

Higher Education and the “American Dream”: Why the Status Quo Won't Get Us There

BY SARA E. KEENE

The community college represents the only form of universal access to education, and is thus purported to be the gateway to low-income and minority students' realization of the “American Dream.” But that dream is growing more and more elusive for a substantial number of people. Instead of breaking down ethnic and class barriers to economic and social opportunities, community colleges are often complicit in the maintenance and reproduction of social stratification, under the guise of a so-called “ethic of care” that attempts to cultivate students' “self-esteem” rather than the acquisition of collegiate competencies crucial to rigorous academic work, successful university transfer, and citizenship. My experiences in higher education—on both sides of the desk—suggest to me that remedial and dumbed-down courses may be simply another means of reinforcing and reproducing ethnic, gender, and class-based inequalities.

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When I began one of a number of attempts at a community-college education, I was placed in a remedial math course. I was not terribly put off by this, since I was scheduled to take two sociology courses that looked extremely interesting. But after several weeks of mind-numbingly boring, irrelevant, and uninspiring classes, I dropped all my courses, adding three “withdrawals” to my transcripts from more than a half dozen community colleges. Five years of bouncing from one college to the next without having either achieved a two-year degree or fulfilled the requirements necessary for transfer left me unimpressed with academia and reinforced my belief that college was a waste of time. Everything I needed for “success,” I believed, could be achieved instead through “life experiences.”

After a frustrating year working in minimum-wage jobs, I decided to swallow my pride and return to the community college. This time, I vowed to complete my two-year degree regardless of how boring I found the courses to be, with the expectation that this perseverance would lead to a better job. But my perceptions of education

were to be dramatically changed. At Columbia College—a community college in the California foothills—I met two professors, Ted Hamilton and Paula Clarke, who fundamentally challenged my worldview, my expectations of academia, my sense of my own academic potential, and my understanding of my responsibilities as a citizen. I became aware of the ways in which my lack of institutional knowledge, coupled with low aspirations, had unnecessarily constrained my academic and professional options.

Professors Hamilton and Clarke's pedagogy was radically different from anything I had ever experienced, and I began to realize why I so detested the remedial courses I had taken in previous college attempts. Such courses lacked significant challenge, and they did nothing to expose me to any of the exciting ideas that make a discipline worth learning or study worth persisting in. I was exposed to an explosion of ideas—many with which I would grapple for months, if not years, after completing the courses—and I was challenged (and required) to develop critical reading, writing, and reasoning

skills. Education was suddenly meaningful and relevant.

The mentorship of these professors led to academic and professional outcomes that were extremely atypical for people in my community. Upon graduating from Columbia College, I transferred to the University of California, Santa Cruz, where I studied anthropology (and graduated *summa cum laude*), earned a M.Sc. in development studies from the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies, and completed an internship in India with UNICEF. I am now beginning a Ph.D. program in development sociology at Cornell University. And I'm only one of a large group of its students—some of whom came from extraordinarily disadvantaged backgrounds—who have successfully pursued academic and professional goals that are unusual for their geographic, economic, and social backgrounds.

I later spent a year teaching at the same community college in which my own life had shifted course, employing my mentors' teaching philosophy and pedagogy. That year was one of the most rewarding and challenging experiences of my life. I witnessed first-hand the effects that remedial and dumbed-down courses are having on students. From one group of them, I experienced outright resistance. I was informed that my expectations were too high: one student insisted that "we shouldn't be expected to do this kind of work; after all, we're only community-college students," and another questioned why my course demanded so much work when he had earned A's in similar courses without having opened any of the required readings. On the other hand, I had students in my classes who were as thrilled as I had been to encounter an alternative to the status quo. They too

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were searching for a meaningful education, although many of them had never considered themselves capable of serious academic work.

As time went on I saw transformations in the students who persisted in the course, who typically didn't fit the normative definition of "elite" students: many were minorities and/or came from low-income families, and several were non-native English speakers. But they began to demand more from their education and in turn invested significantly more effort and commitment in it. As these students developed an alternative conception of the ethical responsibilities of educators and students, they began to question their prior collegiate experiences.

One student told me that one of his instructors had given students the option of donating blood twice in the semester in lieu of taking a final exam. Several others shared stories of being discouraged by counselors from applying

to prestigious academic institutions, under the assumption that the local state college should be "good enough" for them. These kinds of behaviors clearly violate academe's ethical and professional norms and cripple otherwise capable students.

In stark contrast to this ethos, Professors Hamilton and Clarke had created an environment that provided engaging coursework in the context of meaningful challenge and considerable support. But despite such successes, academically demanding and stimulating environments such as these are rare, the students in my classes told me. In the absence of authentic collegiate opportunities, I would have been, and many other willing and committed students have been and still are, casualties of academe.

Although, as I realized during the year of doing menial labor, higher education serves as a gateway into the economy, this is not its only, or even its most important, function. In an era in which employment is becoming increasingly uncertain and unstable, higher education must prepare people not just for work but for lives filled with more intellectually demanding challenges generally. Navigating the future's uncharted territory will require adults to possess a tremendous capacity for and tolerance of ambiguity, as well as commitment, creativity, and critical engagement. We are not likely to cultivate these characteristics through remedial courses. If we want students—and indeed citizens—to think critically, innovatively, and imaginatively, higher education is going to have to provide them with ideas worth thinking about, in an environment that facilitates the development of *authentic* collegiate competencies. □