still do not do well enough. The ACT report affirmed that the AP course emphasis “puts the cart of college-level courses before the horse of college preparation.” In other words, the increase in AP courses has not had the vaunted increase in college preparedness that is claimed for such courses.

Indeed, from personal experience and peer observation during my teaching career, I can say that the content of most AP courses is less than the content of standard courses when I went to high school in the 1950s. From studying earlier textbooks, I know that even what we learned then was less than what was done before World War II.

The conclusion should be inevitable—that the only salvation for our schools is to establish a nationally uniform, rigorous, standard curriculum supported by nationally uniform tests.

Anything less than that will keep us mired in the mud of failure that currently is engulfing—and threatening the survival of—our national intellectual and political sovereignty.

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