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EXPLORATORY STUDY ON AMERICAN STUDENTS' VIEWS ON COLLEGE PREPARATION

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Abstract

This paper is aimed at exploring intellectual foundation for college readiness and ultimately a career to teach. The study is based on a mixed-methods empirical research on the opinions, beliefs and practices of Michigan educational community in order to identify and interpret the strengths and weaknesses of the preparation of high school students for college. On the basis of the data obtained from our qualitative and quantitative study, this proposal offers practical recommendations in order to achieve extensive preparation of Michigan high school students for college. Registered by HSIRB Project Number 12-11-27.

Key words: college preparation, college readiness, a career to teach, high school students, empirical research, strengths and weakness, qualitative study, quantitative study, educational community.

Introduction

In recognition of the ever-expanding global market, the United States workforce is now competing with some of the highest-performing students throughout the world. The United States, being a worldwide leader in educational spending and access to resources, would seem effective in producing an educated working class, yet this is not always true. Though some states have made steady progress in educational reform in efforts to increase college and/or career readiness, some are still struggling to compete in the global economy. Studies show that regardless of nationality, as soon as students complete the 8th grade, each of them has just two million minutes to prepare for college/or career readiness (Compton, Heeter & Raney, 2007). Until their high school graduation, students around the world spend these two million minutes with tutors and schoolbooks as they stay focused to excel in their knowledge and skills for the new global knowledge economy, in which Michigan students may find their intellectual foundation overwhelmingly outdated.

This article takes a deeper look at how to build American students' intellectual and social foundation for college readiness and ultimately a career of a

teacher. The study is based on a mixed-methods empirical research on the opinions, beliefs and practices of Michigan educational community in order to identify and interpret the strengths and weaknesses of the preparation of high school students for college. On the basis of the data obtained from our qualitative and quantitative study, we developed practical solutions and recommendations in order to achieve extensive preparation of Michigan students for college. The article was registered by HSIRB, WMU, Project Number 12-11-27, and approved for publication.

College Preparation as a Global Problem

Recent international assessments caused much rhetoric in the United States about a clear purpose and direction for a stronger teacher education. According to Linda Darling-Hammond and Ann Lieberman (2012), “In the nations like Great Britain and the United States, concerns about the quality of teachers seem to be as frequently met by efforts to reduce standards, as by efforts to strengthen them” (p. 152). There is, however, clarity among global educational community about a strong mission of their teacher education programs for knowledge-based system of education that strives to offer equitable opportunity. For example, in the past thirty years, this allowed such countries like Finland, to transform its poorly educated nation into a “21st-Century powerhouse with a current literacy rate of 96%, high graduation and college-going rate, and top scores in all areas on the PISA assessments. The Finns have created a sophisticated profession of teaching with all teachers holding a Master’s degree which includes both their strong preparation in a subject matter and pedagogical education. Many teachers in Finland pursue a Ph.D. and then remain in teaching (Ibid).

Competing for global knowledge economy, educators of the world are also attentively following the steps which the three superpowers of the 21st century—China, India and the United States—are making in order to prepare their students for the future. Both India and China have made dramatic steps in educating their middle classes, and “given the affordability of their wages, China and India are now preferred destinations for increasing numbers of multinational high-tech corporations” (Compton, Heeter & Raney, 2007, p. 3). The reason for this success lies in the fact that overwhelming majority of their high school graduates stay focused in schools to get a profound education in math and science to pass college entrance exams, while statistics for the American high school students give rise to concern for our students’ education in math and science. Considering that only 45 % of U.S. students take math coursework beyond two years of algebra and one year of geometry, and 50% of college freshmen require remedial coursework (Compton, Heeter & Raney, 2007), we believe that our teachers should also excel in their

preparation of our Nation's students in math and science to insure the best future for all.

Currently, the United States is using a "one size fits all model" where students generally follow a purely academic path. This presents a serious issue as not all students may learn the necessary prerequisite skills in the same manner. Reform priorities need to focus on removing barriers from student participation in programs either tailored to dual enrollment, advanced placement opportunities, or technical and career learning. Regardless of the environment in which a student learns, the same standards and accountability is placed on both student achievement and college readiness can be incorporated into unique methods of education as both pathways would lead toward the development of the same set of knowledge and skills. Even programs that aid the assimilation of high schools into a working environment expressed they felt the students from these schools were better-rounded and were provided with skills they will need in college (Reid & Moore III, 2008).

A major issue that is presented to administration at the secondary level is the lack of communication between what high schools should teach in preparation for college, and what skills colleges expect out of incoming freshmen. National and State Boards of Education has experienced a lack of communication between what qualifies as college-readiness at the secondary level and at the post-secondary level. It appears that there is a gap in the achievement expected out of students in college-preparatory classes and the actual courses they will take at a post-secondary institution. An example of this is how the English classes in a secondary school setting often focus on literature, yet when these students enter college, much more emphasis is placed on the ability to read critically and write over the analysis of literature. Some states, such as California have already taken the initiative to improve this issue, as they implement an Early Assessment Program used to bridge this apparent disconnect between high school and college expectations (<http://search.proquest.com>) The response of many college-level institutions is to enroll student in remedial course work as to provide the necessary skills that the student failed to develop in high school at the college level. These courses do not attribute to the attainment of a college degree, but more of a means in which post-secondary institutions fill in the deficiencies that the incoming freshmen may possess in many of the core subject areas. It was reported that 42% of students attending two-year colleges enrolled in some sort of algebra remedial class, and 67% were enrolled in some sort of remedial English class. With the use of these remedial classes, it is costing the state and the students enrolled money, as it was found that if the state of Texas did not have to fund such remedial classes, they would save 88.5 million dollars each year by eliminating the need for developmental education classes at the post-secondary level (Porter, Polikoff 2011).

In 2005, the National Education Summit on High Schools meeting addressed the growing concern in the lack of high school graduates prepared for the demands of a college career in an increasingly competitive global economy. The solution was to form policies by means of the American Diploma Network (ADP) in order to close the expectations gap. The policy agenda called for states to commit to aligning standards set by college-level institutions to match the standards set in high school to help improve college readiness, to establish graduation requirements that require all students to complete a college-and-career-ready education, and to create comprehensive accountability and reporting systems that promote college and career readiness for all students. States such as Arkansas are using “information from a pilot of its teacher evaluation systems in 2013-2014, along with best practices, to determine how to restructure licensure policies and teacher preparation programs to ensure teachers are equipped to effectively teach the CCSS” (Achieve 2012). There have been two programs launched in Tennessee for teacher and principal training programs: Integrating Common Core into Pre-Service Training and Integrating the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System into Pre-Service Training. Both programs aim to develop a state-wide curriculum in order to ensure that pre-service training meet the CCSS standards (Achieve 2012).

A admirable example of excellent college preparation of high school students is provided by Geoffrey Canada, the star from the directed by Davis Guggenheim documentary, *“Waiting for Superman”*(2010) and the president of the Harlem Children’s Zone (HCZ). His organization has produced really inspiring results because 90% of public school students who participate in HCZ go to college. The main reason of his success is connected with powerful social programs: his organization provides education and support to local children and to their parents from lower-income households. Wishing to follow the strategies of HCZ, in 2009 President Barrack Obama stated plans to reproduce the HCZ model in 20 other big cities across the Nation.

Though currently there is no clear consensus in Michigan on what “college ready” really means and how to measure it (French, 2012), it is commonly understood as “the acquisition of the knowledge and skills a student needs to enroll and succeed in credit-bearing first-year courses at a postsecondary institution without the need for remediation” (The Conditions of College and Career Readiness, 2011, p. 1). Empirically based, ACT’s College Readiness Benchmarks “are the minimum scores needed on the ACT subject area tests to indicate a 50% chance of obtaining a B or higher or about a 75% chance of obtaining a C or higher in corresponding first-year credit-bearing college courses” (Ibid, p.1).

Strengths and Weaknesses of College Preparation in the United States

While there are many strengths and weakness at both at the National and State level when it comes to preparing students for college, there are areas of overlap in which reform to the educational system could prove beneficial to the students within our public schools system.

Strength: Early Start. To prepare better for college, many high school students would benefit from early start in college while still being in high school. Researchers argue that “an early college high school strategy, which combines high school and college-level instruction, reduces drop-out rates and improves academic achievement while boosting students’ chances of graduating from school and finding jobs” (Dessoff, 2011). Schools in North Carolina suggest that early college schools are closing gaps between minority students and white students which has helped to create an environment where all students are better prepared for college. Michigan is using this in a similar but unique fashion in which they are offering early high school graduates a \$2,500 scholarship per semester if they finish high school early in order to attend college. These methods together give a greater incentive to high achievement in high school, as students are encouraged to take more rigorous classes, which hold them to higher expectations with the understanding that they will be financially supported when they begin their college education. *Weakness: Lack of Accountability.* While both early college programs and increased incentives encourage college readiness, they fail to answer how much accountability that district has over the success of these students. Currently Michigan reform does not address this lack of accountability, and it seems as though the most accountability for the lack of college readiness is falling on financial reform; yet, financial reform is not the sole reason for the lack of college readiness. A greater sense of community needs to be prevalent in our schools, as students are now recognized for coming from a variety of backgrounds, such as difficult family circumstances, poverty, and health issues.

Strength: Increasing Competitiveness. The State of Michigan believes that creating a more competitive educational system in which students have the right to pursue their education at the best possible facility has many advantages. A system of capitalism would be instilled as the best-operated facilities would receive ample funding and be given the ability to experience perpetual success. *Weakness: Creating a Divide.* Many disadvantages, however, will present themselves, as well as the inherent issue with a voucher-based system, which is that those students who have the means to attend more successful secondary institutions will take away funding that would otherwise go to their immediate institution. What this will eventually create is a divide between thriving and struggling schools because those who have access to better structured educational facilities and the school in which they are leaving will continue to lose funding and the capability of improving its educational system. Michigan is already regarded as one of the most highly

segregated states in the context of our educational system. Changes to our educational finance with a voucher-based funding would only lead to the greater disparity in the funding of high and low achieving schools.

Strengths: Attempts to Reform Teacher Evaluations. Currently, there were attempts to reform teacher evaluation systems by the groundwork of Michigan Council for Educator Effectiveness (MCEE). Many schools, such as those in Leslie, MI, are currently participating in a \$4 million pilot to determine how teachers and administrators are evaluated in the future. *Weakness: the Lack of a Comprehensive System of Teacher Evaluation:* The primary issue in Michigan education reform is the lack of a reliable teacher evaluation system. A commonly accepted practice in gauging student achievement is based on standardized tests. These test scores are often utilized to gauge the effectiveness of these students' educators; however, these tests are not always a fair representation of student achievement and therefore, not always an accurate indicator of teacher effectiveness.

Strength: Social Programs to Help Parents to Develop their Responsibility. The widening gap between the rich and the poor has a direct correlation to the values which parents emphasize to their children at home. If students have parents who do not ensure their children's attendance and readiness for classes, then even the best teacher wouldn't be able to reach them. Millions of students failed in schools because their parents neglected their duties. An example of excellent college preparation of New York high school students is provided by Geoffrey Canada. *Weakness: the Need to Strengthen the "College-Going" Attitude More.* At both the National and State level, there needs to be a strengthened commitment to the "college-going" attitude. With a heightened sense of community, a bridge is formed between the strength of the community and its students. In New York, a program put into place called the Children's Aid Society, operates many schools in the area and strives to show "better student and teacher attendance, less grade retention, better test scores, and better parental involvement". With this program in place, schools in East Harlem saw 94% of its students being accepted into top-rated colleges (Gilroy, 2011).

Research methods and data collection instruments

This is a mixed methods study, based on quantitative and qualitative methods. We collected data from a variety of sources to construct the analytical framework for this study. For the literature review and the elaboration of the theoretical framework, we were using research findings published both globally and in the United States, with an emphasis on research findings from Michigan. The primary data source were surveys which were conducted as questionnaires where we were exploring the issues of Michigan high school students' college

readiness from four interrelated perspectives of high school students in their senior year. Participation was strictly voluntary. All these people consented to being surveyed. The consent document has been approved for use by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB). All replies were done anonymously. All surveys collected were representative of Michigan public schools demographics. We contacted many different public high schools across the state and received input from those schools whose administration was willing to support and contribute to our study. We were able to obtain the input of high school seniors [N=127] that are currently attending public schools in Michigan. Through the insight of all students we were able to obtain very valuable assessments of the Michigan's public schools picture on college readiness.

This survey was comprised of 5 closed-ended questions and 5 open-ended questions exploring the strengths and weaknesses of preparing high school students for college. The closed questions data was analyzed using the descriptive statistics (SPSS), and the opened-ended data was analyzed by inductive analysis.

Findings from Students' Surveys

The overwhelming majority of Michigan high school students believe that they are ready (47%) or somewhat ready for college (53%). Among the reoccurring themes for feeling prepared students identified the following reasons: because they had good schools and teachers; or because they have the right work ethic, feel independent and believe in themselves; some students felt prepared because they have/or are taking Advanced Placement (AP) or challenging classes; some of them felt prepared because they are dual enrolled at a university. Among the reasons for not being prepared were receiving bad scores on the ACT and lack of college experience to provide an answer. A number of students felt that their high school classes aren't preparing them enough: 59% of respondents believed that they still need to learn more to get prepared better for college; 21% of the participants supposed that they do not need to learn anything more. At the moment of survey, 85% of the participants were not dual enrolled, but 67% of them were taking AP classes. Answering the question whether AP courses prepare students for college, 64 % of the participants answered in the affirmative, 19% disagreed with them, and 17% of students did not know the answer. Among the reoccurring themes evident from the open-ended questions about AP courses, we found out that students believe that AP classes provide students with tougher material, college experiences, and along with them, faster paced classes that teach them better study skills.

From our interviews with high school students in AP classes we found that nearly all (95%) plan on going to a four year university, from this we can guess that in addition to students being exposed to college level material, pace and expectations, these classes also seem to put students in the going to college

mindset. AP classes also give students the confidence they need when entering college. From our data we found that students taking AP classes was a top response of why some high school students already felt prepared for college (15.2%). Going along with this theme, instilling confidence in students is also very important for them to make the next step from high school to college successfully; this showed up in our data because another top response of why high school students felt prepared for college was because they have a strong belief in themselves (13.6%). From our data we found that a lot more female students take AP classes than male students, almost 2 to 1; all students should be equally encouraged to take AP classes to be successful and prepared for college. Another effective method of preparing high school students for college is dual enrollment. This was shown in our data because 3 out of the 12 students who were dual enrolled indicated that dual enrollment was the reason they already feel prepared for college. When asked about who has the greatest impact on preparing high school students for college, a lot of students (almost a runaway) said it is their teachers. Some responses that explain why students feel this way are:

“They (teachers) know the steps between High School and College,”
“Teachers know the steps because they themselves have done them and they know what is required of students for both high school and college.”

Another quote that supports this idea is, *“Teachers spend the most time with students”* which in most cases is very true because students are at school for about eight hours of the day while their parents are at work and the amount of time they spend at their home with their parents can be a lot less than the time they spend with their individual teachers.

Thinking about most important skills outgoing seniors need to be successful in college, the participants identified students’ self-discipline, self-advocacy, and their ability to identify and set goals. Answering the question about what teachers are doing in your teaching to prepare students for college, some teachers responded that they teach and require students to self-evaluate, to identify and set goals, to study and think, and also how to attack the subject matter.

Overall, the majority of students felt well prepared or somewhat prepared to enter into higher-level education upon completion of high school. Even though this is the case, almost every student interviewed was able to provide a few areas that they felt they lacked in in preparation for advancing towards a collegiate environment. Time management (36%), study skills (28%), and the ability to access and use the resources available to them (43%) were the most common areas in which college students felt they were inadequately prepared prior to going to a university; most of the issues with resource use were developed from high school English teachers and their lack of in depth instruction on how to produce accurate

research results and then share them in a formalized paper. Students were regretting that their high school teachers did not teach them other writing styles besides MLA because in college they have written mostly in Chicago and APA, and it was very difficult for them as freshmen when transitioning.

Conclusions and Practical Recommendations

In the data collected, we found that there are many factors other than academics that impact how successful a student will be in college. These are major issues for students because there is a 180-degree change for students going from the structured environments in high school to complete freedom and flexibility in college. Not every student knows how to adjust to these major changes in their life: so many of them may struggle in their personal life causing them problems in their academic life. Many of the professors were realistic by saying that they are not expecting students not to have fun but say students have to balance having fun with getting their work done. This idea also goes along with time management and being organized.

The people we surveyed believe that Advanced Placement classes and tests are effective at preparing students for college as over 65% of high school student responses indicated a positive response. The main reason why the majority of the people we interviewed feel this way is because they see AP classes/tests as classes with more rigor that go at a faster pace which acts in greater accordance with the structure of a college level curriculum. This idea was repeated in both interview responses from high school teachers and their students as over 92% of high school teachers agreed that AP classes better prepare students for college. From these statistics we can guess that AP classes not only prepare students for college but help aid them in developing a college mindset. While it appears that AP classes in general are excellent at preparing students for college it is not conclusive across the board.

Dual enrollment is another effective tool in preparing students for college, as it gradually introduces high school students to the college work load and environment all while earning college credit, giving them a head start after they graduate high school. A number of the students that were dually enrolled expressed that their dual enrollment experience is why they feel ready to enter college upon graduation. There should be greater communication between high schools and post-secondary schools about expectations of what students need to know to be successful, as many times students enter into college having a predetermined idea of what is expected of them, yet when they receive their first grades they find that the college level expects greater quality of work than their high school. High schools should strive to have the highest quality teachers possible and they should increase the rigor of the courses they offer as a vast majority of students and faculty alike agreed that high school teachers have the greatest impact on preparing their students for college..

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**ДОСЛІДЖЕННЯ ПОГЛЯДІВ АМЕРИКАНСЬКИХ СТУДЕНТІВ НА
ПІДГОТОВКУ В КОЛЕДЖІ**

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Простежено інтелектуальні основи готовності до навчання в коледжі і до професії вчителя; поєднано методи емпіричного дослідження поглядів, переконань і діяльності освітньої спільноти Мічигану з метою уточнення й інтерпретації переваг і недоліків підготовки учнів старшої школи до коледжу. На підставі результатів нашого якісного й кількісного дослідження

запроповано практичні рекомендації для досягнення різнобічної підготовки старшокласників до коледжу.

Ключові слова: підготовка в коледжі, готовність до коледжу, професія вчителя, старшокласники, емпіричне дослідження, переваги й недоліки, якісне дослідження, кількісне дослідження, освітня спільнота.

ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ ВЗГЛЯДОВ АМЕРИКАНСКИХ СТУДЕНТОВ НА ПОДГОТОВКУ В КОЛЕДЖЕ

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Статья направлена на исследование интеллектуальной основы готовности к обучению в колледже и к профессии учителя. В работе объединено методы эмпирического исследования взглядов, убеждений и деятельности образовательной общности Мичигана с целью уточнения, интерпретации преимуществ и недостатков подготовки учеников старшей школы к колледжу. На основании результатов качественного и количественного исследования предлагаем практические рекомендации достижения обширной подготовки старшеклассников к колледжу.

Ключевые слова: подготовка в колледже, готовность к колледжу, профессия учителя, старшеклассники, эмпирическое исследование, преимущества и недостатки, качественное исследование, количественное исследование, образовательная общность.

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