

# Instead of focusing on college-ready students, institutions should become more student ready (essay)

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The Emerging Student Majority



## The Myth of the College-Ready Student

Higher education institutions must abandon a paradigm that allows them to deflect accountability and embrace the burden of being student ready, argues Byron P. White.

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**By**

[Byron P. White](#)

“Look to your left and look to your right. The odds are one of you is not going to graduate.”

Many of us who attended college in years past will recall receiving some such an admonition from a professor or adviser. The message was simple: our job is to give you an opportunity; your job is to take advantage of it. If you don’t, oh, well.

It was a fairly straightforward arrangement that for decades buffered higher education from a harsh reality that only recently has come under public scrutiny: more than one-third of students who begin their degree never finish. Those in higher education didn’t think too much about it because we did not consider ourselves responsible.

You’re either college ready or you’re not, we reasoned. And if you’re not, don’t blame us. The fact that those who did not make it were disproportionately less economically privileged and more likely to be a racial or ethnic minority was simply the way it was.

Today, colleges and universities are not getting off the hook so easily. The public is demanding that we do a better job of not only admitting students, but ensuring that they complete. Gains are being made but they have been glacial. There is general agreement that President Obama’s goal of the United States attaining college completion rates comparable to the most successful nations in the world by 2020 will not be reached until, at best, another decade.

To accelerate the pace of reaching this goal, we must abandon once and for all the college-ready paradigm that has allowed higher education to deflect accountability. It is time that we fully embrace the burden of being student-ready

institutions. After all, not only is the notion of college ready an excuse, but new practices in student success have exposed it as something of a farce. It turns out the problem was not as much about the students as we thought. It was largely us, uninformed about what it takes to help them succeed or unwilling to allocate the resources necessary to put it into practice.

These new interventions are exposing the fact that colleges and universities, for the most part, have been equipped to serve one fairly narrow population of students, which institutions have conveniently defined as college ready. Meanwhile, for decades, higher education has passively accepted the conventional wisdom that minority, low-income and first-generation students disproportionately underperform other students because they are the unfortunate casualties of inadequate systems -- low-achieving public school systems, poor neighborhoods, unsophisticated households -- that leave them woefully unprepared for college success.

However, we are beginning to acknowledge that our institutions have been inadequately equipped to assist students from these populations. The revelation comes not so much from our altruism, but from new pressures from policy makers, employers and civic leaders who demand that these students succeed. Permanently distressed urban neighborhoods and a burgeoning prison system, perpetuated by a poorly educated underclass, are causing unbearable social and economic stress on the nation. At the same time, more jobs require higher levels of education, and there are not enough educated citizens to fill them.

At the same time, the pool of prototypical college-ready students -- recent high school graduates from high-performing schools whose parents have had a successful college experience -- is shrinking due to demographic shifts. That means more institutions are looking to so-called underrepresented students to meet their enrollment goals. That, combined with the emergence of performance-based state funding formulas, which reward public colleges and universities based on the number of students they graduate rather than how many they enroll, has made it a financial imperative that we succeed with students we previously deemed unfit to be in college. As Cleveland State University President Ronald M. Berkman has said, "We have a responsibility to educate students as they are, not as we wish they would be."

Colleges and universities are showing success, and strategies that are working are largely driven by changes in institutional behavior rather than dramatic shifts in student preparedness. Organizational reforms such as incentivizing students to take 15 credit hours, pushing enrollment in college-level courses and establishing structured course schedules are producing improvements in student retention and graduation rates. Use of technology and predictive analytics now allow us to anticipate academic challenges before they occur so that they can be addressed through focused support.

In light of these advancements, it appears that the line that defines who is deemed college ready routinely is drawn at a point that conveniently aligns with the capacity of colleges to have success. Thus, predictably, folks on one side of the line do well and folks on the other side do not. We're now learning that with the right investment the line can be moved to embrace more students.

Holding on to the college-ready paradigm serves only to provide a crutch that prevents us from putting forth the full measure of creative energy, resources and accountability required to significantly expand college attainment. It is time to abandon the college-ready myth and adopt, wholesale, a student-ready paradigm, which means rejecting policies that label students as "remedial" and discarding the notion that initiatives to assist them require some extraordinary act of charity that is beyond the legitimate role of higher education.

That does not mean colleges should have no thresholds for entry or that students bear no responsibility for their own success. But as we accept our capacity to educate a broader group of students -- and commit to graduating every student we admit -- we can establish those thresholds in ways that discriminate less against a predictable demographic. Doing what it takes to graduate them would become the new normal, not an exceptional act. It would motivate us in new ways and drive strategy and resources accordingly.

The college-ready paradigm may have always been a myth. Now it is one we can no longer afford to perpetuate.

## Bio

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