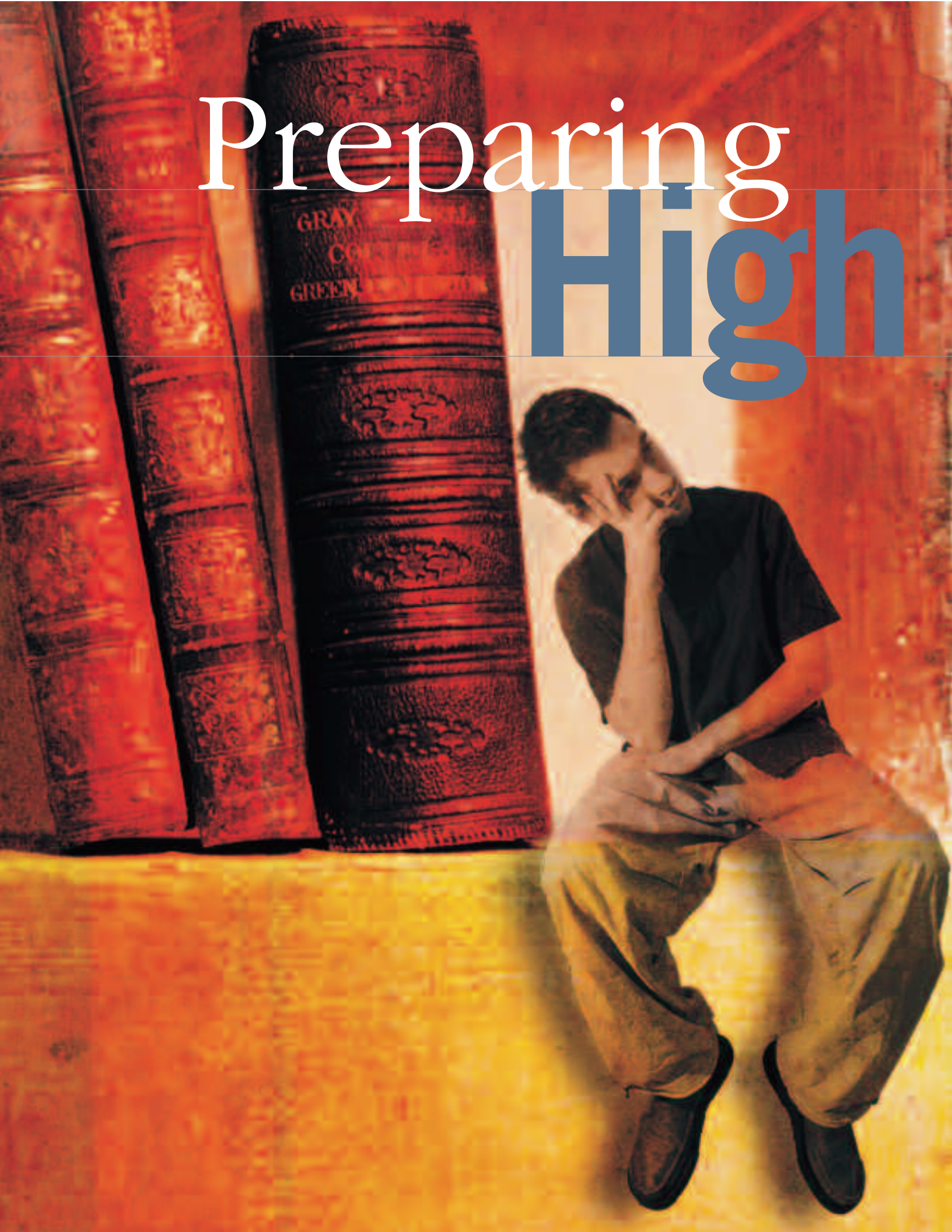


# Preparing High



# School

By Stephen J. Handel

## STUDENTS

### for Community College Success

Intriguing but disheartening research reveals that many high school students who contemplate enrolling at a community college do not prepare themselves academically. The fact that many high school students do not study hard for college is not news. High school teachers and counselors have been grumbling for years about “senioritis.” The troubling research findings I discovered show that some students, both bound for college and not, see almost no link between working hard in high school and college success. They are not blowing off their senior year. They are blowing off high school.

In his book, *Beyond College for All*, James Rosenbaum writes: “Although Americans may believe that society should provide youths...with ‘second chances,’ youths [believe] that school failures never matter and their efforts are unnecessary....[T]hese attitudes may justify their poor effort in high school.”

Rosenbaum and his colleagues conducted a survey of over 2,000 high school seniors in 12 urban and suburban high schools in Chicago. Only 28 percent of college-bound students agreed with the statement, “High school teaches me valuable skills”; 41 percent agreed that “People can do OK even if they drop out of high school”; and 44 percent concurred with the statement: “Even if I do not work hard in high school, I can still make my future plans come true.”

It would be one thing if these results revealed student attitudes that were optimistic or coupled with a strong work ethic. But Rosenbaum finds that these students exert little effort in high school, believing that such minimal efforts will result in few penalties. Only later do they realize their mistake. Public Agenda recently conducted a survey of young people without college degrees, which revealed that 78 percent wished they had paid a lot more attention and worked harder in high school.

#### Easy Access

Why don't students understand the importance of a strong high school foundation for future academic success? One reason is that they view access to higher education as relatively easy

via the community college. Many students see the community college as simply an extension of high school and not a substantive leap from one type of schooling to another.

Rosenbaum writes: “College bound students who think high school effort is irrelevant to their future plans are partly correct — high school grades are not an obstacle to enrollment at two-year colleges”

The result is predictable. High school students who view their courses as unrelated to their eventual transfer to a community college are far more likely to drop out after a semester or two in college. The Education Trust reports that 25 percent of students entering four-year institutions drop out after the first year. For students entering community colleges, the drop-out rate is nearly 50 percent. Moreover, students with minimal academic skills are tracked into remedial courses.

The U.S. Department of Education has found that extensive remediation harms students' prospects for completing their postsecondary degree. Students beginning community college without the skills they need to do college work — even if they manage to stay in college for more than a year — are far less likely to earn any kind of degree. Rosenbaum reports that over 83 percent of students with low grades who planned to go to college and earn a bachelor's degree fail to do so; over 92 percent of students with low grades who planned to go college and earn an associate degree fail to do so.

I think it is a fair assumption that the students who do not see the link between working hard in high school and later success in college are more likely to have come from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. Perhaps they are the first in their family to attend college or they have not been exposed to a college-going culture, either at home or at high school.

Admissions policies at community colleges allow virtually anyone to enroll as long as they have an ability to benefit from the institution's programs and services. But does this emphasis on open admission send a message, however inadvertent, that working hard in high school is unnecessary for success in community college?

## More Than a Second Chance

For over a hundred years, community colleges have aggressively and successfully promoted the idea that higher education should be accessible to all students, regardless of background or social class. But open admission requires community colleges to manage a critical balancing act. They must be true to their legacy of open access, while at the same time maintaining academic standards that prepare students to meet their educational objectives. And they must do this with many of their students having weak or no academic skills.

The extraordinary access offered by community colleges also makes these institutions a refuge for students needing a second chance. Getting a second chance at anything in America is a persuasive narrative that plays well in our country.

With open doors and second chances, community college leaders portray their institutions as places where students from any background can find access to greater economic and intellectual opportunity. Yet, while community colleges have the “access” part down pat, there is a problem in translating this openness into academic success for many more students after they arrive on campus. However heart-warming the anecdote of the student who overcame great odds to earn a college degree, we forget the thousands of others who enter college, languish and never attain their educational goals.

Depending on which study you want to believe, 40 to 50 percent of all students who enter community colleges never return for a second year. Nearly two-thirds of all community college entrants need to complete at least one remedial course in mathematics or English composition. Attainment of associate degrees has never achieved the level originally forecasted and the number of students that successfully transfer and earn a baccalaureate degree remains distressingly low.

Regardless of how we might laud the progressive virtues of a community college, second chances rarely constitute the most effective way to earn a college degree — however critical and necessary such second chances may be. First chances, and by that I mean academic success in high school are the best way to prepare for college. But the perception of the community college as the ultimate safety school works against the effectiveness of these institutions and denigrates the tireless work of community college faculty and staff.

Do high school students value community colleges less because of the open access and second chances they offer? Social scientists have documented the notion that we value more what we work harder to achieve. Everyone knows that anyone can get into a community college regardless of how hard you worked in high school.

The problem is not open admissions per se and it is not in the generous spirit of these institutions to provide all with second chances. Rather, it is the perception that open admission

encompasses something less than collegiate standards and that there are few penalties for not preparing for a community college in high school.

## An Increasing Need

As the number of high school graduates continues to increase and our society depends increasingly on technologies that require advanced training, the need for community colleges will become ever more important.

Some critics contend that high school students who consider community college simply as an extension of high school and do not prepare themselves for postsecondary education are probably not college material anyway. They should not be encouraged to pursue a college degree they are not prepared to earn. To suggest that all youngsters should attend college, the argument goes, simply directs many students toward a set of educational goals for which they are insufficiently prepared and motivated.

I reject this position, as do my colleagues at The College Board. As we work with high schools, community colleges, and four-year institutions throughout the United States, we promote the idea that every youngster should have the opportunity to be successful in his or her educational pursuits.

What Rosenbaum and others have suggested is that we need to work harder to show students how their work in high school will help them lead better lives via college. Moreover, we need to admit publicly that the way community colleges are currently perceived — by students, by parents, by four-year faculty, and by the media — is inadequate and needs to be redressed. Community college is college, requiring prerequisite skills that are best gained in high school. While these institutions are open for all, they nonetheless have standards that students should meet in order to advance academically.

## Let's Ask Ourselves

How can we redress this misunderstanding about the role and requirements of the community college? In what ways should we prepare high school students, especially those from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, about the knowledge, skills, and motivation they will need to take full advantage of what our community colleges can offer them? Those are some of the issues we will address in the next article.



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