

The Senior Slump

Making the most of high school preparation

By Michael W. Kirst

THE SENIOR YEAR in high school has substantial but underutilized potential for improving student preparation to enter and succeed in postsecondary education. Because admissions processes begin early in the senior year, preparation primarily occurs between grades eight and 11. Failure to use the senior year to enhance preparation for success at the postsecondary education level reflects the deep disjuncture between postsecondary and K–12 education, and the consequent lack of incentives for students to work hard academically and prepare for postsecondary education.

Neither K–12 nor postsecondary education claims the academic content of the senior year as a basis for further education. As a result, the senior high school curriculum is not linked clearly to the first two years of study at a university, or to a continuous vision of liberal education. Policy-making for the two education levels takes place in separate orbits that rarely interact, and the policy focus for K–16 has been more concerned with access to postsecondary education than with completion of degrees or programs.

Many students who express interest in college mistakenly assume that meeting their high school graduation requirements means they are prepared for college. All types of students, including the highest performing, talk about the second semester of the senior year as being a time they have “earned” to relax and have fun.

Even though about 70 percent of seniors will go from high school to postsecondary education in 2000, the weak academic focus in the senior year is one reason why the percentage that complete a baccalaureate degree is not much greater than it was in 1950.

Why is the senior year not effective?

Admissions and placement policies are prime examples of the problems for students at all levels of the high school achievement spectrum. For instance, community colleges have open admission, so students rarely are aware of placement exams or requirements for community college. Yet placement exams determine whether community college students can do credit-level work.

Many selective public universities admit by December 1 of the senior year, and rarely even look at senior-year grades. Consequently, students cut back on academic courses and work long hours in jobs or internships. Rarely do universities or colleges withdraw admission if grades fall off drastically during the senior year.

Because of the substantial increase in early admissions at our most selective universities, students know early in their senior year where they will attend university. Many of these students took Advanced Placement courses in their junior

year in order to gain admittance to a highly selective school, and drop difficult senior-year courses after receiving early admission. These high achieving students have scant need or motivation to use the senior year for more academic preparation.

Indeed, many seniors regress in terms of academic preparation, as is evidenced by high failure rates on mathematics placement tests. More than 60 percent of the students admitted to the California State University must take at least one remedial course. And many high achievers take the most advanced math courses during their junior year in high school and then have no math options in their senior year. A typical pattern for many students attending less selective four-year institutions or community colleges is not to take any math in the senior year.

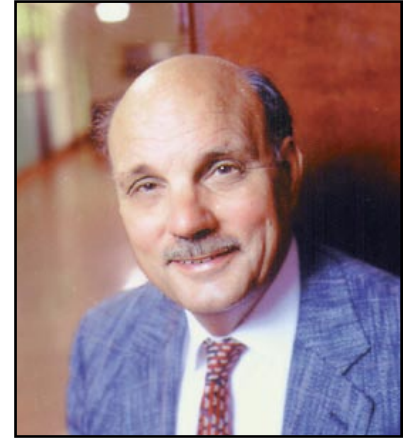
When these same students are confronted with a math placement exam in the summer after graduation, they discover that they have forgotten the math needed to avoid remedial courses at the outset of their postsecondary career.

Students do not realize how important advanced academic classes taken in the senior year of high school can be for university graduation, and community colleges send weak signals about how such courses could improve academic preparation. Very few states have any assessment system for the 12th grade (SAT and ACT are not designed to assess most senior-year learning), so the current state standards movement is not designed with the “senior slump” in mind.

Evolution of disjuncture between higher education and K–12 education

The chasm between higher education and lower education is in many ways a uniquely American problem. In England, for example, the final year of secondary education is crucial in determining admission to universities, and to specific departments within universities. Exams taken at the end of the last year of secondary education are crucial admissions criteria.

The U.S. postsecondary system used to play a more important role in high schools. In 1900 the U.S. K–16 system was linked somewhat because the College Board set uniform standards for each academic subject, and issued a syllabus to help students get ready for subject-matter examinations. Prior to that, students had to



Many students mistakenly assume that meeting their high school graduation requirements means they are prepared for college.

prepare for different entry requirements at different colleges.

The University of California accredited high schools in the early 20th century to make sure the curriculum was adequate for university preparation. But this K–16 academic standards connection frayed and then broke open, and the only remaining major linkage is usually teacher preparation in an education school. Aptitude tests like the SAT replaced subject-matter standards, and secondary school curriculum electives including vocational education and life skills proliferated in

many directions beyond postsecondary preparation.

Unlike the early 20th century, today faculty members in discipline-based professional organizations across K–16 levels interact rarely, and policymakers even less. Higher education coordinating boards rarely extend their “coordination” to K–12.

The only nationally aligned K–16 standards effort is the Advanced Placement program, utilizing a common content syllabus and exam.

A passing score on an AP exam is one indicator of college preparation. But because 33 percent of all AP students do not take the AP exam, many AP students may not be benefiting much from AP’s close link to postsecondary standards.

There is no plan in the U.S. to relate the content and experience of the last two years in high school to the first two years of college so that the student experiences a continuous process conceived as a whole. Consequently, confusion reigns, with some contending that general education is supposed to prepare students for a specialized major, while others believe general education is an antidote to specialization, vocationalism and majors.

It is very difficult with available evidence to ascertain the current status of general education. The role of the senior year in providing general education rarely is discussed, even though many seniors go directly to specialized university departments such as business.

In 1992, Clifford Adelman analyzed student transcripts from the National Longitudinal Study. He emphasized that students did very little course work that could be considered part of general education. Less than one-third of college credits came from courses that focused upon cultural knowledge, including Western and non-Western culture, ethnic or gender studies. Adelman also found that 26 percent of bachelor’s degree recipients never earned a single college credit in history; 40 percent earned no credits in English or American literature; and 58 percent earned no credits in foreign languages.

The standards movement and K–16 disjuncture

Education standards have swept across the country, engulfing almost every state. Forty-six states have created K–12 content standards in most academic subjects, and all but Iowa and Nebraska have statewide K–12 student achievement tests. At the state level, there is progress toward focusing on, and clarifying what students must know and be able to do in the K–12 grades, and how to align standards,

assessments, textbook selection and accountability measures at the K–12 level.

A gaping hole in this reform strategy, however, is the lack of coherence in content and assessment standards between K–12 systems and higher education institutions and systems. Unless we close this standards gap and align K–16 policies, students and secondary schools will continue to receive a confusing array of signals and will not be able to prepare adequately for higher education. The current scene is a “Babel of standards,” rather than a coherent strategy.

U.S. higher education relies on the SAT and ACT to provide some national assessment uniformity, but neither of these assessments is completely aligned with the recent upsurge in K–12 standards. Moreover, the situation is even more disjointed concerning higher education placement tests. In the southeast United States, for example, in 1995 there were 125 combinations of 75 different placement tests devised by universities with scant regard to secondary school standards. As a result, K–12 and university entrance and placement assessments usually utilize different formats, emphasize different content, and take different amounts of time to complete.

Universities hope that the SAT and ACT will make adjustments to accommodate these new K–12 standards, and feel most comfortable with these two assessments that they know and can influence. Many universities are wary of being subjected to a higher education version of K–12 state-accountability systems, and seek to avoid the political quagmire surrounding high-stakes testing.

Given the volume of applications, the selective universities are getting the students they want, so they see no need to implement an alternative to junior-year SAT/ACT assessment. In some states, the governor’s office is the most logical place to put these fractured standards systems together, but higher education leaders (especially from private universities) want to guard their political independence from gubernatorial and legislative specification of admissions criteria.

Because each state has a distinctive K–12 standards and assessment system, it is not clear what can be done nationally. For example, President Clinton’s advocacy of a national voluntary test died after protests concerning states’ rights.

Aligning and improving standards and assessments

Postsecondary education needs to send consistent and clearer signals (accompanied by appropriate incentives) to seniors concerning academic preparation. The concepts of content and standards alignment are promising, but also have deleterious effects if not done properly. For example, K–16 alignment focused upon low-level or inappropriate content would make matters worse. Some K–12 state assessments are at such a basic level that they are inappropriate for use in postsecondary education.

Two recent analyses of K–16 assessments exposed the similarities and differences among K–16 visions of what high school students need to know and to be able to do. A 1999 report of the Education Trust demonstrated the range in mathematics. The high school tests rarely extended beyond algebra and geometry, with content coverage similar to SAT I. But the placement exams had considerable emphasis

Neither K–12 nor postsecondary education claims the academic content of the senior year as a basis for further education.

on algebra 2 and trigonometry. Students are admitted to postsecondary education based on one conception of appropriate math, but their placement is based on a different conception.

The need for students to take algebra 2 and trigonometry in their senior year is not communicated clearly by higher education, because students are focusing upon access and admission, and not on what they need to know to complete their postsecondary programs.

The Stanford Bridge Project six-state assessment analysis highlights the differences in K–16 writing standards. SAT I and ACT assess writing through multiple choice formats, while many states use writing samples. It is ironic that many of the nation's universities do not include actual writing in their admission standards. Consequently, SAT/ACT preparation courses emphasize finding errors quickly in sentence and paragraph structure.

The senior year of high school should include intensive writing preparation for postsecondary success, but there are few signals or incentives to do this.

In short, K–16 assessments are all over the map, and send confusing signals to students and parents. Students are confused as to why SAT I is so different from the content and skills on their state K–12 assessments.

Policy improvements that encompass the senior year

Several policy directions would improve senior-year preparation for postsecondary education:

- Permit students to submit subject-matter-based state external exams as a significant factor for admissions and freshman placement. Study the university success of these students.

The crucial difference between external exams and the SAT/ACT is that a curriculum-based exam is organized by discipline and keyed to the content of specific course

sequences. This focuses responsibility for preparing the student for particular exams on one teacher or a small group of teachers. These exams define achievement relative to an external standard, not relative to other students in the classroom or school.

- Substitute SAT II (or College Board Pacesetters, when it is developed) for SAT I in order to link admissions and placement standards closer to external

discipline-based standards outlined above. Higher costs of SAT II should be borne by the public and not by the student. Since some SAT II exams have not been changed since they were originated, many of them need to be strengthened and updated.

- Align freshman placement exams with other state standards, and publicize placement exam content, standards and consequences to students in high school. The quality of

these exams must be high, or else alignment will lead to lower and inappropriate standards.

- Report and publicize freshman placement results for each high school. Allow students to take placement exams in 11th or 12th grade, and substitute K–12 assessments for university-devised placement exams. Since some states have different placement exams for each university or tier of university, there needs to be a study of content differences and whether a common exam is feasible.

- Require a writing sample for all admissions decisions. Neither the SAT I nor ACT assess writing samples, but some statewide K–12 assessments have a writing sample that could be incorporated into the regular admissions/placement process.

- Standardize high school procedures for computing high school class rank (HCR) and grade point average. Universities should specify academic courses that count in computing HCR, and accord appropriate weight for honors and AP courses. Senior-year academic courses should be an important component of HCR calculations.

- Explore the feasibility of using student portfolios for admissions in lieu of current policies. For example, Oregon PASS provides a writing score to colleges and universities that is based on a portfolio of high school written work.

- Align merit financial aid policies with the changes recommended above. For example, base merit aid on external subject-matter exams like the New York Regents and North Carolina end-of-course tests.

- Review on a periodic basis state, local K–16 and university content and performance standards. Study the signals and incentives that students receive concerning admissions standards. Universities know what signals they are trying to send, but not what signals students receive.

Specific initiatives to improve the academic quality and impact of the senior year

The following list is targeted at the senior year, but will be more effective if accompanied by the changes recommended in the prior section.

- For 70 percent of students now participating in postsecondary education, the senior year should be re-conceptualized to stress preparation for postsecondary success, credit level placement, and a start upon continuous general or liberal arts education. Access to higher education is only the starting point of senior year, not the sole goal.

- Expand substantially successful dual-enrollment K–12 postsecondary programs that include all levels of students, not just highest achieving students.

- Undergraduate general education requirements need to be sequenced so appropriate senior-year courses are linked. Senior-year courses can be a gateway to general education requirements in the first year of college or university.

- Set explicit standards for senior-year performance in all courses, and withdraw admission if they are not met. Require a minimum number of academic credits for the last semester of the senior year. Stress postsecondary placement exam standards in this last semester for students who plan to proceed to postsecondary education.

- Make the implications of freshman placement exams

Some K–12 state assessments are at such a basic level that they are inappropriate for use in postsecondary education.

There is no plan in the U.S. to relate the content and experience of the last two years in high school to the first two years of college.

clearer to students. They should understand that taking senior-year math and writing courses enhances placement scores, and results in less costly remediation.

- If a university has a math requirement for graduation from its campus, then require a linked high school senior-year math course with a certain minimum standard. Many states require only two years of college-prep math.

- University reports about

remediation and freshman performance of students from specific high schools should be publicized widely in mass media, and considered by local school boards for policy implications.

- Encourage high school accreditation by state governments and private groups to focus upon the academic rigor of the senior year. Accreditation should focus more directly on postsecondary preparation.

- Review high school policies granting course credit for

work experience that has no strong academic components. Much of the senior year for many students is spent working with no academic link.

Conclusion

All of these policy mechanisms and recommendations to improve the senior year require leadership and motivation. It is unclear how this will evolve, given the long U.S. tradition of K–16 disjuncture. Perhaps the stimulus will come from rising public concern about postsecondary remediation. But the senior slump has been around so long that it has become part of American high school culture.

The senior-year issue must receive more public attention and concern before K–16 policy communities will be mobilized to act. Given the huge gap in postsecondary attainment between high- and low-income students (particularly for Hispanics and African Americans), this is an urgent issue of equity as well as quality education. ♦

Michael W. Kirst is a professor emeritus of education at Stanford University.