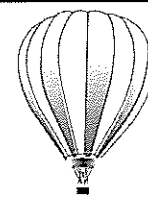


ACCESS



Refocusing Universities for Relevance in The New Millennium

Mary Catherine Swanson,
AVID Founder and Director

The United States is currently experiencing the most rapidly changing demographics any nation has experienced in history. Each year nearly a million people come legally to America. Today nearly one in ten people in America was born in another country; one in five school children is from an immigrant family. This rapid shift in population has precipitated an ever increasing gap between rich and poor in this country. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the upper seventy percent of incomes are rising while the lower thirty percent are falling. Few would argue that such a trend threatens the very fiber of the middle class which has

historically made America strong, and few would argue that a strong middle class is dependent on educating the masses to the highest levels possible.

Public elementary and secondary schools have found themselves for the past decade pummeled by public opinion decrying falling test scores, with the public's understanding being limited regarding the increasing difficulty of teaching such a diverse student population. Nevertheless, nationally the mantra is institutional responsibility for student learning, and rightfully, national and state leaders are scrambling to develop appropriate measures for student

outcomes. To fail to do so will surely hasten the public's cry for private schools that will be asked to accomplish what the public schools have struggled with for the past several decades.

Recently, public debate has intensified about the University of California's altering its admission standards to accept students who come from schools where rigorous honors courses are not offered in an attempt to align university enrollments more closely with the population of the state. Yet all acknowledge that the most effective preparation for students scoring high on SAT and ACT college entry examinations is

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The Science of Opportunity: Gene Cota-Robles

The ACCESS Interview

As middle schools and high schools address the issue of rigorous preparation for all students, postsecondary opportunities in mathematics and science remain a concern for many colleges and universities. Gene Cota-Robles has observed the challenge of providing both rigor and access first-hand, having taught microbiology at the Universities of California, Riverside and Santa Cruz, and at Pennsylvania State

University. Cota-Robles' broad range of academic experiences also includes roles as a special advisor to the National Science Foundation, a postdoctoral fellowship with the U.S. Public Health Service, and a term as a visiting scientist with the Uppsala Universitet in Sweden. Moreover, Cota-Robles gained an understanding of the challenges many students face while serving as vice-chancellor for academic

affairs and provost of Crown College at UC Santa Cruz, and as assistant vice-president for academic advancement, Office of the President, for the University of California. Currently, Cota-Robles serves as co-chair for The College Board's National Task Force on Minority High Achievement, and he is presently a member of the board of directors

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completion of advanced level courses in high school. Colleges clearly use SAT and ACT exam scores to "level the playing field" of high school grade point and to predict, on an objective measure, which students will succeed in college. Somehow, logic doesn't follow that students from schools without advanced courses will be as well prepared as those from more academic high schools.

Surely we applaud admitting as many well-prepared students into the nation's universities as is humanly possible; however, the public school system does not need another round of public anger leveled at it when the new admission standards, based on trying to meet the needs of a rapidly changing population, yield students who will need remediation and support in order to be successful in college. And herein lies the problem.

While the K-12 public school system is being held accountable for student outcomes, the universities are not. Exactly what is a university student supposed to know upon the completion of

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AVID To Present Special Pre-Conference as Part of The College Board's National Forum

The AVID Program will sponsor a special pre-conference opportunity in conjunction with the College Board's National Forum in October of 1999, in San Diego. The AVID preconference event will take place on Tuesday, October 26, when participants will have the opportunity to visit AVID National Demonstration Schools, both middle schools and high schools, with a special focus on successful Advanced Placement and algebra opportunities for all students.

The College Board's National Forum commences on October 26 and concludes on October 30. Headquarters hotel will be the Hyatt Regency, San Diego.

For more information about the National Forum, contact the College Board's website at www.collegeboard.org. In the coming months, more specific information about the AVID preconference will be posted on the AVID website at www.avidcenter.org.

courses and graduation? What are the state and national standards for the universities, many of which are public institutions? What student outcome measures are required in our universities?

As Director of the AVID Program, it is important for me to stay grounded in the realities of today's secondary schools and the colleges to which we send our students. I often observe our students in their classes in both the secondary schools and in postsecondary institutions and discuss their experiences with them. While I find middle school and high school classrooms filled with collaborative settings and students actively involved in conquering difficult curriculum, I find the college classrooms reminiscent of those I attended in the 60's and undoubtedly reminiscent of those my father attended in the 30's and my grandfather attended at the turn of the Century. In all fairness, did my grandfather, father, and I learn in these classrooms—by all means. But we came from homes in

which English was our first lan-
guage and our parents would have disowned us if we had dropped out of college.

When I talk to college faculty about the current dynamics of student learning, they see a false dichotomy in expressions that seem to pit teaching against learning. They believe that teaching causes learning, and they strive to improve their teaching through scheduling extra review sessions and individual appointments with students.

When I talk about collaborative classroom settings and interactive problem-solving, they are concerned about the loss of teacher control. They see themselves as subject-matter experts who dispense and explain information to students, primarily via lectures.

Uri Treisman's research in the early 80's at the University of California at Berkeley paralleled that of mine as a high school teacher in the San Diego Unified School District in the same era. We both found that students of all backgrounds learned equally well if they were challenged by rigorous

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curriculum and required to conquer that curriculum in collaborative groups in which they explained their ideas through their own words, both orally and in writing. While the lecture method is adequate for imparting some new concepts, students need to grapple with their own interpretations of those concepts in a public, rather than private or individual setting or many of the students never know they are not understanding the information until exam time when they fail the course.

Just as secondary teachers have much to learn from elementary staff regarding student support systems so do college faculty have much to learn from secondary instructors regarding pedagogy which lends to efficacious learning for all students regardless of cultural, social, ethnic, or linguistic origins.

In a *Learning College for the 21st Century* (1997, Oryx Press), Terry O'Banion reports that nursing programs in some community colleges have the highest success rates of all education, at least in part because a cohort is guided through a rigorous competency-based curriculum. Nursing students study together and support one another, and there is no disincentive for all to succeed at high levels because students are graded not relative to one another (as on a curve) but relative to a given performance standard.

What a novel idea for postsecondary institutions — performance standards. In a 1993 National Adult Literacy Survey, the Educational Testing Service reported that only one half of

four-year college graduates were able to demonstrate intermediate levels of competence in interpreting prose such as newspaper articles, working with documents such as bus schedules, and using elementary arithmetic to solve problems involving costs of meals in restaurants. And yet, where was the public outcry regarding this report and how did universities respond?

Popular magazine ratings of colleges and universities rest primarily on the basis of resources and processes rather than outcomes. Institutions with the most exclusive student admissions standards, the largest library collections, and the largest endowments are ranked at the top. Wouldn't it be revolutionary if colleges were judged on the basis of student learning instead?

In 1989 I accompanied several university professors to an American Education Research Association convention in Boston where we reported on AVID research. Although given only three minutes for my "presentation," I ended it by lauding William Kennedy, president of Stanford University, and Derek Bok, president of Harvard University, for rewarding professors for good teaching as well as for good research. When the session concluded, several professors approached this high school teacher to tell her how offended they were that I would suggest that teaching was an appropriate criteria for evaluating college instructors. They clearly held to the idea that learning was the domain of the student.

I would propose that the most relevant, revolutionary step universities could take for the new millennium would be to identify learning outcomes for students and to develop ways that college professors could ensure that

graduates achieve those outcomes. In addition to high school graduation exit exams, we could have university exit exams as well. If this were the call of the land, university faculty would necessarily have to focus on teaching as it affects learning; they would need to create environments conducive to student learning.

The new four-step plan for universities could be:

- The mission of colleges and universities would be focused on student learning
- Colleges and universities would accept primary responsibility for student learning
- Student learning would guide institutional decisions
- Colleges and universities would be judged on their effectiveness and be evaluated on student learning rather than on resources or processes.

Just as secondary teachers have much to learn from elementary staff regarding student support systems so do college faculty have much to learn from secondary instructors regarding pedagogy which lends to efficacious learning for all students regardless of cultural, social, ethnic, or linguistic origins. Only when the various segments of public education equally accept responsibility for student outcomes and share the best of each institution's expertise in achieving these outcomes will the taxpaying public have a public education system of which it can be proud and we can all walk into the new millennium with confidence.