

Making College A Reality For All: A Submission for Strengthening America's Democracy

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SETTING THE CONTEXT: DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA

While exact definitions of democracy vary, they typically include common elements: government by the people and for the people; one person, one vote; representative leadership; and majority decisions that preserve minority rights. And in its most literal deconstruction, democracy combines the Greek words demos, meaning "the people," and kratien, meaning "to rule."

People, and necessarily the individual, are at the heart of democracy. Yet no definition of democracy I found contains a simple descriptor of the people that embodies the inherent promise of "equal rights" and best predicts the health of a democracy. In this author's humble opinion, the strongest democracy is one in which all of its people are educated. Not some, not many, but all. The very purpose of democracy is to ensure every individual is guaranteed equal rights as a foundation in order to be able to pursue equal opportunity.

Without relentlessly, deliberately, and proactively securing the equal right of education for all, we create a starting gate of inequity. With this bigotry, democracy fails generations of individuals who are trapped in a cycle of "maleducation" and low expectations, while it simultaneously succeeds for individuals who have no intrinsic advantage, but whose access to a quality education creates higher expectations and motivation for personal achievement and success.

This is a fundamental challenge facing American democracy today.

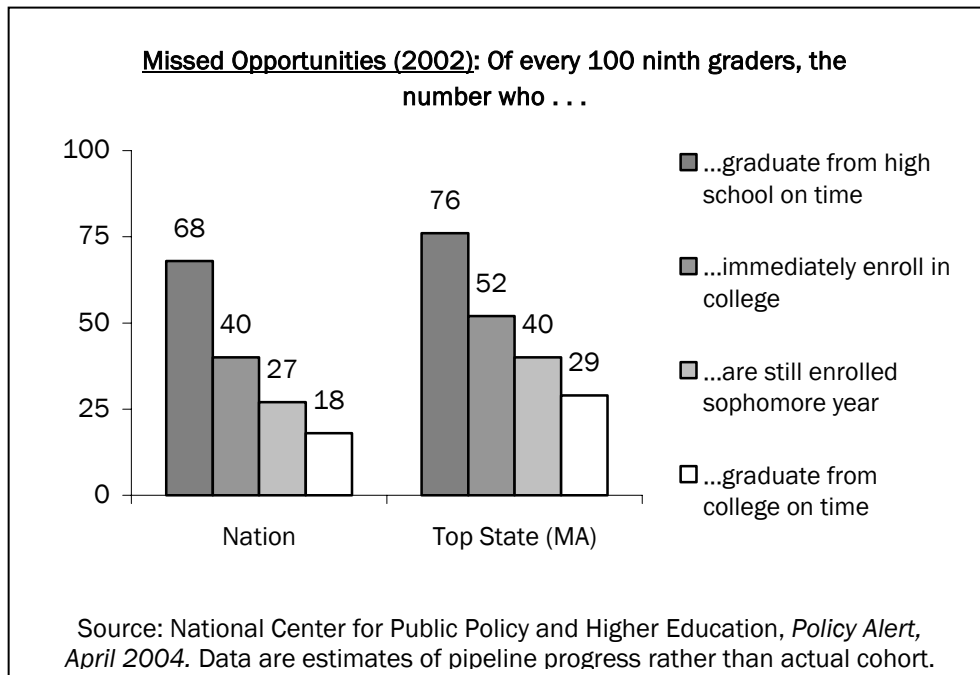
I concede that the challenge to democracy goes beyond educational inequity. American ideas of freedom and democracy were founded by men who were incredible visionaries and who believed that those ideas simply did not apply to everyone. As a nation, we are still working through the structural and psychological barriers and the "-isms" created by that legacy. Beyond those issues, there are several that also contribute to a weakened democracy, among them increasing numbers of fragmented families, lack of quality housing and healthcare and lack of economic opportunity.

But I am positing a silver bullet theory that if we can solve educational access for all, that triumph would have the most promise to create a domino effect that will begin to address the other challenges facing American democracy. Numerous studies show that individuals who earn a high school diploma or advanced degree – when compared to those that do not – earn more, divorce less, get better healthcare, vote more, are employed more, get better jobs, volunteer more and are generally more civically engaged. Simply put, educated people are more active participants in a more effective democracy.

DEFINING THE PROBLEM: SELECTING THE PRIORITY

America's system of higher education has proven to be the foundation upon which our nation's achievements have been built. Yet millions of young people, particularly low-income students, never get the chance to pursue a higher education. While these young Americans have the capacity to learn, the tremendous socio-economic challenges they face fuel low expectations of their potential and perpetuates the myth that college is out of their reach.

How many make it to, and through, college?



Multiple studies¹ have shown that the majority of young people, especially low-income African-American and Hispanic high school students, are disproportionately at-risk for (a) not graduating high school prepared for college or the workforce, or (b) not graduating high school at all.

- Only 71% in the class of 2002 graduated with a regular diploma. Graduation rates for minority students are particularly dire. While 78% of white students graduated from high school in the class of 2002, only 56% of African-American and 52% of Hispanic students did the same. College-readiness rates for the class of 2002 are similarly worrisome. Just over a third (34%) of all students who entered ninth grade in public schools left school with both a regular diploma and the abilities and qualifications required even to apply to a four-year college. Again, the situation is particularly bad for minority students. Only 23% of African-American students and 20% of Hispanic students left school college-ready, compared with 40% of white students.²
- In major cities, such as Chicago and New York, only 30% of African-American males who enter high school in ninth grade do not graduate. In small cities, such as Cleveland and Cincinnati, Ohio, fewer than one in five black males gets a high school diploma.³
- Only 17% of school districts in California make college preparatory courses available to all students. Even though more than eight in ten California high school students plan to go on to college, only about two in every ten ninth graders complete the curriculum by the end of high school that will most likely help prepare them to succeed in college and the workforce.⁴

Significant research shows that failing to graduate from high school has terrible consequences for students, their families and their communities.

- In 2002, nearly one half of all high school dropouts age 16-24 were jobless.⁵
- High school dropouts are three times more likely than high school graduates to slip into poverty from one year to the next.⁶
- Nearly half of all heads of households on welfare and 41% of our nation's prison population dropped out of high school.⁷

In today's competitive global economy, the fastest growing jobs are those that require some postsecondary education or training.

- By the end of the decade we will face a shortage of 12 million qualified workers for the fastest-growing sectors of the job market.⁸
- Jobs that require at least an associate degree will increase by 32% through 2010, followed by jobs that require a bachelor's degree which will grow by 24%.
- Four out of ten newly created jobs (9.3 million) will require at least some postsecondary education, up from less than three in ten in 2000.
- The Bureau of Labor Statistics suggest that over the next decade, about 30% of job openings will require workers with some college education.⁹

These statistics prove that America's educational system is failing a large segment of its young citizens, and that failure is putting our country at a growing disadvantage. According to William H. Gates Sr., "Only six percent of young people from the lowest economic quartile will earn a four-year college degree. Six percent...It doesn't have to be that way."¹⁰ Young people deserve more. Yet this is not a new challenge. There has been another moment in our nation's history when millions of young people from a diverse array of backgrounds were discriminated against and faced the prospect of life without access to a college education.

We successfully responded then. We can now.

DEFINING THE SOLUTION: STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY

In January, 1944, President Franklin D. Roosevelt introduced the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, better known as the "GI Bill." Through this legislation, the federal government would subsidize tuition, fees, books, and educational materials for World War II veterans who attended college. The bill faced opposition from Congressional and academic leaders.

According to historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, "In 1940, the average GI was 26 years old and had an average of one year of high school as his only education, and now, suddenly, the college doors were open. I mean, it's so amazing to realize that the university presidents thought it was a terrible idea at first. The president of Harvard said it would create 'unqualified people, the most unqualified of this generation' coming into college. The president of the University of Chicago feared we'd be creating educational hobos, but as the piece earlier showed, these were mature, responsible people, the best of their generation in college. It shows what happens when you give people who don't have a chance an extraordinary opportunity."¹¹

Because of the initial opposition, the American Legion (GI Bill author) and William Randolph Hearst launched a grassroots and media campaign to influence public opinion in favor of the GI Bill's passage. "The American Legion worked diligently to organize a grass-roots campaign and prepared promotional materials for its 12,000 posts to use in rallying local support. Posts received suggested radio interviews, press releases, and letters and telegrams for congressmen, as well as short trailer films for legionnaires to take to the local movie theater. On May 10, in a well-publicized ceremony on the steps of the Capitol, Legion officials delivered petitions bearing a million signatures to the House leadership." ¹²

Within 7 years of the GI Bill's passage, approximately 8 million veterans received educational benefits. America's system of higher education was democratized and made accessible to people of a wide range of racial, ethnic, religious and economic backgrounds that heretofore had seen college as a remote possibility. "Whereas college in pre-war days had been regarded as just for 'teachers' kids or preachers' kids,' the G.I. Bill opened higher education to all—including those who previously had been discriminated against. Quotas restricting admission of Jews and Catholics disappeared as schools were swamped with veterans. Previously all-white colleges admitted African-Americans. In fact, one-third of veterans at college between 1946 and 1950 were black; many went on to become leaders in the civil rights movement." ¹³

Fast forward sixty years. By 2010, the Federal Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance reports that 4.4 million college-qualified high school graduates will be unable to afford a four-year college and two million will not be able to afford college at all. ¹⁴ And millions more young people are either not graduating from high school at all, or are trapped in school systems whose curricula do not meet the minimum requirements to prepare them for college or work.

Yet lightning can strike twice. Just as Roosevelt transformed America by democratizing higher education through the GI Bill and William Randolph Hearst threw the full weight of the Hearst newspaper empire into the battle for the bill's passage, the Foundation community can launch a campaign to ensure that every young person that wants to graduate from college can do so – and not allow lack of financial resources nor lack of adequate academic preparation to stand in their way.

Thus I propose a five-point plan:

- 1. Mobilize at least 100 major corporate and family foundations to contribute to a fund that by 2007 permanently and annually distributes \$2 billion in privately funded, full-tuition scholarships to academically gifted, low-income graduating high school or enrolled college students.**
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Initially award students who are the first in their family to go to college or those who are ethnic minorities. It is possible: the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation alone has already committed \$1 billion in Gates Millennium Scholarships through the year 2019 to minority students who meet the Federal Pell Grant eligibility criteria, have at least a 3.3 GPA (on a 4.0 scale), and have demonstrated leadership through service or other extracurricular activities.

- 2. Mobilize at least 100 of the nation's wealthiest universities to adopt financial aid plans that permanently eliminate loans for students from low-income families.**
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It is possible: in 1998, Princeton University eliminated loans to students from families whose income was less than \$46,500 (current dollars, adjusted for inflation), and in 2001, Princeton extended the "no-loan" policy, replacing loans with grants for *all* financial aid students¹⁵. Since then several universities – including Harvard, Brown, Yale, UVA, and UNC – have mimicked the approach and

eliminated loans and parental contributions in their financial aid for low-income students, requiring self-help in the form of earnings from summer or in-school jobs. And Rice University, an institution whose original charter mandated that it "educate the white inhabitants of Houston and Texas," has eliminated loans, replacing them with grants for students whose family income is less than \$30,000.

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3. Mobilize every Governor to ensure that every student in every state is required to complete a core curriculum that would ensure that graduating from high school equates to meeting or surpassing the admission requirements of that state's university system.

It is possible: Governor Mark Warner of Virginia, Chair of the National Governors Association, has launched an initiative to encourage all 50 Governors to restore value to the high school diploma, by revising academic standards, upgrading curricula and coursework and developing assessments that align with the expectations of college and the workplace.¹⁷ Several states are taking action. For example, with the workforce and colleges demanding more from high school, California is considering placing all high school students in California's A-G course sequence — the minimum curriculum required for admission to the University of California and California State University systems.¹⁸

4. Launch two five-year media campaigns to enlist business, academic, political and religious leaders in the campaign to make college a reality for every young American, and to engage young people to want and demand a quality education.

The two campaigns must annually in the dual target markets generate the equivalent number of marketing impressions that would be generated in a typical \$100 million consumer product launch. The campaigns would defray marketing costs by optimally securing five-year sponsorships of events or programs which a high concentration of the target market will be viewing. By developing long-term agreements, the campaign would gain leverage to secure donated media time and ad space to reinforce messaging secured by the paid advertisements.

- To reach business, academic, political and religious leaders, the campaign should secure long-term sponsorships of Meet the Press, the Wall Street Journal, the Chronicle of Higher Education and events such as the PGA Tour (Coca-Cola has a five-year, estimated \$30 million PGA sponsorship). The message to these leaders would be to give their voice and financial support to the first three objectives of this campaign.
- To reach young people, the campaign should secure long-term sponsorships of television, gaming and Internet offerings popular with young people. The message of this campaign would be to extol the values of education, normalize and de-stigmatize (particularly for low-income minority students) the pursuit of education, and ensure young people know what is required of them, as evidenced in a recent study by the Bridge Project out of Stanford University that found that only 3% of California high school students knew the coursework and admission requirements for even the least selective universities.¹⁹

5. Annually measure progress towards the above objectives, particularly in three areas: (1) dollar amount of privately funded grants distributed to low-income students; (2) the number of universities that have eliminated loans as part of their financial aid plan; and (3) the number of states that have modified their high school curricula to meet what is required of their state universities, or provide a form of industry certification to its graduating students.

Over time, we should see a rise in the number of young people that graduate from high school, as well as the percentage of all graduating high school students who possess the skills and

qualifications necessary to attend and graduate from college, or enter the work force.

In sum, education as the common pathway to opportunity in America simply does not work for all. Yet we possess the resources and knowledge to make the "equal right" of college a reality for all. Leaders in the foundation community directly control massive resources and have the ability to make education *the priority* even at the expense of other worthwhile projects that comparatively do not possess the potential domino impact that investments in educational access would have. The question is whether or not we have the collective will.

I sincerely hope we do.

BIOGRAPHY & CONTACT INFORMATION

Ian V. Rowe is the Vice President of Strategic Partnerships and Public Affairs for MTV: Music Television. His department oversees MTV's on-air and off-air "pro-social" campaigns that build awareness of issues of importance to the MTV audience, and that encourage young people to take action to address those issues, such as *Choose or Lose 2004*, the campaign designed to engage and inform young people and encourage them to register and vote. Prior to his work at MTV, Ian was the Director of Strategy and Performance Measurement for USA Freedom Corps, the President's initiative on volunteer service. Ian was founder and President of Third Millennium Media, and also spent two years at Teach For America. Ian holds an MBA from Harvard Business School and a degree in Computer Science Engineering from Cornell University.

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PACE INVITES YOUR COMMENTS

This essay is one of a set of eight essays that **PACE** commissioned in 2005 for our first national gathering, titled ***The Condition of Democracy in America and What Philanthropy Can Do About It.*** **PACE** - Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (www.pacefunders.org) is an emerging community of donors and grantmakers committed to strengthening democracy by supporting pathways for individual participation in civic and community life. We hope this and the other essays in the series will stimulate productive conversations across different groups and different philosophies about how to unleash the power of individual participation in solving the problems of our communities and nation.

I welcome your comments and questions about this essay.

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ENDNOTES

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