

High School Flight from Reading and Writing

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As concerns mount over the costs and benefits of higher education, it may be worthwhile to glance at the benefits of high school education at present as well. Of course, high school costs, while high, are borne by the taxpayers in general, but it is reasonable to hope that there are sufficient benefits for such an outlay.

In fact, 30 percent of ninth-grade students do not graduate with their class, so there is a major loss right there. In addition, it appears that a large fraction of our high school graduates who go on to college leave without taking any credential or degree within eight years. On November 17, 2008, the *Boston Globe* reported, “About two-thirds of the city’s high school graduates in 2000 who enrolled in college have failed to earn degrees, according to a first-of-its-kind study being released today.”¹ The fact that this is a new study shows that the days of taking not just college, but high school education for granted may be ending as well. If public high schools were preparing their graduates (the 70 percent) adequately, they should be able to read and write in college.

Alternatives to high school are coming only slowly. Charter schools, some good and some bad, are being tried. Homeschooling serves some 1.5 million students, and some edupundits (and computer salesmen) are pushing for ever more use of virtual distance learning at the high school level.

One of the most frequently heard complaints of college professors is that their new students (and many of their older students) can’t seem to read and

¹James Vaznis, “Hub Grads Come Up Short in College,” *Boston Globe*, November 17, 2008, http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles/2008/11/17/hub_grads_come_up_short_in_college/.

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write. A survey of professors done by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2006 reported that 91 percent thought their students were not very well-prepared in writing, 89 percent said they were not very well-prepared in reading, and 91 percent said they were not very well-prepared with research skills. The same survey reporting these disastrous numbers found that high school teachers thought 36 percent of their students were ready for college writing, 25 percent were ready for college reading, and 26 percent were ready for college research. The two sets of percentages measure different things, but they present enough information to indicate some serious communication gaps between high school and college teachers.²

What accounts for these differences? American public high schools in general do not believe in having students read complete nonfiction books, but confine reading assignments to excerpts or textbooks; nor do they believe in having students do the research and writing necessary for serious term papers. How can that be? The English department is responsible for reading and writing, and there the reading is fiction, and the writing is personal, creative, the five paragraph essay, and, thanks to college admission requirements, the “college” essay (approximately five hundred words, again personal).

Of course, if college professors are concerned about student readiness in reading, writing, and doing research, perhaps they could speak with the admissions office about the “college” essay they ask students for, and academics might even suggest that such a requirement helps to dumb down student reading and writing in the high schools. But they don’t speak with the admissions office, as far as I can tell.

I have been interested in the contrast between the relationships that college coaches, for example, have with high school coaches, and the relationships college professors have with high school teachers. In some cases the coaches know each other well and frequently talk about promising athletes. If a high school coach has a hot prospect, he is sure to hear from college coaches early and often. And at some colleges, coaches bring lists of the athletes they want (need) to the admissions office for action.

By contrast, if a high school history teacher has a very good student, he will most likely not hear from any college professor of history, and the

²Alvin P. Sanoff, “A Perception Gap Over Students Preparation,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 10, 2006, <http://chronicle.com/article/A-Perception-Gap-Over/31426/>.

college professor will not bring a list of favored candidates to the admissions office for action.

I am sure there are exceptions, but as a rule, college professors show no curiosity about good academic work in reading and writing at the secondary level, but feel free to complain about the literacy skills of the students they teach.

I once heard that Lew Alcindor (Kareem Abdul-Jabbar), when he was a senior at Power Memorial Academy in New York, got some attention from college coaches. According to an article in *Time* magazine in 1965:

So far, 60 colleges have invited Lew to look them over. Boston College Coach Bob Cousy writes him mash notes; Princeton, Cincinnati and St. John's would all like invitations to his graduation this June. And the pros, who have four years to wait, are already saving up: they figure that Alcindor will start out somewhere around \$50,000 a year. Imagine. All that fuss over a 17-year-old who has only grown one inch in the last two years.³

Now they would be talking about millions of dollars, of course, but the thing that struck me about the story I heard was that in addition to all the coaches' interest, this high school senior got personal letters from Jackie Robinson and Ralph Bunche urging him to attend UCLA, which he did. I can say with some confidence that in 1965 the best ten high school history students in the country heard from no one, and it has been that way every year since.

So what? Good students can be accepted at fine colleges, do well, etc. But one concern I have is over the message this sends to high school teachers and high school students. The message seems to be that if they are coaches and good athletes, they are important and valuable. But if they are outstanding teachers and first-class students, that is less important and less valuable. As it turns out, some of these fine students are also fine athletes and some of these fine teachers are coaches, and they see the difference in the respect with which they are treated in those roles.

What Richard Hofstadter termed in his 1963 work *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* has long been recognized and understood, but as we think

³“High School Basketball: The Courtship of Lew Alcindor,” *Time*, January 22, 1965, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,940882-1,00.html>.

more about the failings of our public high schools, perhaps it is time to take a closer look at their approach to academic reading and writing.

The International Baccalaureate Program, offered in several hundred American high schools, requires a four thousand-word extended essay for the diploma. The Advanced Placement Program of the College Board, on the other hand, which can be found in almost all U.S. high schools and claims to set college-level expectations, has no research paper requirement.

A national study done for *The Concord Review* in 2002 found that while 95 percent of high school teachers believe writing a research paper is important or very important, 62 percent never assign a paper of moderate length (three thousand to five thousand words) and 81 percent never assign a paper of more than five thousand words—the starting point for most papers published in *The Concord Review*.⁴

Teachers who do not assign research papers have a number of reasons why: they never wrote such a paper themselves, they think short papers are just as good, they have no time to teach students writing and no time to correct student papers. I was hired by the Director of Social Studies in Collier County, Florida, to conduct a three-day workshop with teachers on student academic writing. The teachers were interested in having their students do serious papers, but I found out on the last day of our sessions together that all but one of them had six classes of thirty students each, and that one had seven classes of thirty students each. With classes that size, teachers who assign serious research papers need at least five extra days to evaluate them properly, and they are never allowed such time in our public high schools. The reason is that having students learn to write term papers is not regarded as important and deserving of time aside from regular classwork in the way that band, drama, football, chorus, soccer, and a multitude of other school activities are.

If we do not assign importance to reading nonfiction and writing term papers, it should be no surprise that when our students arrive at college or in the workplace, they cannot read very well and they cannot write very well.

The Business Roundtable did a survey of its member companies a few years ago, and found that together they were spending more than \$3 billion each year on remedial writing courses for their employees, and not just for new hourly employees, but equally divided among current salaried employees,

⁴Center for Survey Research and Analysis, University of Connecticut, *History Research Paper Study* (Sudbury, MA: The Concord Review, 2002), 1, http://www.nas.org/documents/History_Paper_Study.pdf.

current hourly employees, new salaried employees (college graduates), and new hourly employees (high school graduates).⁵

Many education organizations and edupundits in this country are finding uses for the hundreds of millions of dollars in grants and contributions from many sources, including the Broad, Gates, and Walton Foundations, not to mention the Department of Education.⁶ Surely, one would think, they are tackling these reasons for doubting the value of a high school education. But the Harvard Graduate School of Education, for example, doesn't seem to be paying attention to student reading and writing. If you take the time to look over the research interests of Harvard's ed school faculty you will find, as I did, that no one seems to be interested in the academic work of students, whether in history, physics, literature, foreign languages, chemistry, or the reading of nonfiction books and the writing of real term papers. Instead, they are interested in issues of race, gender, community, leadership, ethnicity, poverty, disability, management, psychosocial difficulties, social justice, and the like. All fine pursuits no doubt, according to many, and no doubt well-funded. But this is more evidence of the ignorance and inattention among edupundits when it comes to basic academic work for our students.

There is a major and multi-billion-dollar effort to determine and adopt common core standards that, if any good, might direct attention to badly needed remedial work in academic reading and writing at the secondary level. But so far the reading and writing standards are quite low, I would estimate at the eighth-grade level or lower.

Students in American high schools take calculus, European history, chemistry, Chinese, Latin, literature, physics, and so on, but for some very odd reason, educators have all agreed that high school students in this country are able to read only fiction and to write mainly about their own

⁵National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges, *Writing: A Ticket to Work or a Ticket Out: A Survey of Business Leaders* (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 2004), 4, http://www.collegeboard.com/prod_downloads/writingcom/writing-ticket-to-work.pdf.

⁶Teach for America (TFA), for example, which "is growing the movement of leaders who work to ensure that kids growing up in poverty get an excellent education," had an annual budget of more than \$312 million in 2010. In 2011, this "national corps of outstanding recent college graduates who commit to teach for two years in urban and rural public schools and become lifelong leaders in expanding educational opportunity," received another \$50 million grant from the federal government to help TFA expand and \$100 million from the Broad Foundation for endowment. In July, the Wal-Mart Foundation announced that it was awarding TFA a new \$49+ million grant.

lives. To my mind, this makes reading and writing far and away the most dumbed-down parts of our high school curriculum.

Now, perhaps in this brave new world of STEM and virtual learning, some will argue that math and science are so much more important than the humanities that we do not need to concern ourselves with reading and writing, but I received this email from a long-time college chemistry professor who wrote:

I began listing “college level reading and writing skills” as prerequisites for my courses. My first lecture I also included a section on how to overcome poor reading and writing skills (many excellent workshops are provided on our campus completely free of charge!). *However, I have to say that it is VERY difficult for college students to learn reading and writing skills “after the fact” while pursuing their college degrees.* They really need to learn these in high school (which they definitely are not) and come in prepared, or spend a year in college learning them before they begin their degree programs—what a waste of their time and money! (Emphasis added)

When and if the college bubble bursts, we will still have our public high schools. I am convinced that one of the reasons so many of our high school graduates drop out of college (the usual excuse reported by the edupundits is lack of funds) is that their knowledge is so meager and their reading is so poor that they really have no idea what the professor is talking about. Moreover, if fewer students wind up going to college in a post-bubble world, then it will be all the more important to make sure their high school education is solid and substantive.

It may be helpful to note that William Shakespeare finished only through the seventh grade and managed to learn to write well somehow, helped along, perhaps, by a tougher curriculum at that Stratford school. But even in this country, standards for fifteen-year-olds were once higher. As E.D. Hirsch, Jr., reports in *The Knowledge Deficit*:

In our pre-romantic days, books were seen as key to education. In a 1785 letter to his nephew, Peter Carr, aged fifteen, Jefferson recommended that he read books (in the original languages and in this order) by the following authors: [history] Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, [*Anabasis*], Arian, Quintus Curtius, Diodorus Siculus, and Justin. On morality, Jefferson recommended books by Epictetus, Plato,

Cicero, Antoninus, Seneca, and Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, and in poetry Virgil, Terence, Horace, Anacreon, Theocritus, Homer, Euripides, Sophocles, Milton, Shakespeare, Ossian, Pope, and Swift.⁷

I would dearly love to be in the room to see the faces of the common core planners if someone would read that list to them and suggest that our public high school sophomores ought to consider such a reading plan. Something, if not a bubble, would surely pop at that!

⁷E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *The Knowledge Deficit: Closing the Shocking Education Gap for Children* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 9.