

Commentary

Where Are America's High-Performing Students?

Barry Salzberg, 09.06.07, 12:01 PM ET

As another school year begins, high school seniors across the country are starting to draft their college application essays. These students recognize that a college degree means something: It's proven that a bachelor's degree can add as much as \$1 million in earnings over a lifetime.

And while a high school education might have been enough for most jobs in the last century's economy, to succeed in the 21st century, we need knowledge workers with a college-level education.

So who are America's college-bound students, the workers our businesses will depend upon in coming years? You might assume that the cream of the crop, our brightest students, are all applying to college. Unfortunately, you would be wrong.

Many of this country's best-performing students--young people who have the potential to succeed in college--don't fill out a single application. Statistics show that low-income students who score in the top 25% on tests apply to college about as frequently as upper-income students in the bottom 25% of test-takers. Every year, nearly 200,000 high-performing, low-income high school graduates voluntarily close the door to the life-changing potential of higher education. And while that statistic is sobering, we're also losing millions of young people with potential in the middle range.

As someone who was once one of those low-income kids--and changed my life by becoming the second in my immediate family to go to college--I find those statistics unforgivable. As the CEO of a professional services firm, I find it unconscionable. We are wasting talent in America, and for the sake of both our people and our businesses, this waste must end.

Why are students who have the capacity to succeed in college not applying to college? A complex web of socio-economic factors contributes to the problem, including lack of sufficient academic preparation, issues of affordability--both real and perceived--and insufficient support from college-experienced adults, including guidance counselors and teachers.

Another reason is one familiar to me from business: "What gets measured gets managed." We measure the performance of high schools on how many students graduate, but ignore what really matters: whether or not those students make themselves ready for the job market by enrolling in--and staying in--college.

A generation or two ago, high school graduation might well have been a destination; today, it is merely a launch pad. The American economy needs as many skilled workers as it can get--and that means college-educated workers. Businesses in every industry and profession report an acute shortage of talent. Seven in 10 companies say that the shortage of skilled labor is keeping them from growing their business.

That situation is not going to get better any time soon: The baby boomers, my generation, will start to retire in the next few years--and there are not nearly enough skilled workers in Gen X and Y to replace us. According to a recent study by the U.S. Department of Labor, 60% of new jobs require skills that only 20% of the workforce possesses.

Are we in danger of perpetuating two separate classes of workers in America? Some believe we already have: college-educated, mostly white and Asian; and non-college-educated, including poor people of all races. Fortunately, something can be done to address this situation--and more can be done if more businesses step up to the plate.

Change is happening not far from where I grew up, in Bushwick, Brooklyn, a predominantly Latino and African-American community, where nearly 40% of the residents are immigrants. Last year at one neighborhood high school, 80% of the students qualified for full or partial lunch subsidies, yet 93% of the seniors applied to college. And 84% of them are enrolling this fall. The principal believes that the Class of 2008 is on track to exceed those numbers, with 100% completing at least one college application.

Given those statistics, many people would conclude either "It must be a private school" or "It must be a miracle." It is neither. The New York Harbor School may be smaller than the public high school I attended, but it is indeed a public school. And for the past year the school, its administrators, teachers and students have been supported in their efforts by a remarkable nonprofit called College Summit.

College Summit aims to create lasting change by helping high schools--and the communities they serve--develop a culture in which going to college is the norm, not the exception. The program that worked so well in Brooklyn has been replicated at hundreds of high schools across the country: It's a systemic approach combining teacher training, community outreach, coaching and counseling, and robust data tracking that facilitates accountability.

Since its inception in 1993, College Summit's workshops have served nearly 12,000 students; 79% of them have enrolled in college. Compare this with the national numbers: Of students in the bottom 20% in family income, less than half--49.6%--enroll in college directly out of high school. And when it comes to the measure of "persistence"--students who progress from freshman year to sophomore--the rate for College Summit alumni beats the national average across *all* income groups: 80% vs. 69%.

College Summit may be one solution to the talent crunch we are all beginning to feel, but there are many ways for Corporate America to step up to the plate. Businesses and organizations of all types can bring a lot to the table when we partner with schools or nonprofits focused on improving educational outcomes for our young people.

I'm not talking just about writing a check. Financial contributions are important, certainly, but most companies have a commodity that's even more valuable to the nonprofits trying to reach our young people: expertise. My organization and I have been working with College Summit for the last year--we're creating technology that will drive increased accountability by helping high school principals and district superintendents monitor comprehensive data on the progress of their students in applying to and enrolling in college.

Bringing one's business skills and knowledge to bear on a vexing social problem is incredibly rewarding--and it can have tremendous impact.

Our young people--*all* of our young people--deserve the best education possible. Our businesses need skilled workers. Working together with results-driven nonprofits, we can dramatically improve college enrollment rates--and the skill base and diversity of our future workforce. It's a win-win for everyone.

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