

Point & Counterpoint on Bell's 2005 Education White Papers

Point:

Rocky Mountain News editorial, August 28, 2005

College is not for everyone: Study based on false premise

Colorado's high-school graduation rates are dismayingly low, especially for black and Hispanic students and students from low-income families. College entrance rates are low, and too many people who do start college never finish.

These are the conclusions presented earlier this week by the Bell Policy Center in a series of "white papers," and we're in broad agreement with them.

Bell policy analyst Spiros Protopsaltis, who wrote the papers, uses the metaphor of a leaky pipeline. For every 100 students who enter high school as ninth-graders, 29 fail to graduate on time, 30 don't start college within a year, 12 don't come back for a second year and nine haven't finished their degrees within three years (for an associate's degree) or six (for a bachelor's degree).

So only 20 remain to walk across the stage at college graduation ceremonies.

Actually, Colorado does a little better than the national average at every point along the pipeline, but "a little better than average" is nowhere near good enough.

The only thing this state is really good at is luring well-educated people from the other states. During 1989-2001, the report says, "Colorado was the second largest net importer of college graduates and college freshmen."

That's a good thing; let's hope it continues to be true.

Let us also say, as we often have before, that if there are unnecessary barriers to higher education for qualified Colorado students, whatever their circumstances, the state should be identifying those barriers and removing them. But Bell's assiduous number-crunching does nothing to demonstrate that such barriers exist, let alone to say what they might be.

Everywhere in the nation, Hispanic and black high school graduation rates are significantly lower than white and Asian rates. As long as that is true, which is not the same thing as saying it is acceptable, states with a large percentage of Hispanic or black students, including Colorado, will probably have a lower overall graduation rate. New Mexico's "pipeline" number is only 10.

Another problem with the report: It seems to assume that everybody should go to college. Education should be viewed as a whole "that starts with preschool and is completed with a college degree." But not everybody is qualified for college, and enrolling young people who will need one or even two years of remedial work before they start earning credits that count toward college graduation is a cruel deception.

Does everybody need to go to college? The report paints a dire picture especially "for Hispanics, blacks and young people from low-income families - those who most need the boost of a college education to avoid a life of poverty and dependence."

It apparently has escaped Bell's notice that many college graduates of all races earn less than people who rewire their houses or weld heavy equipment.

The report also excludes several large categories of students, including those who take more than four years to graduate from high school, take time off between high school and college, or transfer out of their first college.

In other words, although Bell is right that too many students are falling along the wayside, it would not be wise to put too much stock in its numbers.

Counterpoint:

Rocky Mountain News Speakout column, September 2, 2005

Too many college education barriers

By Wade Buchanan

We have no more important task than educating the next generation – our future work force, our future voters, our future leaders. By educating the broadest range of residents, we create a prosperous, engaged and stable society.

So we should be concerned that 30 percent of Colorado's kids don't graduate from high school on time; that another 30 percent do not enter college the next year; that another 13 percent do not return for their sophomore year; and that only 20 percent graduate from college in a reasonable amount of time.

And we should be very concerned that the numbers are far worse for low-income and minority students.

These are the findings of a recent series of white papers by the Bell Policy Center (available at www.thebell.org). They show the achievement gap that starts in elementary school becomes a graduation gap, a college attendance gap, a college completion gap, and ultimately a prosperity gap.

This is among the most significant challenges we face in Colorado. That's why we welcome the recent editorial by the *Rocky Mountain News* concerning our white papers ("College is not for everyone/Study based on false premise," Aug. 28).

We are in agreement with much of the editorial, but several issues warrant discussion.

First, the *News* says our reports are based on the "false premise" that "everyone should go to college." We know college is not for everyone. But we believe everyone

should have the opportunity to go to college, and that the only limit should be the individual's own interests and abilities. We clearly fall short of that goal in Colorado.

The *News* also faults our reports for not describing or proving that "unnecessary barriers to higher education" actually exist. Our purpose was to document who attends and who succeeds at higher education in Colorado. Our goal is to better understand the system and begin a conversation about improving it.

Still, a careful reader of all six white papers will come away with a clear understanding that unnecessary barriers do indeed exist.

In fact, decades of research leaves little doubt: Otherwise able students do not go on to higher education because they cannot afford to, because the public schools do not prepare them properly, or because they do not receive support and guidance to navigate the system. That last factor is particularly potent for those who would be the first generation of their families to attend college.

These barriers exist in Colorado, and we should remove them.

To begin with, policy-makers need to treat the public schools and our colleges and universities not as two separate systems but as parts of one continuum of education from pre-school through college graduation. The public schools need to do a better job preparing students for further education.

If Referendums C and D pass this November, they will provide a good down payment on this effort. Nearly \$1 billion will go to improve our public schools, and an equal amount will be earmarked to help make our colleges and universities as affordable as possible.

Finally, the *News* suggests that the Bell Policy Center fails to appreciate the value of jobs that do not require college degrees. Of course both examples used - welders and electricians - require technical training. But, yes, some people make very good livings without college degrees. On average, however, the more education you have, the more money you will earn.

Our reports focus not just on the traditional four-year colleges but on the entire suite of higher education opportunities in Colorado. We can be proud of our higher education system - a system designed to prepare students from diverse backgrounds for a variety of careers, from welding to medical research.

The problem is that too few of our kids are finding their way into that system, and too few of those who make it into the system are staying to graduate. That is a crisis that requires our attention.

Wade Buchanan is president of the Bell Policy Center, a nonpartisan research and advocacy organization.

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