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Learner: **Steven Diaz**

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ED5003

Dr. Butler Pearson

Philosophy of Education

**Activity 11: Culminating Research
Paper**

Dr. B-P,

Thank you for being my mentor for this course! I enjoy the course readings, your feedback, and the challenge of writing academic papers (not my forte!). Do you also mentor ED5001? I have this course as one of my electives and I am hoping you also mentor ED5001. Just curiosity, why you went back teaching high school students?

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Culminating Research Paper: The Contradiction of Higher Academic Standards; A Higher

Number of Remedial College Students

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Introduction

The author of this paper has been teaching for a year remedial math courses for a small Catholic university in Miami, Fl. During his short experience, he has encountered that the majority of his students lack the basic or essential skills to succeed in Introductory or Intermediate Algebra Courses, which the course content is equivalent to high school Algebra 1 and 2 courses. In many instances, this instructor has faced with the challenge of helping students who do not know how to add, subtract, multiply, and divide whole numbers, skills that students should had mastered by the end of Fourth Grade in any elementary school in United States. He has met students that have repeated the same course (Introductory Algebra or Intermediate Algebra) several times, which implies that these students had spent a considerable amount of time, effort, and money attempting to satisfactorily pass a high school math course. In many other instances, there have been students who allegedly took advance math courses (e.g. Pre-Calculus, Statistics, etc.) in high school but they ended taking remedial math courses with this instructor. It would be easy to assume that students who take remedial math courses are freshmen college students; however, there had been junior or senior students who cannot complete degree requirements due to the fact they have not pass these courses.

Similar experiences are also happening in remedial English courses. Students are struggling in reading comprehension and/or writing skills. Spelling is often overlooked by students when writing their papers and their main ideas can hardly be identified due to their poor ability to construct coherent and structured sentences and paragraphs. There have been instances where students write a paragraph as just one long sentence. Students often struggle reading a short essay and finding its main idea. Reading is an essential skill for problem-solving in mathematics

and often students cannot solve a math problem not due to the complexity of the math concepts; instead, it is due to their poor reading comprehension skills. They do not understand the problem.

Not only many of the students enrolled in remedial course are lacking basic skills in Mathematics and English, they also lack an essential skill to succeed in their academic journey: study skills. This instructor has personally seen students who constantly procrastinate, do not take notes during class, do not know how to manage their time, do not preview the material before the next class, do not read and follow instructions, and often come unprepared for class (e.g. do not have a pencil or pen to write notes). A common occurrence is to see many students focused during class on their cell phones or iPods instead on the topic that the instructor is introducing. The university provides a wealth of resources and services to help students achieve their academic goals but students constantly hesitate or seem reluctant to use such resources and services. Students seem to understand the importance of earning a college degree; however, they do not seem committed to endure the hard work and effort implied in earning a higher education degree.

During faculty and/or administration meetings or informal conversations, a topic often discussed is about the quality of freshmen students entering the university and how unprepared or unready these students are to succeed with the high demands and challenges they will face at the college level. It is shocking to see students who spent 12 or 13 years of schooling, but they can hardly succeed their first two years of college. Graduation rates are being affected significantly by this fact and retention has become a major issue in this instructor's university, which was one of the reasons he was hired as a math instructor by the Academic Enhancement Center. In addition, there are many concerns among the instructor's colleagues, and himself of what would be the future of our communities, if the number of students taking remedial courses

increases and these students continue giving up their efforts earning a post secondary education, which is necessary for the ever-changing and technological society that we all currently live.

It is becoming common to find students who do not want to spend their time thinking, reflecting and becoming aware of the problems, challenges, and opportunities present in our society. Instead, and as one of this instructor's colleague once said , students prefer to become automatons where with the press of a button in one of their gadgets or computer to receive what they need now, and what could produce immediate gratification and results (D. Quesada, personal communication, September 4, 2007). According to Gutek (2004), students' presentism, which is the belief that significant, relevant and important events and information are happening now and it must be found quickly or instantaneously, is one of the ills of contemporary American education. This is causing our students to lack the perspective or see *the whole picture* of an issue or topic that comes from thorough research and reflection.

Problem Statement

According to Gutek (2004), the main goal of the standards movement is to improve American education by setting up higher academic standards and measure students' achievement of such standards. If students do not perform at level as defined in the standards, then remediation and intervention programs will be implemented to improve students' performance. The No Child Left Behind Act has been in effect since 2002, in which schools districts, schools, and teachers are being held accountable to improve all students academic performance more than ever in American education history. This accountability has forced schools' administrators and teachers to focus all their efforts and resources to improve students' chances to pass annual standardized assessments and avoid being included in the list of failing schools and lose federal funding to support school programs.

However, this emphasis on higher academic standards seems to not be producing the expected outcomes, the improvement on students' academic achievement. According to the Issue Brief by the Alliance of Excellence Education (2007), one-third of the students who graduated from high school and made it to college have to take remedial courses. This statistic seems to contradict the main goal or purpose of the standards movement. If schools are spending considerable amount of effort and resources to help students pass the mandated standardized state tests, then why too many students need to take remedial courses when entering college? If students are being taught to meet high academic standards, then why too many students are not ready to handle the demands and challenges involved in higher education? Why there is not a correlation between high standards and college readiness?

Education unlocks the doors of opportunity for an individual's life to become the best person he or she can be. For this to happen, there should be no difference or distinction between graduating from high school and college readiness. Frances Couey, a school principal in Alabama, once pointed out in a newspaper interview that it seems there is a gap between what the states' department of education expects and college expects (as cited in Hughes, 2007). Earning a high school diploma should guarantee college readiness. Only then the promise of the Educational Law of 2001, "No Child Left Behind," will be complete.

Literature Review

Roderick Paige, a former United States Secretary of Education under the first presidential term of George W. Bush, stated his disappointment about the fact that too many high school graduated students are required to take remedial courses when entering college. He believed that NCLB law will be a factor for college readiness when he said "My hope is that through No Child Left Behind, we can strengthen our nation's primary and secondary education so that all students

enter the postsecondary world as prepared as possible" (as cited in Hammer, 2003, para. 4). However, NCLB still has not made a significant change in the number of high school graduated students being prepared for college. According to the Issue Brief presented by the Alliance for Excellence Education (2007), only 70% of high school students are graduating on time, and out of this group, only 34% are ready for college. Almost a third of first year college students must take remedial courses before taking regular college courses (Gutek, 2004, p. 268). In the institution where this instructor currently teach, there are seven sections of remedial math courses that approximately averages 25 students per course section this year. In other words, approximately 175 students out of approximately 400 first year students in this institution are taking remedial math courses. This is a significant high number of students not prepared for college.

Many parents and students believe that the American education is a seamless system where students who go through high school and graduate can easily continue to earn an undergraduate and graduate degree (Gilroy, 2003). These students worked their way through their K-12 education and enter college feeling confident they will succeed, but only to find out that they are academically unprepared (Weiner, 2002). To many, this would cause frustrations, disbelief, denial, anger, and will probably lose interest and motivation in pursuing a college degree. Many of these students decide to find a job that will probably provide temporary satisfaction for 5-15 years, in which by then they probably realized that a college degree is the key to unlock the doors of opportunity for a better life. This is probably why so many working adults return to school.

These academically unprepared students and the institutions that receive them will have to spend considerable amount of time and money to get them up to speed since remedial courses do

not count toward a baccalaureate degree. If colleges want to increase the quality, diversity, and the cost-effective effectiveness of their institutions, then high schools must produce more fully prepared graduates for college (Reed & Conklin, 2005). According to Dr. Boylan, a professor and Director of the National Center for Developmental Education at Appalachian State University, only forty-three percent of students complete a college preparatory curriculum in high school and sixty-five percent of high school students go to college; meaning there is a high percent of students who did not take a curriculum that would have prepared them for college (as cited in Hamilton, 2001).

In a recent report by Education Week, ACT scores were slightly better in 2007 than the previous year but the producers of the nation's second most widely used college-admission test still warned about the lack of rigor in the typical high school core curriculum and its inadequacies to prepare students for college (Cech, 2007). According to the Alliance for Excellence Education (2007), research says that the key for college readiness is a rigorous high school course work. Richard L. Ferguson, the chief executive officer of ACT Inc., criticized the current typical high school curriculum since it lacks the proper level of rigor; he suggested that instead of forcing students to take additional courses on top of their current loads, the rigor of the courses that students are currently taking should be improved (as cited in Cech, 2007). This is exactly what Alfred North Whitehead stated in his essay *The Aims of Education* in which he enunciated two educational commandments: "Do not teach too many subjects," and "What you teach, teach thoroughly" (as cited in Cahn, 1997). In other words, it is better to learn well a few main ideas or basic concepts and in every possible combination or ways. It is not about the quantity of courses students take; instead it is about the quality of education students get. This lack of rigor is often common in high school math programs where schools are passing students

to take advance math courses without having yet mastered adequately the prerequisite courses (Hoyt, 1999). The ability of students to obtain a college degree is significantly impacted by their ability to learn college mathematics, which could limit their choices of major and hinder their opportunities of success (Hoyt, 1999).

It would be easy to blame high school teachers for the lack of rigor in the core courses since they are directly responsible of students achieving the state high academic standards. As the Alliance for Excellence Education (2007) pointed out, teachers are the ones who have the greatest impact on students' learning for college since they can set high expectations, teach rigorous course content and college readiness, and motivate their students to pursue a college education. However, teachers are under heavily pressure by school administrators, politicians, and the public to ensure their students pass the state tests. Teachers are often criticized for "teaching for the test," in particular during these times where accountability has been heavily emphasized under the NCLB law, but their jobs and careers could be in jeopardy if they do not focus their students to past the test.

In addition, due to the shortage of teachers in critical areas like math and science, there are many teachers who are teaching subjects that they were not trained for and many high schools teachers are not "highly-qualified" as the NCLB law requires ("High School," 2007). In his essay *What is Teaching?*, Hirst stated "One of the most important things for a teacher is surely to be clear about the nature of the central activity in which he is professionally involved" (as cited in Cahn, 1997). In other words, teachers who are teaching out-of-field do not have a clear idea of the central activity of the course he or she is teaching; therefore, increasing the chances that he or she lacks the rigor to teach the course content.

Often, teachers who recent graduated from teacher education programs are usually assigned to teach in low-performing or struggling schools (“High Schools,” 2007) without any type of induction; due to the teachers’ inexperience and the challenges they face in these schools, their transition into teaching becomes a survival experience and the rigor of their teachings and their motivation to teach is affected. In many instances, teachers cannot handle the overwhelming experience of teaching in these schools and decide to exit the teaching profession; therefore, increasing the shortage of teachers. Those teachers who survived the challenging teaching conditions, they probably changed their original ideals and perspectives of what teaching is. According to the Alliance for Excellence (2007), research shows that teachers have the tendency to have lower expectations for their students in schools with high minority student population unless they are well prepared to teach in these schools. The conditions in which new teachers are introduced into the teaching profession are taking away their power of making a difference in students’ lives and the opportunity of their students of having teachers that care, and want the best for them. Teachers who start expecting less from their students or do not demand rigor in their work, thinking this is the best teaching approach, are closing the doors of opportunities to their students to be the best they can be. This is contrary of the two tasks of the caring teacher that Nel Noddings stated: to stretch students’ world and to work with them cooperatively to overcome the struggles and become competent in that world (as cited in Cahn, 1997).

As the Alliance for Excellence Education (2007) indicated, it should not be fair to assume that main reason for not preparing students for college is the poor-quality of teachers, since probably the major reason may be the lack of alignment between the state standards, and what college expects. There is a disconnection between how high school teachers are preparing their students for the future and how students succeed and meet the college’s demands and

expectations. Recently, the ACT did a poll where sixty-five percent of college professors believe that high school academic standards do not prepare students for college (Stansbury, 2007).

“High school *teachers often value and teach different things than college instructors expect*, due in part to poorly aligned standards and curriculum” (“High Schools,” 2007). College professors prefer students to know fewer but more targeted topics and to master the basic skills than learning superficially or briefly the variety of content that high school teachers are teaching.

According to Gilroy (2003), a group of policymakers have called the relationship between K-12 and colleges “dysfunctional” and have demanded collaboration and cooperation to improve the education of this country, in particular in the areas of academic standards, teacher preparation, and community involvement. There is a gap in the educational continuum process between the education at the K-12 and higher education. Ravitch once stated “Education, today more than anytime in the past, is the key to successful participation in society” (as cited in Gutek, 2004). According to Conley (2006), the baccalaureate degree is one of the key attributes or added value that employers look in a person. However, it is astonishing to believe that there is little dialogue between K-12 and higher education institutions (Gilroy, 2003) which is probably the reason for the high number of students taking remedial courses since they are poorly prepared for college expectations. Robert McCabe, a former president of Miami-Dade Community College, emphasized the disconnection between K-12 and higher education when he stated “Nowhere in America is there a match between the requirements to graduate high school and the requirements to begin college work” (as cited in Hamilton, 2001).

This disconnection can be seen among faculties of higher education who distance themselves from their K-12 counterparts and show no interest in the issues that are happening in the public schools. According to Kysilka (2003), many faculty members of higher education institutions do not seem concerned about the ramifications of the NCLB law since there is the belief that such

legislation will not affect their work, and it only pertains to those educators in the Pre-K-12 system. “Many colleges and universities are accustomed to a high degree of autonomy and believe that secondary education’s primary role is to serve the needs of higher education” (Conley, 2006). To add more to the disconnection factor, the political structures that govern K-12 schools and higher education institutions are different systems, different legislative committees, and separate funding (Gilroy, 2003). It will be easy to infer that each sector of education only watch for its interests and not what they have in common, the education of our youth.

However, there has been an education reform movement to close the gap or disconnection between K-12 and higher education. The goal of the K-16 education reform movement is to adopt more-rigorous high school graduation requirements, aligning high school standards with college expectations, expanding the opportunities for students to take college while in high school and setting up a data information system that provides consistent and accurate information to both education sectors (Tonn, 2007). Donald Langenberg, who served as a chancellor for the University of Maryland and championed a K-16 partnership in that state, stated “With almost 70% of high school graduates now seeking postsecondary education within two years of graduation, it is essential that preparation for college be a universal standard” (Gilroy 2003).

One of the obstacles of the K-16 reform is the incompatibility between the high school exit exams and college admission requirements (Gilroy, 2003), where most high school tests focus on minimum competencies rather than knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in college. Only ninth- and tenth-grade content levels are assessed in the state standardized tests, and rarely require students to explain their reasoning or to apply their knowledge to new situations (“High

Schools,” 2007). In addition, these tests do not provide useful information or feedback about college readiness. This is probably why the gap exists and why so many parents and students are confused on what is needed to succeed in college.

The responsibility to prepare students for college should not rely only on the high schools. Higher education institutions need to be involved to improve high school students’ college readiness and reduce the number of students taking remedial courses. According to Reed and Conklin (2005), higher education institutions can play a key role by defining college-readiness and helping align high school standards and college assessments, so these can reinforce each other. This will allow high school students to have a smoother transition and a better opportunity to succeed in college, since teachers, students, and parents will have a clear and focused view what is necessary to be prepared for college and how to achieve it. Those who are in higher education cannot afford to show no interest or ignore any legislation that has an impact on the Pre-K-12 education system, and higher education should be proactive in dealing with any issues with these legislations by providing guidance, help and support to K-12 educators (Kysilka, 2003). As a professor of education at Coppin State stated about higher education institutions becoming partners with K-12 school, “We had to ask ourselves, ‘If we don’t help, who would?’” (as cited in Morse, 2001).

Conley (2006) pointed out that there has been many educational reforms at the K-12 level but only a few have been designed to bridge the gap between high school and college. For example, dual enrollment programs have created opportunities for some students to experience college courses. However, these few reforms are not addressing the general issue of high schools, college readiness for all. Aligning the K-12 standards with college readiness will require an intense effort to reform high schools (“High Schools,” 2007). Teachers will need more than a test

to measure if students are ready for college. Due to the overcrowding of most high schools and overload of courses, teachers scarcely have time to work in collaboration with colleagues and update their content knowledge to a college level. The pressures to perform well in the state tests are not allowing teachers to incorporate regularly critical-thinking skills in the classroom. Tonn (2007) also pointed out that to bridge the gap between K-12 and postsecondary institutions will be difficult since changing the number and rigor of graduation requirements due to the teacher shortages in many states. It is also necessary to break with the “cycle of doom” (D. Quesada, personal communication, September 4, 2007) where higher education institutions must stop graduating under-prepared teachers, and schools must stop hiring ineffective and under-qualified teachers; otherwise, students cannot be expected to meet high standards and college readiness if their teachers are unable or are under-prepared to meet such standards.

As the Alliance for Excellence Education (2007) stated “The clear goal is to focus teaching on college readiness.” If schools prepare students for college, they will be giving youngsters the “versatile intelligence” that Ravitch (as cited in Gutek, 2004) stated in her essay *Left Back* about the primary function of schools. This type of intelligence will allow individuals to learn new tasks and take control of their lives, no matter if they go to college or not. Robert M. Hutchinson, in his essay *The Higher Learning in America*, pointed out that “Since education cannot duplicate the experiences which the students will have when he graduates, it should devote itself to developing correctness in thinking as a means to practical wisdom, that is, to intelligent action” (as cited in Gutek, 2004). In other words, high schools should arrange the sequence of their curriculum in a way that will promote habits of mind that are crucial for college success and lifelong learning (Conley, 2006). This will only happen if K-12 educational

system and higher education institution will become partners of the same goal: to unlock the doors of opportunity, for everyone.

Conclusion

This instructor chose the topic, for this research paper, as result of his daily experiences seeing students struggling with course content that they should have learned in high school. He has seen his students motivated and excited to be in college and the potential to have a better future; however, they cannot handle the challenges and demands involved earning a college degree because they lack the essential skills to succeed. He has seen students with exceptional potential who let their lack of basic and study skills become an obstacle and defeat their attempts to achieve their dreams, even after the instructor and the school has provided assistance and services of every kind just to see them succeed. It is perplexing to see students wasting a unique opportunity of attending college, which not every person has the means to attend one, due to lack of initiative, commitment, and determination. This instructor could not understand why this is happening, in particular during these times where K-12 schools are solely focused on high academic standards. It seems paradoxical that high standards are resulting in higher number of students in remediation. For such reason, this instructor decided to find out possible reasons for such contradiction.

It is often easily assumed that the teachers are fully responsible and blame them for students' academic deficiencies and this instructor in many instances unfairly has assumed the same. There is no doubt that there are bad teachers who are disempowering our students their opportunities to succeed; however, the majority of our teachers work very hard to make a difference in students' lives and want the best for them. The problem of having so many students taking remedial courses is much bigger than the lack of rigor of our high school

teachers. It involves the lack of cooperation and collaboration of two education sectors (the K-12 system and higher education institutions) for improving American education, who zealously watch for their own interests.

Remedial education will always be necessary to provide a second chance to those students who barely survived the rigorous work and high expectations in those high schools that contain a college preparatory curriculum. The problem is that not all high schools have such curriculum and the reason for a high number of freshman students taking remedial courses. For such reasons, higher education institutions have to make up what K-12 schools left undone. Students who take remedial courses in college take longer to graduate and will cost more to earn a degree. However, this is not the right way to provide an education that should unlock the doors of opportunity to all students.

The best possible solution to reduce the number of unprepared students who will attend college is that K-12 and colleges become partners of the education venture. Aligning high school standards with college expectations will provide transparent information to teachers, parents, and students on what to focus and work for. Higher institutions need to collaborate with K-12 system to improve the competency skills of teachers and prepare them for the challenges of a constant changing American society. K-12 and higher education institutions must find ways of sharing information of students' academic performance and how this information can be used to prepare students for college. There is no doubt that the possibilities to improve American education are endless through a partnership between K-12 and colleges. Finding all the possible ways on how a K-16 partnership would improve American education could be a topic for another research paper. However, it will take considerable amount of time and very determined individuals with a strong leadership to convince all parts involved in education about the benefits

of a K-16 reform. On the meantime, the promise of “No Child Left Behind” is constantly broken.

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