

The Baccalaureate Game

Is It Right for All Teens?

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The answer is no, according to Mr. Gray, who points out that there are other ways for young people to win. Ultimately, it is students and parents who must make the decision to try the baccalaureate game, but they deserve to be told the odds and provided with alternatives.

Many flounder, many more suffer, and some end up costing parents thousands of dollars and years of heartache because the college experience was not for them ... at least not right now.¹

HIGH SCHOOLS are great places to observe adolescents in all their glory and diversity. A particularly good time is at the beginning or end of the school day as students enter or leave the building. It is always fun to see what is fashionable, to watch the interpersonal dramas play out, and to feel the energy. Such encounters typically leave one feeling that the nation is in good hands. Well, at least they used to!

Today, however, there are good reasons to worry about these teens. Not all of them inspire worry, of course. The academically talented, who take the honors diplomas and advanced placement classes, who graduate academically prepared and head off to prestigious four-year colleges, don't make me worry. No, it's the fate of the

rest that concerns me, particularly those who populate the academic middle of any high school graduating class. A comparison of their postsecondary plans with their academic records and labor market prospects suggests that most of these young people are seriously adrift.

But the fault is not theirs. They have been told by parents and teachers alike that their generation has only "one way to win" in the game of life: namely, to get a four-year degree that will open doors to professional or managerial positions. But the majority of students from the academic middle who attempt to follow this advice will fail. Of those who beat the odds and graduate, one-third or more will end up in jobs, they could have obtained without a four-year college degree. The costs of this folly - both financial and human - are staggering for students, their parents, and the nation. It is time to challenge the one-way-to-win mentality that pervades our schools and our nation. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, there are other options for higher

education that make a lot more sense for many teens.

The One-Way-to-Win Mentality

Today, from their early adolescence on, most young people express their intention not only to pursue higher education but to earn at least a baccalaureate degree. Of the U.S. high school seniors in 1992 included in a study undertaken by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 95% indicated that they planned to continue their education, 84% said that they planned to get at least a four-year college degree, and 33% had already decided to go on to graduate school.²

This is not a case of adolescent wishful thinking: most young people attempt to follow through with their plans. According to U.S. census data, 70% of 1992 high school graduates enrolled in institutions of higher education. The majority enrolled directly in four-year college programs. Of those who matriculated at a two year community college, the

¹ Daphne Muse, "From Mortarboard to McJob", *Washington Post*, 14 June 1994, p.14

² National Center for Education Statistics, *Statistics in Brief* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, NCES 93-473, November 1993), p.3

majority were enrolled in programs that would take them on to four-year institutions. The percentage of graduating high school seniors pursuing a two-year occupational/ technical degree has actually decreased. Today, the high school graduate who goes directly to work or even one who matriculates in a postsecondary occupational/technical program is the exception; most try the baccalaureate game.

Why this sudden enthusiasm for a four year college degree? Does it reflect a new thirst for knowledge? Hardly! According to the American Council on Education's annual survey of entering college freshmen, the primary reason that today's students matriculate is "to be able to get a better job." Clearly, the motive behind the current mania for four-year college degrees is not a passion to read the likes of Dylan Thomas (which is unfortunate) but the desire to gain in advantage in the labor market.

Young people's expectations about where a college degree will take them in the labor market are alarmingly one-sided and completely naive. Fifty percent of all males and an amazing 69% of all females in the NCES study of 1992 high school graduates expected to be employed in the professions by the age of 30. Only 6% aspired to be managers or technicians: only 3% of all the males and less than 1% of the females aspired to careers in high-skill high-wage nonprofessional technical occupations.

These national survey results define the one-way-to-win mentality of today's adolescents. The majority have the same career plan: to get a four-year college degree in the hope of obtaining a high-paying job in the professional ranks. This plan is a good one for some high school seniors - those born blessed with academic ability and those who will graduate academically prepared and mature enough at 18 to succeed in a four-year college. But is the pursuit of a four-year college degree realistic for 85% of all graduating seniors? Can even the most optimistic among us hope that the economy will generate enough professional work to employ two thirds of all women? In particular, how realistic is this plan for most of those who graduate in the academic middle of their high school class? When one examines the data, it would seem not very realistic at all.

Losers in the Baccalaureate Game

Those who are indiscriminately advising all teens to adopt the one-way-to-win outlook and matriculate in a four-year college program seem to be making - consciously or otherwise - four assumptions: 1) that most students graduate from high school prepared to do legitimate baccalaureate-level work. 2) that most of those who begin a baccalaureate program will graduate. 3) that most of those who graduate will find jobs

that they could not have obtained without a degree, and 4) that the whole process is benign, meaning individuals do not get hurt in the process even if they fail.

However, data suggest that none of these assumptions is correct.

1. *Readiness for college-level work.* The first indication of a problem if the majority of graduating high school seniors pursue a bachelor's degree comes from national data suggesting that only one-third are adequately prepared. According to the NCES study, only 47% of the 1992 high school graduates had taken three years of science and math, and only 37% scored at level three or higher on the National Assessment of Educational Progress assessment in reading. Moreover, I conducted extensive analyses of high school transcripts and found that, even in the academically elite high schools, only about one third of the students graduate with the courses, grades, and test scores that would confidently predict academic success in a legitimate four-year college.

College faculty members seem to agree. In a survey recently reported in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* only 20% of faculty members believed that entering freshmen were adequately prepared in "written and oral communication," and only 15% thought students were adequately prepared in mathematics.³

Those unfamiliar with developments in higher education

³ "International Survey of Faculty Attitudes," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 9 June 1994, pp.A-35-A-38.

over the last 20 years may be forgiven for being a bit confused at this point. The question that would naturally arise is this: If so few students graduate with academic credentials indicating readiness to do college-level work, how do so many get admitted? The answers are in the demographics. Between 1970 and 1990, the number of high school seniors declined by almost two million (11%); yet, during the same period, the number of four-year Colleges increased by 170 (10%). These figures prompted Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, to observe that "college is [now] the sort of place that says to anybody who's over 18 and breathing, come here and bring your tuition."⁴

The higher education community points to this growth, and it is celebrated by many as a sign of the success of efforts to provide equal opportunity to all young people. But the eminent sociologist Burton Clark pointed out the fallacy of this argument 30 years ago. He observed that, while our society encourages young people to be ambitious, it does not provide adequate schooling or economic opportunity for everyone, nor is it willing to accept the reality that not everyone has the ability to do college-level work.⁵ Faced with this dilemma and unwilling to deal with it, Americans have

opted for a Darwinian approach or, as Clark termed it, a "cooling out" process. We provide virtually unhindered access to higher education, and then we rely on the rigors of academe and the discipline of the labor market to sort out the winners and losers. This sorting begins with those who are inadequately prepared when admitted to college and thus required to take remedial courses.

The growing percentage of entering students who take remedial or developmental courses is perhaps the best-kept secret in the higher education community.

According to the American Council on Education 90% of all private and 95% of all public four-year colleges schedule remedial classes.

And the public is just beginning to learn how many students actually take these courses. At all but the few remaining selective colleges, the numbers typically range from 40% to 70% of entering freshmen. It is also important to note that being required to take remedial courses is a powerful predictor of both dropping out of college and of defaulting on student loans.

2. Graduation rates.

Graduation rates are another of higher education's dark corners into which light has only recently begun to shine. Since national 'right to know' legislation was passed several years ago, the dismal truth has slowly emerged about the actual graduation rates for those matriculating at four-year

colleges. For example, among entering NCAA Division I universities in 1988, slightly more than half (57%) had graduated six years later. In states with high postsecondary matriculation rates, the college drop-out rate can run as high as two-thirds. Other than those who fail to return between the first and second semesters, one-third of all freshmen who drop out are reported to leave during the first three weeks. Using graduation alone as an indicator, about one-half of those who try the baccalaureate college game will fail. While some of those who fail were academically prepared for college, most began with inadequate academic preparation in the first place.

Of course, many students do graduate. In fact, each June the number of bachelor's degrees awarded by the nation's colleges and universities exceeds the number of people who live in the state of New Hampshire. Considering that most of these new degree holders matriculated in the hope of professional employment or at least employment requiring a college degree, it seems prudent to investigate whether their expectations are being met by the labor market.

3. Job outlook for baccalaureate graduates.

There is a great faith - perhaps hope - that the labor market demand for individuals with baccalaureate or graduate degrees will increase to accommodate the increasing percentages of workers who now hold these credentials. But, as growing numbers of parents are discovering when their children

⁴ Albert Shanker, quoted in Mark Titsch, "Alliance for Learning," *Education Week*, 13 April 1994, p.4

⁵ Burton Clark, "The 'Cooling Out' Function in Higher Education," *American Journal of Sociology*, vol.65, 1962, pp.576-96.

graduate from college only to move home unemployed. this faith is at best naive optimism.

The reality is that, since the 1950s, only around 30% of all jobs have required a four-year college degree and only 20% of all employment has been in the professional ranks. These ratios are not predicted to change in the future. According to U.S. Department of Labor projections through the year 2005, at least one-third of all graduates of four-year colleges will not find employment commensurate with their education.⁶ The outlook is even worse for those with graduate degrees. In virtually all professional fields except medicine, graduates exceed employment opportunities by 50%. Contrary to conventional wisdom, there is a worldwide surplus of accountants, chemists, and engineers - not to mention lawyers, teachers, and marketing specialists. And women have just about reached participation parity in all professional areas except engineering.

To make matters worse, middle management positions in the corporate world, a traditional source of jobs for recent college graduates, are being pared back dramatically. Today, downsizing companies are laying off college-educated middle managers and engineers; they are not laying off skilled employees on the production lines. Thus it should not be surprising that the *New York Times* recently ran an

article documenting the fact that more and more college graduates are taking jobs as factory workers because they cannot find college-level employment.⁷

The remarks of one female college student whom I interviewed recently seem to sum up the situation: "It's all a game. We know there are no jobs, but it is what our parents want us to do, and there is nothing else to do anyway, so we play the game. We know most of us will not get jobs." The cynicism of these remarks hints that the costs of playing the baccalaureate game are not just measured in dollars.

4. *Victims of the game.*

According to conventional wisdom, the fact that two-thirds of all high school graduates go on to higher education directly after high school is cause for pride and celebration; the idea that there may be victims in the process is unheard of. Yet the euphoria over baccalaureate education seems misplaced when the data suggest that, at best, only half of those who matriculate ever graduate and that, of those who earn a bachelor's degree, at least one-third will end up underemployed. The baccalaureate game is not benign. Indeed, it is very costly, and these costs are not shouldered equally among all segments of the population.

Since the 1980-81 academic year, college costs have increased 55% at private institutions and 32% at public ones, while family income has decreased 2%. As a result, growing percentages of students are securing student loans. Forty-eight percent of all students at public colleges and 70% of those attending private institutions receive financial aid that almost always includes student loans. It is sobering to remember that the resulting student debt is not limited to those who actually graduate; the majority of college dropouts end up with debt from student loans as well.

An additional reality that we are just beginning to face is that we have reached the limits of government willingness to provide student financial aid. Since 1980 students have defaulted on \$19.2 billion in federal guaranteed student loans. While the actual default rate is only around 12%, the cumulative dollar value of loans in default exceeds the dollar value of yearly awards. Thus it is not at all surprising that deficit reduction plans under consideration in Congress call for massive cuts in federal student loan money.

But dollars are only one cost associated with the baccalaureate game; equally worrisome are the human costs of widespread humiliation, depression, and alienation of the nation's youth. The look on a young person's face when admitting that he or she never finished a college degree says it all. Holders of four-year degrees are not exempt: growing numbers of them are experiencing the humiliation of being employed

⁶ Kristina Shelly, "The Future of Jobs for College Graduates," *Monthly Labor Review*, July 1992, pp.13-19

⁷ John Holusha, "First to College, Then the Mill," *New York Times*, 22 August 1995.

in jobs they could have acquired right after high school. And humiliation can quickly turn into depression when the student loan repayment schedule arrives.

Moreover, the one-way-to-win mentality is becoming a source of national divisiveness as more and more unhappy young adults with unmet expectations - college dropouts and underemployed graduates alike - look for someone to blame.

However, the baccalaureate game does harm not just to those who play, it also harms those high school graduates who don't get to play at all. These are the young adults who are labeled as "second class" or deemed to be outright failures the day they graduate from high school simply because they do not go to college. While those who succeed without a college degree e.g., Bill Gates of Microsoft fame - become folk heroes, most are dismissed by the overclass as "Joe-six-packs" or blue-collar workers; in high school these students are similarly labeled by their college-bound peers and often by the faculty as well. A great deal is being written about the growing underclass in America. In the nation's high schools the underclass consists of those who see no hope of attending college. All too often these students act accordingly: they drop out, sell drugs, steal cars, have babies out of wedlock, and so on. The prospect of a bright future is the best vaccine against all types of self-destructive behavior. And herein lies the danger of telling all young people that a four-year

college degree is the sole road to a bright future. Believing this route to be closed to them, many teens conclude that their future is not very bright at all and give up or give in to other temptations. In a sense, these students may be the greatest tragedy caused by the preoccupation of our high schools with baccalaureate education.

The Culprits

Those prone to conspiracy theories could easily see a plot afoot by the overclass to appease the underclass by making college available to all, knowing full well that the privileged place in society of the overclass remains secure because most children of the underclass will fail. While such a theory seems a bit far-fetched, the apparent harm being done by the baccalaureate game does lead one to wonder about motives. To a great extent the "stay in school and graduate" message of the Sixties and Seventies has been replaced by the "go to college" message of the Eighties and Nineties. Of course, efforts to encourage college attendance are not new; what is new is the growing spectrum of students who believe that the message applies to them. What's more, the message comes from those in their lives who are supposed to know, including parents, teachers, and guidance counselors.

The percentage of all high school students who indicated that their mothers, fathers, teachers, or guidance counselors advised them to attend college rose dramatically between 1982 and 1992.

However, the greatest increase was in the percentage of high school students who reported that their teachers or guidance counselors had recommended college. In 1982 only 32% of high school sophomores indicated that their teachers or guidance counselors had recommended college; in 1992 the percentage had risen to 66%.⁸ More important for this discussion are the statistics on students in the lowest two academic quartiles. In 1982 only 20% of these students indicated that various important adults had recommended college; in 1992 the figure was nearly 60%. The data suggests that the attitudes of educators have changed the most. Why? The factors behind educators' and parents' widespread adoption of the one-way-to-win doctrine are complex. For parents, having a child accepted at a prestigious four-year college has become synonymous with parental effectiveness. The best advertisement of success is an expensive car with an Ivy League university sticker in the rear window. Other factors contributing to college mania are the cultural biases in favor of professional work, the millions spent on marketing by colleges,

⁸ Compiled from National Center for Education Statistics, *High School and Base Year Student Survey* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1982); and National Center for Education Statistics, *National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, 1992 Second Follow-Up* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1992)

and the vested interest of financial institutions that reap millions from student loans while the Government (i.e., taxpayers) insures their risk.

But while all these factors partially explain the mania for a four-year college education, they do not seem to account for the rather recent adoption of the one-way-to-win mentality by educators. The factor that best explains this shift in educators' attitudes is economic uncertainty. National data showing higher lifetime earnings for four-year college graduates have led educators, as well as parents and the public, to conclude that the causal factor is education and that a college degree will provide the same earning benefits to today's generation as it did in the past.

At the core of this anxiety about the economic future is the developing conventional wisdom that a college degree will be necessary to get just about any job in the future. While this fear is not entirely unfounded, the labor market shows that it is exaggerated and that there are postsecondary alternatives or "other ways to win" for those from the academic middle.

Creating Other Ways To Win

Today's young people - particularly those who graduate at the academic middle of their high school class - have alternatives to college that make good economic sense. These alternatives include higher education at the certificate or

associate's degree level, which can lead to careers that provide lifetime earnings equal to or greater than those earned by four-year college graduates. Moreover, the occupations addressed in these postsecondary occupational and technical programs are sufficiently diverse to provide job satisfaction for individuals of all inclinations.

The High-Skills/High-Wage Rationale

One of the fastest-growing groups of students in higher education is known as "reverse transfers." These individuals hold baccalaureate or even graduate degrees and enroll in one- and two-year certificate or associate's degree programs in occupational and technical areas. This phenomenon became so common in California that at one time the state decided to charge degree holders who enrolled in community colleges more per credit in an effort to ensure that spaces would exist for students who didn't have degrees.

The behavior of these "reverse transfers" may seem irrational. But it really isn't. These degree holders have discovered, albeit a little late, that the one-way-to-win doctrine is a myth. They know from experience that holding a college degree does not guarantee high-wage employment - or even a living wage. They now sense that occupational skills can give

them an advantage in competing for high-wage employment, and they are returning to one and two-year postsecondary programs to acquire these skills.

The emergence of the technical workplace and the reduction in the number of middle management positions indicate the end of an era during which a bachelor's degree was viewed as a sign of an individual's potential. Today, in order to be competitive, employers must hire people who can do a job immediately or with minimal training. Nor do employers want only basic academic skills, despite the rhetoric that suggests they do. Donald Thomas and I found, for example, that the single most important criterion in hiring for high-skill/high-wage nonprofessional technical occupations was possession of a specific occupational skill.⁹ The ability to communicate in writing ranked almost last.

To make the high-skill/high-wage rationale clearer, consider the hypothetical case of an individual who graduates with a bachelor's degree in the liberal arts. This person may well displace a high school graduate from a low-skill/low-wage sales job at the Gap, but such a person will not displace a skilled manufacturing technician, a medical technician, or an electrician. Furthermore, researchers from the U.S. Department of Labor have concluded that the lifetime

⁹ Donald Thomas and Kenneth Gray, "An Analysis of Entry-Level Skills Required for Blue-Collar Technicians in Electronics Firms," *Journal of Vocational Education Research*, vol.16, no.3, 1992, pp59-77.

earnings of individuals who work in such occupations as precision metals, the crafts, specialized repair, and other nonprofessional technical occupations will exceed the earnings of all college graduates save for those who are successful in finding work in the professional or managerial ranks.¹⁰ And there is even better news for those seeking alternatives to the baccalaureate game: the outlook in nonprofessional technical careers is positive. In fact there are unfilled vacancies, which explains in part why the U.S. annually admits roughly 25,000 foreign workers with technical skills.

Thus there are economically sound alternatives to the four-year college degree. They lie in the numerous nonprofessional high-skill/high-wage occupations where jobs are going unfilled. An associate's degree or a certificate program in a technical field related to nonprofessional, high-skill/high-wage work is the best way for many high school graduates - especially those graduating in the academic middle of their high school class - to prepare for a career. I must emphasize, however, that these nonprofessional high-skill/high-wage occupations do require fairly sophisticated levels of applied math, science, and reading skills. In addition, in the absence of guidance from high school faculty members, students and parents may not be automatically receptive to

alternatives to a four-year college degree. Thus educators and others committed to creating "other ways to win" need to consider 1) changes in the guidance provided to students and their parents, 2) changes in the curriculum and in the instructional methods employed, and 3) changes in the demeaning way many teens in the academic middle are treated in our high schools.

Focused Guidance For Students and Parents

The one-way-to-win mentality is so persuasive that it is naive to think the myth will be dispelled easily. The myth plays into the hopes and dreams that parents have for their children to attend a prestigious college and pursue a professional occupation. At the same time, rising costs of higher education and increasing numbers of underemployed college graduates still living at home are making parents considerably more receptive to alternatives than they were just five years ago. And improved guidance and counseling will help as well. The objective is not to dissuade parents or students from higher education, but to help them formulate postsecondary education plans that have a high probability of success. While a full discussion of a systematic career guidance program is beyond the scope of this article, the end product of such a program should be an

individual career plan (ICP) for every high school student.

Briefly, the ICP process calls for schools to institute a systematic set of activities through which students and their parents - by the end of the eighth grade - develop and have on file a tentative ICP. This plan guides the selection of courses in the ninth grade. Throughout the high school years, faculty members provide students and parents with the objective information needed to evaluate the plan, and they take the risk of pointing out when a student's academic performance is incompatible with the ICP. All but a few eighth-graders will aspire to a professional occupation and thus plan to prepare for a four-year college program. As a student's high school academic record develops, however, some students and their parents may welcome information about alternatives, especially where they learn about the high-wage earnings, the employment potential, and the lower costs.

The High School Curriculum

Since most students aspire to attend college, the majority of high school students now participate, to one degree or another, in a college-preparatory program of study. Even the majority of so-called general track students are typically "quasi-college-prep" students who take some college-prep courses. Nationally, less than 20% of high school students now concentrate on vocational education.

¹⁰ Alan Eck, "Job-Related Education and Training: Their Impact on Earnings," *Monthly Labor Review*, October 1993, pp.21-38

Yet despite the dramatic increase in the number of students making college their goal, the college-prep program of study has changed very little over the years. There is a clear need for some rethinking. It is interesting to observe, for example, that enrollment in college remedial courses is growing while the grade-point averages of entering college freshmen are simultaneously increasing. One explanation for this intriguing inconsistency is that the growing numbers who complete the high school college-prep curriculum - and get good grades - are not learning very much. The goal of the recommendations I offer here is to prepare those in the academic middle to pursue one-year and two-year postsecondary occupational and technical education programs.

Reconfiguring the college-prep curriculum. Every high school in the nation already has two tracks or emphases within its college-prep curriculum. One stresses the general or "garden variety" program of study and is populated by the masses from the academic middle; the other is an honors/advanced placement (AP) program and is populated by the academically blessed.

As I discussed above, the educational effectiveness of the general college-prep program is suspect. One clue regarding a possible remedy may be found in examining the honors/AP emphasis. These programs of study have a focused academic mission: to prepare students to compete for admission to and academic success in prestigious

four-year colleges. The content and instructional modalities employed in the program flow from this mission.

A similarly targeted focus needs to be developed in the general college-prep program, which the majority of students take. Two emphases come to mind: 1) a program of study to prepare those aspiring to a four-year degree program at second and third-tier colleges and 2) a program of study to prepare others who aspire to one- or two-year postsecondary occupational and technical institutions. One example of the latter emphasis is the tech-prep curriculum model. All college-prep students would take many of the same courses - though perhaps at different levels - during the final two years of high school. However, in their junior and senior years, after evaluating their academic performance and their ICPs, students and their parents would select one of the three emphases.

Diversifying instruction. In most college-prep classes students are expected to act like office copying machines: the teacher lectures, and the students take notes and then reproduce on the test what they copied. While learning experts argue that this is the least effective teaching strategy for all students, it is mastered early on by the academically blessed, who excel as the content becomes more abstract and more detached from any context. The problem is that

the academically blessed now amount to less than one-third of those in the college-prep curriculum. The majority come from the academic middle and do not learn this way very well.

The learning styles of those in the academic middle are typically more concrete. They learn best when instruction is put into a relevant "real world" context. Yet, according to a U.S. Department of Education research study, only 18% of all teachers spend more than 10% of their class time putting subject matter into any context at all.¹¹ If the college-prep curriculum is to be instructionally effective for everyone, this must change.

Reading, math, and science. A close look at the remedial courses students take in college provides important feedback for high school educators. The remedial course taken most often is math. However, while the percentage of all students who take remedial math has declined slightly in the last few years, the percentage who must take remedial English has increased. In most cases, the students' deficiency is in reading for speed and comprehension. Thus college-prep teachers can no longer assume that the students in their classes can read well, and they must help them improve. Unfortunately, the typical high school English teacher has not been trained in how to teach reading skills and, therefore, will require additional training.

¹¹ *National Assessments of Vocational Education (NAVE): Interim Report* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1994)

A second interesting finding in studies of college-level remediation is that many students who must take remedial math in college have already taken three years of college-prep math. The resolution of this inconsistency may be found by looking at when high school students take math and when they take the college placement tests. Many students complete their high school math requirements by the end of their junior year and do not take math in their senior year. Thus, when they take the placement test in the summer following high school graduation, many have not had formal math instruction for more than a year. This suggests that it is important for all students to take math in all four years of high school.

The same argument can be made with regard to science. For those preparing for two-year postsecondary occupational and technical education, the science should either be applied physics or applied biology, depending on their ICPs.

Driving Out Taylorism

The adjustments to the college-prep curriculum mentioned above are unlikely to create more winners among those from the academic middle unless high school faculties reject the Taylorist mentality that the academically blessed are more important than the rest. As things now stand, students from the academic middle typically show low levels of academic engagement. This should not be surprising, since their teachers

all too often treat them as if they did not exist.

As the authors of *The Shopping Mall High School* observed in that wonderful book, those in the academic middle have become the “unspecial.”¹² Being neither gifted nor handicapped, they do not fit into legally defined categories and, therefore, receive little attention and have few advocates. Despite the fact that they are now found primarily in the college-prep programs, they remain invisible because they are not in AP or honors classes. All too often teachers treat them the way coaches treat the third- and fourth-string athletes on their teams: they receive little attention, zero recognition, and are more tolerated than welcomed.

This attitude must change. The belief that only the academically blessed are to be treated as future peers, while the rest are to be treated as future subordinates, is both unfair and counterproductive to national interests. Faculty members will not motivate students in the academic middle until they start giving them more attention and recognition, as well as an equal share of resources.

A Final Thought

¹² Arthur Powell, Eleanor Farrar, and David Cohen, *The Shopping Mall High School* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985)

Pursuing a baccalaureate degree and preparing for the professions is a sound postsecondary strategy for some high school graduates, but it is not a realistic or practical goal for all of them. Most of us would wish for a nation in which all teens are academically blessed and graduate from high school with the maturity and the academic preparation to earn legitimate four year college degrees; in which all who wish to do so are able to pursue a bachelor's degree without incurring a burdensome level of debt; and in which the economy generates enough professional employment to accommodate these students after graduation from college. In reality, none of these conditions exists.

Faced with this harsh reality, conventional wisdom has decreed that the fairest course of action to ensure equal opportunity is to provide virtually open admissions to baccalaureate education, regardless of academic ability, preparation, or maturity. Instead of dealing with the social and economic realities head on, society has opted for a form of labor-market Darwinism to deliver the bad news to young people and their parents. We take solace in the belief that this is meritocracy in action and is thus an egalitarian solution.

I do not share this view. Cloaking cruel Darwinism in the guise of meritocracy and egalitarianism is deceitful, patronizing, and all too often most harmful to the very young people it is supposed to help. While the actual dollar costs of this folly are exorbitant, the psychic costs of widespread

unmet expectations and failure among the nation's young adults are even more dangerous.

The baccalaureate college game is not the “only way to win” and is not the correct game for even the majority of today's youths. There are other ways for these young people to win. Ultimately, it is students and parents who must make the decision to try the baccalaureate game - and rightfully so - but they deserve to be told the odds and provided with alternatives.