**College Is Not the Best Option for Many Students**

Education and College, 2003

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Heidi Leonard is a career and college counselor in Newport Beach, Calif., where most parents are college-educated professionals. Recently, Ms. Leonard advised a high school student with poor grades but a passion for automobiles, finding him an internship at an elite racing car company.

She thought it could lead to a well-paid career. But the boy's parents were incensed, insisting that he go to college. Ms. Leonard suspects he will soon drop out and take less desirable work than the internship he rejected.

**The College Illusion**

This kind of thing is happening all over the country because of an illusion that college is for everyone and that a high-tech future requires as many college graduates as possible. Yet the Department of Labor expects only about a fourth of future jobs to require college degrees.

Barbara Schneider and David Stevenson, authors of The Ambitious Generation: America's Teenagers, Motivated but Directionless (1999), say exaggerated beliefs about job needs can have dire results. Some 90 percent of seniors say they will go to college. Some 35 percent want to be engineers, architects, health professionals, social or natural scientists. But only 8 percent of openings will be in those fields.

Many youths face this reality only after high school. Two-thirds of graduates enroll in college, but only half of these get bachelor's degrees by their late 20s. Another 15 percent finish community college. More than a third drop out with no degree, though some may return later.

It is often said that without college a youth will be "flipping hamburgers." But many good jobs—computer and health technicians, equipment repair or finance personnel—demand vocational or on-the-job training, not bachelor's degrees.

Students who are unsuited for college but still attend may lose the chance for such jobs. In their cases, the flipping hamburgers myth could become reality.

**Parental Objections**

If all races and social classes have similar academic ability, then even in middle-class suburbs a goodly number of students should incline to technical careers. But parents won't hear of it.

In some suburbs—Montclair, N.J., is one—counselors are pressured to get almost all students into college because if admission rates fall, children may switch to private schools. So youngsters are guided to universities even when they would benefit more from technical training.

In less affluent communities too, uncritical college ambitions can impede counseling. Indeed, black adolescents plan on college at higher rates than whites. Glenda Rose, a high school adviser in Miami, says her efforts to help minority students get into technical schools are resisted by parents who believe a university education is now essential. Many students then drop out of college to take less rewarding jobs than those for which training programs prepare.

Ms. Rose blames the media, church leaders and former President Bill Clinton (who urged universal college) for parents' misconceptions.

Of course, job readiness is not the only reason for college, perhaps not the best reason. But today's push to prepare all students to attend does not mostly come from concern for their moral, cultural or intellectual growth. It stems from vocational myths.

**Confusing Ability with Race and Class**

This will be tough to fix because aiming too low is worse than aiming too high. Counselors who urge some students to pursue nonacademic paths may confuse ability with race and class. The affluent have traditionally gone to college while minority and working-class children were tracked to training programs or workplaces, even when their talent justified college ambitions.

But asking everyone to attend college does not serve all students well. Nor should universities have to devote resources to failing youngsters who don't belong.

Somehow we've got to guide fewer students to college while also ensuring that higher education is more accessible to the disadvantaged.

A first step should be adding counselors with improved training. Nationwide, there is now only one counselor for every 560 pupils, handling not only college and career advice but scheduling and discipline. Students cannot get good guidance with so little attention.

Schools also need more business partners to set up internships and other school-to-work programs. Adolescents can then experience an adult world of more than doctors and lawyers on the one hand and fast-food workers on the other. But better counseling cannot thrive in a climate of unreality. No pupils should be impeded by race or class from striving for prestigious professions.

This, however, should not mean telling all that they can make it.