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## **College-prep expectations don't mesh with realities**

**By Cara Solomon**

*Seattle Times Eastside bureau*

Leah Belisle just assumed she was prepared. She had, after all, graduated second in her class.

She took the most difficult classes at Meridian High School, a rural school near Bellingham, from which few of her peers went on to four-year colleges. She served as student-body president, played two varsity sports and developed close ties to her teachers.

But in her first semester at the University of Washington, Belisle was stunned. The pace, the intensity, the fact she was expected to read 200 pages of a psychology textbook in one week — all of it felt overwhelming.

"I worked hard in high school, but they could have worked me harder," said Belisle, now a sophomore. "Not only was I adjusting to new people, a new place to live and a new city, but I was adjusting to a new way of learning."

From the U.S. Department of Education to the company that designs the Advanced Placement (AP) program, experts have described a growing problem: High-school and college expectations rarely connect. Most high-school graduates are not prepared to enter college, studies show. And when they do enroll, many are not prepared to succeed.

One in four freshmen at four-year colleges don't return for their sophomore year, according to Education Trust, a nonprofit group that promotes higher academic achievement. One in two freshmen at two-year colleges does not return.

"I think people are catching on and beginning to recognize that this is one of the most serious issues confronting America," said Peter Negroni, senior vice president of K-12 education at the College Board, which develops the SAT, the PSAT and the AP program. "To me, it is the issue of our time."

Decades ago, high schools equipped students with basic knowledge and skills, then sent them into a work force where a "strong pair of shoulders" could get a student lifelong, well-paying work in a factory. Then, college was considered a finishing school for the elite.

But today's America revolves around the "knowledge economy," where high-school graduates earn an average \$15,000 less than college grads; most of the fastest-growing job sectors require higher education; and more than 75 percent of high-school grads plan to go to college.

"Parents and students of all incomes and races have gotten a clear signal that college pays off economically," said Michael Kirst, a Stanford University professor and director of The Bridge Project, a research group that works to strengthen the transition from high school to college. "But the system is still set up for 1903, when few went on to college."

The best college preparation is a curriculum that increases in rigor and sophistication as students advance, according to the Standards for Success Project, an initiative of the Association of American Universities. Before graduation, students should know how to think analytically, solve problems, form opinions and conduct research.

As part of Washington state's education-reform movement, the Governor's Council on Education Reform and Funding had a lengthy debate about what students should know, and be able to do, before they

## Top 10 myths about preparing for and attending college

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The Bridge Project at Stanford University compiled a list of the top 10 myths students believe about college for its recent report, "Betraying the College Dream." The national report included feedback from students, parents and educators in six states.

● **I can't afford college.** Students and parents regularly overestimate the cost of college.

● **I have to be a stellar athlete or student to get financial aid.** Most students receive some form of financial aid.

● **Meeting high-school-graduation requirements will prepare me for college.** Adequate preparation for college usually requires a more demanding curriculum than is reflected in minimum high-school-graduation requirements, sometimes even if that curriculum is termed "college prep."

● **Getting into college is the hardest part.** For most students, the hardest part is completing college.

● **Community colleges don't have academic standards.** Students usually must take placement tests at community colleges to qualify for college-level work.

● **It's better to take easier classes in high school and get better grades.** One of the best predictors of college success is taking rigorous high-school classes. Getting good grades in lower-level classes will not prepare students for college-level work.

● **My senior year in high school doesn't matter.** The classes students take in their senior year will often determine the classes they are able to take in college and how well-prepared they are for those classes.

● **I don't have to worry about my grades, or what classes I take, until my sophomore year.** Many colleges look at sophomore grades, and, in order to enroll in college-level courses, students need to prepare well for college. This means taking a well-thought-out series of courses starting no later than ninth or 10th grade.

● **I can't start thinking about financial aid until I know where I'm going to college.** Students need to file a federal-aid form before most colleges send out acceptance letters. This applies to students who attend community colleges, too, even though they can apply and enroll in the fall of the year they wish to attend.

● **I can take whatever classes I want when I get to college.** Most colleges and universities require students to take placement exams in

graduate. The discussion ended in new graduation requirements, which take effect in 2008.

The governor's council included business leaders and educators but did not include higher-ed representatives. Some say this is why a gap in expectations remains: Seniors are still required to complete at least two years of math, for example, but the state's higher-education system will not admit them unless they have completed at least three years.

"There are gaps all over the place," said Robin Rettew, associate director for policy for the state's Higher Education Coordinating Board. "There's a lot of work left to be done."

More than 20 states have joined a "K-16" network, working both locally and with counterparts in other states to coordinate learning at all levels, kindergarten through college. Washington has not joined that network, but Rettew said she and her colleagues at the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction and the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges are working on the issue.

Leaders in the K-16 movement say it is a matter of social justice. Upper-middle-class students are more likely than low-income students to take the rigorous classes they need for college success, according to Education Trust, which traces the problem to "tracking" in high schools.

Low-income students are not always encouraged to take high-level courses, such as Algebra 2, that are strong predictors for college success.

In Bellevue, where 90 percent of graduating seniors in 2002 planned to go to college, the level of preparation varies significantly.

The district ranks in the top 1 percent in the nation for participation in the AP curriculum. But in a district-sponsored follow-up study of the class of 2002, 35 percent of respondents said they had taken a remedial reading class in college and 38 percent said they took one in math.

"In high school, all I had to do was memorize," said one student in the survey. "In college, I actually had to think."

### **Remedial education**

To strengthen its connection to college, the Bellevue School District is working with educators from the Standards for Success Project.

The national project involved in-depth interviews with about 400 teachers and staff at more than 20 major institutions and has been hailed as the most comprehensive look into what higher education expects from its students.

Earlier this school year, Bellevue Superintendent Michael Riley convened his own advisory group on that topic. The group includes the director of the Standards for Success Project and other national-education reformers, as well as local officials from the University of Washington and Bellevue Community College (BCC).

"We need to make sure that the K-12 curriculum is a stair step in sophistication and rigor that prepares students for what they will experience at college and university," said Jean Floten, president of BCC.

Higher-education officials must take more responsibility for clarifying their expectations, Floten said. Many students enter community college expecting low standards, she said, then find themselves left out of credit courses because they could not pass placement exams.

About 80 percent of students who took the math-placement test at BCC were steered into remediation this autumn, while 46 percent ended up in remedial reading. State figures show about 66 percent of community-college freshmen end up in at least one remedial class.

The remedial rate is in the single digits at four-year colleges, said Rettew of the Higher Education Coordinating Board. But that figure is misleading, she said, because some institutions not equipped to provide remediation send their students to community colleges for the work.

The biggest predictor of whether a student will go to college, and succeed there, is the "quality and intensity" of the school's curriculum, according to the U.S. Department of Education. Students from low-income families who took a more rigorous curriculum nearly doubled their chances of completing college, according to a 1999 study.

At Holy Names Academy in Seattle, where more than 98 percent of students go on to college, students must complete four years of English and social studies, three of math, two of foreign language, fine arts and science. The all-girl Catholic school encourages each child to take at least one of the many AP courses offered.

"We would rather have students try it, and not have the best scores," said Principal Elizabeth Swift. "If they're not exposed to high-level thinking, how are they going to develop that?"

### **Independent thinkers**

Blake Behnke remembers the moment clearly: It was sophomore year, in an honors English class at Mercer Island High School. The teacher asked a question, then answered it herself. A student raised his hand and begged to differ.

"At first, you don't know: Is he going to get in trouble?" " said Behnke, now a freshman at Brigham Young University. "But then you realize that's what learning is."

The message from the Standards for Success Project is clear: Colleges want problem-solvers and independent thinkers, creative minds and passionate debaters. They want students with resilience, flexibility, and determination.

Sometimes, even high-performing schools will forget to nurture those skills.

"Those schools are preparing them for the admissions process, and hoping that, along the way, they're doing things right," said David Conley, director of the Standards for Success project and a University of Oregon professor. "The research suggests even these kids have some gaping holes in their knowledge and understanding."

At Woodinville High School, Lillian Nelson takes four AP classes, participates in drama, does about six hours of homework each night and sometimes gets as little as three hours of sleep. It's about the personal challenge, she said. "Some kids skydive. I work myself to death."

Nelson said AP courses are "good at forcing stuff into your mind." But she sees one thing missing: writing creatively. In her college applications, she was stumped by a question on how a personal obstacle shaped her life.

"You look at it and go, 'What? Say that again?' " Nelson said. "It's nothing like, 'Analyze the internal conflict of the main character in "Great Expectations." ' "

## **Obstacles**

Even as the nation's business leaders and education experts call for better college preparation, there are obstacles.

At the K-12 level, educators are scrambling to meet new state and federal standards that were not necessarily designed with college success in mind. And at the higher-education level, the debate has focused more on access and funding.

But there is another, over-arching obstacle, experts say: Society has not yet agreed to raise its expectations for all students.

A national survey in 2000 showed that although 71 percent of students planned to attend a four-year college, only 52 percent of parents thought their children would make it. And high-school teachers expected only one-third of their students to go to four-year colleges.

Not every student is "college material," the argument goes, and forcing all students to take a rigorous curriculum will only set up some for failure and humiliation.

That was the argument last year in Bellevue, when Riley introduced a proposal to require all students to take a college-level course in each of the four "core" disciplines before graduation. More than 300 people packed a forum on the topic, saying the district was moving too far, too fast.

"I've got a heck of a lot of people pushing back and saying, 'Oh, that's unrealistic,' " said Riley, who shelved the proposal. "It reminds me of how the country was a hundred years ago, when people started saying, 'Everybody ought to get a high-school education.' "

But it is the district's responsibility to prepare every student for college, Riley said. They might not make finish college. They might not choose to go. But at least, he said, we will have them ready.

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