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College and Career Readiness: Synonymous or Separate?



CONVERSATIONS ABOUT

EXPECTATIONS for today's high school graduates usually include some reference to college and career readiness. It seems our key focus is college readiness and preparation for all students. The career reference is simply an afterthought or an attempt to give deference to those who may not be willing or able to pursue college. Such a mind-set is a disservice to both colleges and careers.

Today's high school graduates need a set of skills that come from instructional rigor in all the traditional core content. However, they also need additional skills that include the ability to use technology competently, interpersonal skills to work collaboratively and citizenship skills to participate in a democratic society. These expectations apply to every student, whether we call it college or career readiness.

America has given sporadic acknowledgment to the importance of technical skills. When the Smith-Hughes National Vocational Education Act was approved in 1917, many people worked in agriculture, but the transformation of the nation's industrial machine was well under way. The emphasis on preparing students to pursue employment in vocations was reinforced through several federal acts and by various state initiatives. While "random" may be a harsh descriptor of these efforts, the process was neither comprehensive nor coordinated nationally or in many states.

Today, we seem to be sending conflicting messages. We emphasize preparation to enter college driven by what degree-granting higher-education institutions expect. Simultaneously, we acknowledge that although most jobs will require some postsecondary training, a college degree does not guarantee skills or employment. It may be time to admit we need highly skilled technicians in many fields, and that compensation and prestige in these fields are

on par or above what many college graduates receive.

Those of us who enjoyed the college experience and earned multiple degrees have great influence in schools and school districts. We appropriately encourage students to pursue rigorous courses that will prepare them to enter challenging college programs. However, we also must acknowledge that a significant number of students in our schools are not inclined to enter a traditional college program. These students do have interests and talents our nation requires. Our responsibility to them lies in providing the rigor and relevance in their preparation.

Skills in technical reading, mathematics, science and citizenship, and the capacity to problem solve, are a must for every student. A coordinated plan is needed that reaches from Washington to the local school and values and supports viable career options. We must also learn to articulate this message of value effectively to students. Additionally, the support for programs must provide more than the pittance of investment in technical training that has been characteristic for the past four decades.

Training commensurate with industry technical standards is not cheap. Our friends in business know this and invest accordingly, but school-based training never has measured up. Our schools often have facilities and equipment discarded by others.

What does this tell us? First, we need to prepare all students with strong academics while we customize our expectations to match individual student trajectories. When we take our \$50,000 automobiles to the dealership for repair, our first question is not "What was your ACT/SAT score?" or "Did you take calculus and AP history?" We want high-level technical skills, and we are willing to pay for them.

BENNY GOODEN is AASA president in 2012-13.
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