

The Impact of Postsecondary Admissions Policies on Secondary Education

Changes in college entrance requirements will bring about more rigorous academic preparation in high school.

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A nationwide trend to raise admission requirements for postsecondary education is sweeping the country. In the last two years, colleges and universities in 27 states have upgraded or reconsidered freshman admission criteria. For example:

- The University of California now requires that high school seniors take more English and a heavier academic load.

- Kentucky will require three units of math and two of science in biology, chemistry, or physics.

- The University of Utah will now require four units of English.

- Essex Community College in New Jersey, estimating that 85 percent of their new students have had serious academic deficiencies, established admission standards for the first time.

These new college admission requirements will be a major force in reshaping American secondary schools. The effect

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will be a reallocation of teachers and courses to college preparation unless there is a significant increase in school budgets. Most school systems face a situation where increasing some secondary courses forces a reduction in other courses. In California, increased college prep courses have caused cutbacks in vocational and personal development courses. This results in few alternatives for students in the middle or general high school tracks. Course redistribution has less of an effect on remedial students; high schools must help them pass minimum competency tests.

A large problem will be the lack of teachers in math and science. Some science teachers have been diverted into math courses, and this may help in states where colleges have raised math but not science admission requirements. But the requirements most commonly increased, according to a survey by the National Association of Secondary Principals, were in both math and science.

A prime factor in the tightening of college entrance requirements is the inability of secondary school graduates to do college work, the result of a watered-down curriculum in which students spend less time on college-oriented academic material. Factors contributing to this debasement of the high school curriculum include:

1. *Overattention to the legitimate needs of students in the bottom band of the achievement distribution, at the expense of the college-bound.* Alarm over functional illiteracy among high school graduates led many states to institute minimum competency tests for graduation. Schools then diverted resources away from college preparatory courses in the effort to get as many students as possible to pass the tests.

2. *Lax college admission and graduation requirements.* Since the 1960s, colleges have offered a smorgasbord of electives and distribution requirements rather than a "curriculum." In the California State University system, an A in typing weighs as heavily in the admissions process as an A in Physics! Moreover, many colleges base their admission decisions on ACT and SAT scores that cannot be aligned with what is taught in high school. In such an atmosphere, it is not clear what "preparation for college" might mean.

3. *Knowledge among high school students that academic deficiencies can be made up through remedial courses in college.* The need to learn academic skills in high school becomes less urgent

when community colleges offer remedial instruction.

Changing the Tide

One step that colleges and universities are taking is simply to inform the public—parents, teachers, students, and guidance counselors—about the competencies college freshmen need and about the sort of secondary curriculum that provides adequate preparation for college work. Stanford University Dean of Admissions Fred Hargadon was astonished by the lack of "cues" reported by college-bound students and their parents. He testified before the National Commission on Excellence in Education that 50,000 copies of Stanford's statement on preparation for admission had been requested:

For too long a time colleges have simply taken it for granted that knowledge about the kind of preparation which, if not required, is at least highly desirable, was widespread. We assumed such knowledge on the part of the secondary schools and, through them, on the part of students and their parents.¹

The dissemination of "expectation statements" like the College Board's *Academic Preparation for College*² signals a rededication of colleges and universities to their leadership role in determining the content of "an education"—a responsibility they abdicated in the 1960s.

There is reason to be skeptical, however, about the effects of increased admission requirements. Requiring a course called "mathematics" doesn't guarantee that the content covered prepares students for college work, especially when there is a shortage of math teachers. These proposals, in sum, are likely to compel more secondary students to take courses with titles like "English" or "science," but college recommendations on content *within* the high school courses are difficult to reinforce.

Moreover, during the 1980s, the number of 18-year-olds will drop about 18 percent, resulting in pressure on institutions of higher education to lower their admission standards. Unless we insist on maintaining high expectations, the current policy phase of raising standards may thus give way in the 1990s to another cycle of lowering them. □

¹Office of Admissions, *A Memo to Secondary Schools, Students, and Parents* (Palo Alto: Stanford University, July 1981).

²*Academic Preparation for College: What Students Need to Know and Be Able to Do* (New York: The College Board, 1983).

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