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## CHAPTER FOUR

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# *Questionable Academic Preparation*

Long-term trends show that as the "A" average becomes the norm, the "C" grade is becoming a thing of the past.

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**A**t one time, going to college was unusual. Today, the high school graduate who goes directly to work is the oddity. Throughout the period from 2000 to 2005, on average, around 1.8 million or 65% of all high school graduates enrolled immediately in higher education, whereas 30% of all graduates went to work or entered the military. Of those in higher education, two-thirds enrolled in 4-year colleges, and at least one-third of those who enrolled in 2-year institutions were not taking occupational programs but general studies courses. Thus of all high school graduates, the vast majority go to college, and the largest group enrolls in 4-year colleges or 2-year programs in preparation for transfer to a baccalaureate degree program. Is this a positive development? Perhaps not, if many are academically unprepared to benefit from the experience. Thus it seems prudent to ask this question: how many of these 1.8 million new college freshmen are prepared to do college work? Our focus of analysis is the effectiveness of the revered and respected high school college prep curriculum.

## SECTION I

### How Effective Is the College Prep Program of Study?

Today, most youth aspire to baccalaureate education. Not surprisingly, the majority, including those in the academic middle, also say they took the college prep program in high school in order to prepare for college. Using National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) national high school transcript data, Table 4.1 summarizes high school course-taking patterns. More than two-thirds of students take the academic program of study. Twenty percent take both (combined) academic and career and technical education program of study.

If grades in high school are any indication, the college prep program is very effective. Among college freshmen involved in the annual UCLA college freshman survey in 2004, a record high 47% indicated they graduated from high school with an A average. But

there is room for skepticism: these students also indicated that the amount of time they spent studying remained low. Only 34% indicated they spent six or more hours per week studying in their senior year.

The question is, how many high school students actually graduate prepared to do college level academic work? Everyone? Some? A few? If not everyone, then maybe the one way to win strategy, at least, as pursued directly after high school, is, for some, ill-advised. Table 4.1 provides a beginning clue. Of the 70% who are in the supposed academic or college prep program, only a little over half (54%) take what would be called a minimal college prep set of courses that includes three years of math and science and two years of a foreign language. These students and especially their parents, may think they are in the college prep program, but few grasp that in most high schools, there are actually two.

Part of the subterfuge caused by the growth of the one way to win mentality and the corresponding growth in the number of students wishing to take college prep courses has been the bifurcation of the college prep curriculum to distinguish between the academically blessed and those from the academic middle. Today, in virtually all U.S. high schools, at least two college prep programs are going on simultaneously: One consists of the regular college prep courses; the other is the college "honors" or "advanced placement" (AP) courses. Most would consider the latter to be the college prep program of old.

The mere existence of these two levels of college prep programs hints that one group of students may not be getting quite the same preparation as the other. Many teens and their parents may be deluding themselves. Just because teens are enrolled in college prep programs does not necessarily mean they graduate prepared to do college-level work, even when they got good grades in high school, which is a reality that often becomes brutally apparent only when disappointing college board entrance test results arrive in the mail. Surprisingly, no one seems concerned about, or at least has questioned, the effectiveness of the college prep curriculum. In fact, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) seems to promote its expansion to all teens based on the assumption that it is effective. It seems appropriate, then, to take a closer look at the effectiveness of a college prep program of study in the light of the large number of academically average students enrolling in it.

**Table 4.1** Demographic Distribution (%) of High School Graduates by Program of Study, 1998 High School Graduates

	Entire sample	Combined		
		Academic	Traditional CTE	General
1998	70	20	4	6
Female	53	41	7	5
Male	47	57	6	4
White	75	72	8	6
Black	14	17	9	1
Hispanic	11	11	10	2
4 E, 3 SS, 3 M, 3 S, 2 F	44	34	0	0
4 F, 3 SS, 3 M, 3 S	55	64	0	0
4 F, 3 SS, 2 M, 2 S	75	83	1	1

Source: 1998 Transcript Study (abridged), NCES 2001-498, by the National Center for Educational Statistics, 2001.

Note: By definition, it is not possible for a vocational or general student to take course combinations in rows 6 and 7.

CTE = career and technical education, E = English, F = foreign language, M = mathematics, S = science, SS = social studies.

### THE COLLEGE PREP PROGRAM AND THE ACADEMIC MIDDLE

Increases in enrollment in college prep programs and NCLB-led proposals that all teens should take this program of study have only recently resulted in investigations about its effectiveness for the academically diverse cohort participating in it. Specifically, if the objective of the college prep program is to prepare students for college admission and success in college-level academic work, how many of those who enroll actually achieve these outcomes? No doubt some do, particularly if the academically blessed are separated into honors classes with the best teachers. But what about the rest?

This question is important for those who suspect that the one way to win paradigm may, in fact, encourage many academically average teens to pursue postsecondary plans that are unrealistic and doomed to fail.

Several national studies suggest that if 72% of recent high school graduates are in college within two years of graduating, two thirds of whom are supposedly working toward a university degree, many are academically ill prepared. One indicator is the National Assessment of Education Progress. Table 4.2 indicates the percentages who scored at proficient and advanced levels in reading, mathematics, and science. Level 300 in reading is defined as being able to understand complicated written information. Level 350 is the ability to learn from specialized reading materials (such as college reading lists). Most would agree that wannabe college freshmen should be able to read at these levels, but in 2002, only 31% could read at this level—down 8% from 1998. Proficiency in mathematics is the ability to solve mathematics problems using algebra; 60% had mathematics skill at this level. Not all that impressive, considering that around 65% of this group will enter college when they are 18 years old.

Equally interesting is a study done by the NCFES (1998, Indicator 8) that sought to determine the percentage of youth who graduated from high school qualified to do college level academics. Importantly, this study included only students who were already enrolled in 4-year colleges. The criteria included high school class rank, courses taken, and standardized test scores. For example, minimally qualified students need only have graduated in the top 50% of their high school class, have a C average, and have a combined SAT

**Table 4.2** National Assessment of Educational Progress: Percentage of 1998 and 2002 17-Year-Old High School Seniors Scoring at College Levels of Proficiency

Subject	1998	2002
Reading		
Level 300 Proficient	39%	31%
Level 350 Advanced	6%	5%
Math		
Level 300 Proficient	60%	61%
Level 350 Advanced	7%	8%
Science		
Level 300 Proficient	71%	18%
Level 350 Advanced	3%	2%

Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2004 Long-Term Trend Assessment Results, by the National Center for Educational Statistics. 2005. Retrieved August 22, 2005 from <http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/data/ipedsresults/2004/>.

Note: Proficient represents solid academic performance for each grade assessed. Students reaching this level have demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter, including subject matter knowledge, application of such knowledge to real-world situations, and analytical skills appropriate to the subject matter.

score of 820 or a composite ACT of 19. Table 4.3 shows the results.

Table 4.3 suggests that, of all those students in 4-year colleges, only two-thirds are even minimally qualified. If one argues, as we do, that the minimally qualified are really not academically qualified to succeed in college, the result is rather sobering. More than half (52%) of students pursuing the one way to win dream at 4-year colleges are not academically prepared. If we were to take the old-fashioned view that only highly qualified students should be pursuing a 4-year degree, then the unavoidable conclusion is that only 32% are qualified to do so. It is little wonder that in some institutions, two-thirds of entering freshmen are in remedial education, and six years later, only about half have graduated.

Additional insight into just how many so-called college prep students graduate from high school prepared to do college level academics is supplied by a high school follow-up study done for this book. This study examined in detail the experiences of 1998 high school graduates.

Table 4.3 Academic Readiness of Enrolled College Students

Race/ethnicity and family income	College qualified				Very highly
	Marginally unqualified	Minimally	Moderately	Highly	
Total	35.5	64.5	16.6	18.2	13.8
Race/ethnicity					
White	53.1	68.2	16.1	20.3	15.2
Black	53.1	46.9	16.7	9.9	6.3
Hispanic	47.0	53.0	20.7	10.8	7.9
Asian/Pacific Islander	27.3	72.7	14.6	20.2	23.0
American Indian/Alaskan native	55.2	44.8	22.2	15.8	1.0
Family income					
Low (less than \$25,000)	47.5	57.5	18.7	12.8	7.3
Middle (\$25,000-\$74,999)	32.4	67.6	16.1	17.0	14.6
High (\$75,000 or more)	14.1	5.9	11.5	18.4	29.0

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 1998

## FOLLOW-UP STUDY OF RECENT HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES

The best indicator of the need for promoting other ways to win at any particular high school is to look at what happens to its students the first year after graduation. However, unless it is based on what courses they took in high school, such evaluation is meaningless. For example, the implication of large numbers of students taking remedial courses in college depends clearly on what they did or did not take in high school. If most were quasi-general/academic students, then it is understandable. If, on the other hand, many were in honors courses, the implications are quite different. Thus rather than just sending graduates a questionnaire regarding their first-year experiences, a better approach is to also collect information regarding

courses taken, grade point averages (GPAs), absences, test scores, and so forth, for each graduate. This information is then used to develop a longitudinal data set that links students' high school records with their post-high school experiences. This was the approach taken in the follow-up study discussed below.

Seven high schools that included inner-city urban, rural, and suburban locals participated in the study. Regardless of the demographics, sending as many teens on to college as possible was the criterion of success. None of these high schools had an official general track program, and typically less than 15% of the students completed a concentration in vocational education. Thus, by default, most students must be considered to have been in the academic/college prep program of study.

The question we are asking is, how many were actually prepared? Unlike the NCEES study that evaluated just those enrolled in 4-year colleges, this study looked at all high school graduates in the participating high schools.

Table 4.4 indicates the range of students at various high schools assigned to three levels of preparedness to do college-level academics, namely, prepared, marginally prepared, and unprepared. The criteria used were three years of college math and two lab sciences.

Table 4.4 Percentage of High School Graduates Prepared to Do College-Level Academics

Criterion	Range of Preparation for College		
	A prepared	B marginally prepared	C unprepared
3 years college prep math	10-27%	8-28%	28-55%
2 years science	Yes	Yes	Yes
2 years foreign language	Yes	Yes	Yes
High school GPA	1100	800	Default

Source: Gray and Xuoli, 1999

GPA = grade-point average

two years of the same foreign language, cumulative GPAs, and combined SAT scores. Because of wide differences in demographic/socioeconomic settings of the participating high schools, ranges are provided instead of averages.

To be assigned to the academically prepared group, a student must have taken the required courses, earned a GPA of B or better, and had a combined (verbal + math) score of 1100. At the best-performing high schools, 27% of graduates had these credentials; at the other end, only 10% did. Of course, it can be argued that these criteria are too difficult. And it could also be argued that they are too lax; clearly, they would not be sufficient to gain admission to colleges that still have competitive versus open admissions.

Nonetheless, a second count was conducted to identify students who were marginally prepared academically for college, meaning that they probably could survive in college, though some remediation might be necessary. To be included in this category, students needed to take the courses but needed only a C average and a minimum combined test score of 800. Again, at the best performing high school, these more lax standards added 28% versus 18% at the poorest-performing site. Perhaps most important is the column (A + B) which combines these two levels: prepared and marginally prepared. In the "best case," only 55% of the graduates were either prepared or marginally prepared to succeed in college (see Table 4.4). It is to be remembered that these data are for teens from a state that has had increased graduation requirements and state testing long before NCLB, yet there is little evidence to suggest that the result has been anything other than perhaps grade inflation.

### GOING TO COLLEGE: DO ACADEMIC CREDENTIALS MATTER?

From the information provided in Table 4.4, it is clear that, at best about half of high school students graduate even semi-prepared to do college-level academics. But most, two-thirds, were in college anyway. Not surprisingly, virtually all of the prepared and semi-prepared graduates were in college (see Table 4.5).

But what about the group that interests us the most, those who graduate with credentials suggesting that they are not prepared to pursue the one way to win strategy? Amazingly, more than half were also

Table 4.5 Post-High School Pursuits of Respondents (%)

	Full-time student		Part-time employment		Others
	student	working	employment	employment	
Total	46	42	14	6	2
Prepared academically (competitive)	71	27	1	1	0
Marginally prepared (semicompetitive)	55	36	4	5	0
Unprepared (noncompetitive)	23	33	29	10	5

Source: Gray and Xaoli, 1996

in college. This finding is startling for three reasons. None of these graduates (1) had a combined SAT score of over 800, (2) had taken a complete sequence of college prep courses, and (3) had maintained a C average. The expectation at this point may be that these students enroll mostly in 2-year institutions such as community colleges or technical schools. This is not the case; many of these students are in 4-year colleges. Apparently, the idea that it takes good academic credentials to get into a 4-year college is old-fashioned.

In general, the data confirm the wide acceptance of the one way to win paradigm: The only way to win is to have a 4-year college degree; 78% of all graduates were in 4-year colleges. What is astounding, however, is that almost half (47%) of the students who graduated with academically noncompetitive credentials were also in 4-year colleges. Of those in 2-year institutions, we can be only somewhat certain that the 15% in business and technical schools were not taking general studies courses in the hope of transferring to 4-year degree programs.

Looking at the analysis of high school transcripts discussed previously illustrates the persuasiveness and results of the one way to win paradigm. Consistent with national data, most students in this study were in the academic/college prep program of study. But, at best, only half graduated from high school even marginally prepared to do college-level work, and of this group about half had credentials that suggest college was going to be an academic stretch. Even

through the other half (and in some high schools it is two-thirds) are not prepared, at least half of this group are in college, and half are in 4-year colleges. How do they do in college?

In addition, we should not forget the students who went to work without having taken vocational education in high school. How do they make out in the world of work? We examine these questions in Chapter 5. But before turning to the postsecondary experiences of those in the academic middle, a closer look at the high school experiences of those who graduated with academically noncompetitive credentials is worthwhile. After all, these are the students most likely to be hurt by the presence of only one way to win.

## SECTION II

### *The High School Experience of Those in the Academic Middle*

How many math and science courses did the academically average students in this study take? As part of the Class of 1998 Follow-Up Study, data regarding levels of mathematics, science, and foreign language courses taken were collected from each student's transcript. After these patterns were summarized for just those who failed to earn either "marginally" prepared or "semi-competitively" prepared credentials, we found that the overall levels of math, science, and foreign languages taken by the remaining unprepared students were often quite high.

### **College Prep Course-Taking Patterns**

But something seems odd, doesn't it? If these students had this much math and science, why did they do so poorly on the SAT? The data suggest that although these students were often enrolled in higher levels of math and science courses, they were somewhat untouched by the experience. Stated in another way, traditional college prep courses seem to be less effective for those in the academic middle. Unlike their more academically blessed peers, those in the academic middle may take a course but not master the content. This conclusion is substantiated by the low grades obtained by this group in these courses and by the fact that (as is reported in Chapter 5) half

of those who graduated unprepared but went on to college had to take one or more remedial courses in higher education.

The point is that simply driving these students higher in the traditional curriculum—an oft-expressed goal among educational reformers—may not do much to improve their skills. Those who take solace in the fact that more academically average students are now in college prep courses are perhaps celebrating prematurely: students may be in the courses, but they may not be learning much. National grade inflation data discussed earlier suggest that in some high schools, this may be the case even when their grades indicate the opposite. In fact, they often seem to be almost unaffected by the experience. This statement brings us to another important variable: the general degree of involvement of these students in the high school curriculum.

### **Involvement in the Curriculum**

As researchers probe the results of the steady increase in the number of students who succeed in graduating from high school, it becomes increasingly apparent that completing high school and actually learning something are two entirely different things. This reality suggests that the goal is not only to keep young people in school—or even in class—but also to engage them in the academic content as a prerequisite to learning (Anderson, 1983). Thus those seeking to improve the instructional effectiveness of schools are increasingly focusing on students' degree of involvement in, or attachment to, the curriculum.

In the light of the growing body of literature suggesting the relationship between educational achievement and involvement and common sense tells us that it is tough to learn by not paying attention—the researchers involved in the Class of 1998 Follow-Up Study employed statistical techniques to test the degree to which students were involved in the curriculum. They did this by testing the degree to which traditional variables, such as attendance, satisfaction with high school, and working part time, affected students' grades. The rationale was that if the students were not very involved with learning in school, it would make little difference whether they were absent, liked school, or worked part time. In fact, when compared with their more academically successful peers, those who graduated with academically noncompetitive

credentials had grades relatively unaffected by the variables tested. Although absences, dislike of school, and working part time all negatively affected the grades of those graduating with competitive or semi-competitive credentials, only absences affected the grades of noncompetitive students. Even then, the magnitude of the effect on grades of not coming to school was considerably less for these students than for the rest.

A pattern thus emerges. A large number of high school students take rather high levels of college prep courses, but their participation is passive, at best. They might as well take high school correspondence courses. These students are playing the one way to win game without much enthusiasm. In fact, when asked, they agreed: 75% of those in the Class of 1998 Follow-Up Study who graduated unprepared for college said they wished they "had worked harder while in high school."

### Career Uncertainty

Passivity and lack of engagement by academically average students may be partially explained by the fact that, compared with their more academically successful peers, they are less certain about why they took college prep courses in the first place. Indicative of this situation is the degree to which the academically unprepared were significantly more likely to express feelings of career uncertainty. For example, these students were twice as likely to volunteer on the follow-up survey that they wished they had "thought more about their future" while in high school. Likewise, a majority (60%) of all respondents wished that the high school had provided opportunities to explore careers. In fact, a much higher percentage (80%) of those graduating with academically noncompetitive credentials thought this way; this finding suggests a higher level of both career uncertainty and anxiety.

Thus, although we cannot say with certainty that career immaturity or uncertainty was a factor in their lack of academic success, it may be something more than a coincidence that the more successful students were in the college prep program, the less likely they were to express a need for opportunities to explore careers. Studies of community college undergraduate and graduate students, for example, indicate that at least half of America's post-secondary population indicates a need for assistance with career planning.

career choice, or both (Herr, Cramer, & Niles, 2004). One wonders, then, about these students' level of commitment to preparing for college, in the light of their relative uncertainty about their future. This speculation adds weight to the argument that many pursue college prep because they have been provided with only one way to win. It would seem that if they needed guidance, they did not get it in high school. In fact, in high school, they were largely asked to take a back seat.

### Second-Class Status

If the academically average seem largely uninvolved, it is because they are treated this way within the social framework of the U.S. high school. Basically, they are largely ignored and treated as second-class citizens.

In the true Taylorist tradition, high school educators appear to be preparing the academically less blessed for future roles as quiescent, anonymous subordinates. As is pointed out in the still classic work, *The Shopping Mall High School* (Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985), these students are relegated to the role of "spectator." While these authors' study was conducted 20 years ago, not much has changed. If a high school has an awards assembly, and they all do, one does not have to attend to know what happens. Ninety percent of the individual awards go to five percent of the kids. The role of the rest, those average kids in the academic middle, is to sit passively during awards assemblies while their more blessed peers receive all the awards. They are expected to show "school spirit" by filling the stands at pep rallies for more honored student athletes. Even the uniqueness that should fall on those in the academic middle because of enrollment in revered college prep courses does not occur today, virtually everyone is enrolled in this curriculum. The awards are reserved now only for those enrolled in honors or AP college prep courses. This Taylorist modus operandi is not lost on students, particularly those relegated to second-class status. As part of the Class of 1998 Follow-Up Study, graduates were asked whether they thought "some students were treated better than others"; 78% of all graduates and 84% of those graduating with noncompetitive credentials responded affirmatively.

How is it possible for nearly half of the teens in any high school to be lost, even when they are in a college prep program of study?

Some researchers suggest a masked bias by teachers in favor of the more academically talented. Evidence suggests that teachers do describe and treat the blessed in significantly more positive terms than the less blessed (Oakes, 1985). But, in most cases, the situation is probably due more to benign neglect than to covert plots or sinister prejudices. Perhaps there are simply too many teens and too few teachers. Regardless, few would debate that when it comes to academic performance, the standards for those in the academic middle are lower: there is little demand for excellence, and the teens know it. And while NCLB penalties are designed to correct this situation, it is just as likely that when a large number of kids fail prescribed tests, the test and the penalties will be changed. In fact, by the spring of 2005, several states were threatening to sue the federal government over NCLB, and the U.S. Office of Education was signaling greater flexibility. The reality is that as long as open admission is the rule not the exception, in higher education, and teens know that they will get in somewhere, there is little incentive for high school students in the academic middle to worry about the tests.

### Low Academic Expectations

As part of the Class of 1998 Follow-Up Study, graduates were asked whether they wished they "had worked harder in high school." Seventy-five percent of academically unprepared students said they wished they had. Equally important they apparently were not asked to. When asked whether they felt "pressure to get good grades," fewer than half of this group said yes. Even in college prep courses, these students are not held to the same standards as the academically gifted cohort sequestered in honors and AP courses. Homework is a good example.

Although the academically less blessed may not be able to achieve at the same level as the blessed, they should be expected to invest equal amounts of time in trying. One indicator of institutional expectation of effort is whether or not homework is regularly required. Any number of studies have documented the lower amount of homework, if any, expected of less academically blessed students (Bottoms, Pressons, & Johnson, 1992). Some researchers have gone so far as to suggest that an unwritten deal has been struck between those who make up the academic middle and their teachers. The authors of *The Shopping Mall High School* (Powell et al., 1985) call

these agreements "classroom treaties," whereby unmotivated students agree not to hassle the teachers and, in turn, the teachers agree not to hassle them. Thus much less is required of these students than would be required of more academically able students.

Sedlak (1986) argues that the lack of rigorous academic standards for those in the academic middle, together with the classroom standoff between teachers and those from the academic middle who now enroll in college prep courses, represents a logical adjustment to contradictory social expectations. Specifically, in the face of unrealistic expectations of universal attendance and now universal success in preparing all students for college, high schools simply have adjusted. The academically gifted, those who are blessed with the cognitive skills to succeed in the one way to win game, are placed in honors courses and provided with a demanding and rigorous program. The rest, if they choose, are allowed to enroll in college prep courses, but the daily routine and standards within these courses are quite different from those populated by the academically blessed. Honors courses are challenging and competitive, whereas courses for the less blessed are passive, generally unchallenging, and noncompetitive. Debate and cooperative or group learning are common in advanced college prep classes whereas lectures and predictable routine dominate classes for the average student in the college prep program. When discussion does occur in the regular college prep classes, it is often at the concrete recitation level, whereas in advanced courses, students are challenged to interpret and extrapolate. At both levels, some homework is required, but the complexity and level of thinking required in honors courses are more advanced (Powell et al., 1985). In advanced college prep classes, both the academic content and teacher expectations are what would be expected of those preparing for serious college work. The same cannot be said of regular courses populated by academically average students. This finding explains why many of those who graduate having taken college prep courses are still not prepared to do college work.

### OTHER WAYS TO WIN

In this chapter, the academic credentials of high school graduates have been examined to determine the degree of readiness to pursue the most popular goal after graduation, namely, a 4-year college

degree. Of particular interest was whether high school students were graduating with the advanced academic credentials needed to predict academic success in college. A study of 1998 high school graduates from seven public high schools where virtually all were supposedly preparing for college revealed that, at most, only 27% earned the academically advanced credentials normally associated with admissions and success at Level 1 colleges (those that are still selective and rigorous). At best, another 24% graduated with credentials that might predict readiness to do higher-education academic work at Level 2 institutions, those that accept virtually everyone. The remaining students graduated with credentials that suggested inadequate preparation for higher education.

Of particular importance to those seeking to create other ways to win is evidence that simply enrolling these students in traditional college prep high school courses is not instructionally effective. Although students may take the courses, they do not necessarily master the content. Furthermore, this group is largely unengaged in the high school curriculum in general, perhaps because they are largely ignored or unchallenged by high school teachers. These students report not being pressed to do well in high school and wishing they had worked harder. They also wished they had thought more about their future and had been given more opportunities to explore careers while in high school. This information suggests that compared with their more academically successful peers, they lack career maturity. The point is that if educators are to create legitimate other ways to win, it will be necessary to devise not just post-secondary alternatives but also focused, rigorous academics that prepare students to succeed by providing well-planned and focused career exploration. Evidence suggests that this creation calls for higher expectations and new instructional approaches, all of which are explored in detail in Part III.

Data reviewed in this chapter demonstrate the unavoidable conclusion that, even in elite public high schools, only about half of graduating students are even minimally prepared to do college-level work. One can assume that, in lesser high schools, the percentage is lower. But, like their counterparts across the United States, faced with only one way to win, most students go on to higher education anyway, mostly to 4 year colleges or to 2 year general studies transfer programs. Clearly, this decision by those with noncompetitive academic credentials seems unrealistic and thus very risky. These

students seem to require better alternatives or other ways to win. Of course, the validity of this argument necessitates evidence, such as data about the level of success experienced by academically average students in higher education. This topic is the focus of Chapter 5.

## NOTE

- 1 Higher Education Research Institute (2004, January 26). Political interest on the rebound among the nation's freshmen. UCLA survey reveals, p. 2-2.2. Retrieved August 16, 2005, from [http://www.gseos.ucla.edu/heri/03\\_press\\_release.pdf](http://www.gseos.ucla.edu/heri/03_press_release.pdf)

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## CHAPTER FIVE

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# *Winners and Losers in the One Way to Win Game*

Diplomas from most American universities are a devalued currency in the marketplace. It no longer means what it used to.

—*Hudson Institute*<sup>1</sup>

**I**f enrollment projections are any indication, 4-year college enrollments will continue to climb through 2012. This may well be one of those rare cases, however, where more may not be better. By the late 1990s, some writers were suggesting that so many were pursuing a 4-year college degree that its value, particularly in the social sciences and liberal arts, was about equal to a high school diploma.

Indeed, by the end of the 20th century, as many persons, including politicians of all stripes, had come to associate college graduation as essential to success in the labor market, there were, on the other hand, a growing number of criticisms of this one way to win focus on a 4-year college education. These critics (see Boersel & Fredland, 1999) contended that the public had come to believe that almost all high school graduates should go to college; this go-to-college movement was sweeping many marginally qualified or unqualified students into college, and hence the overall academic ability of college graduates was declining, as a result of these declines, both college remedial academic courses and college dropouts were increasing.

many of these dropouts did poorly in the labor market and would have been better advised to pursue other types of education and training; they were often burdened with debt from college loans, and finally, even among those who did graduate, many failed to find a job that required a 4-year degree or paid a wage that made the expense of going to college worthwhile.

In general, this inventory of criticisms about the one way to win mentality provides an outline of this chapter. Among those who try the one way to win path, which is the majority of those who go to college, who then are the winners and losers?

It is argued in this book that the one way to win advice passed along to all teens and the continued growth of baccalaureate education that has resulted requires public scrutiny. If increased enrollments are resulting in more students' entering 4-year colleges unprepared, ending up in remedial courses, and flunking out after accumulating significant student loan debt, or if greater percentages of those who do graduate end up underemployed, then this growth is, in fact, both wasteful and harmful. The purpose of this chapter is to provide evidence to objectively answer the question, among those who pursue the one way to win paradigm, how many win and how many lose. If the justification is to provide opportunity, just how much opportunity is being provided?

## SECTION I

### *Remedial Education and College Dropouts: The First Losers*

The conventional wisdom of one way to win is the belief that the only route—at least the only socially acceptable route to the American dream involves getting at least a baccalaureate degree in the hope that it will lead to a job in the professional ranks. Thanks partly to the one way to win focus of No Child Left Behind, a large majority of today's high school students are taking one form or another of the academic/college prep program. Aided by open admissions at most institutions of higher education, most enroll in 4-year colleges or 2-year programs that hold a promise of leading to a 4-year degree. This is true despite the fact that many young people graduate from high school with academic credentials demonstrating

Is the unprecedented growth in higher education enrollments, particularly in programs leading to a 4 year degree, a positive development? And is this a wise investment of both individual and public funds? The answers seem to depend first on the degree to which a reasonable number of those who enroll are academically prepared and how many graduate, and then on how many actually find a job that pays a wage that is commensurate with completing a 4-year college degree

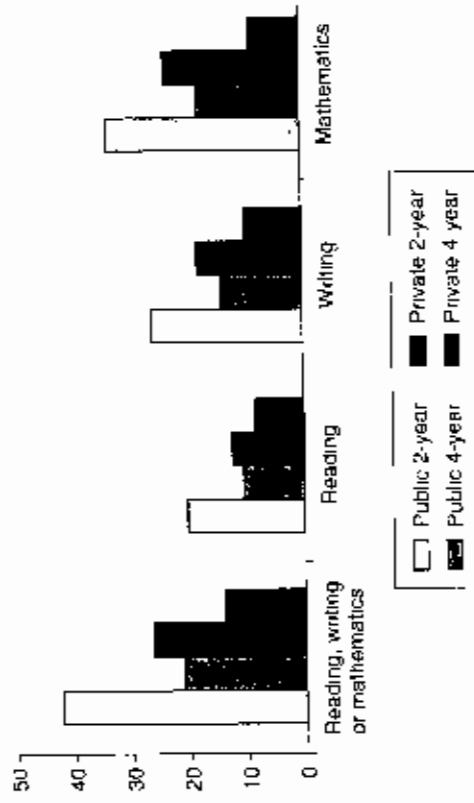
### ACADEMIC ABILITY TO BENEFIT

One test of the wisdom of one way to win for all and, conversely, of the need to create other economically legitimate and socially acceptable alternatives to pursuing a 4-year degree, is how well freshmen, particularly those from the academic middle, perform in college. Our review of the effectiveness of college prep programs in Chapter 4 gives us reason to suspect that many who head off to college are not ready to do college-level work. College faculty, when polled, agree: only 20% of faculty at baccalaureate institutions agreed that incoming freshmen were adequately prepared in "written and oral communication skills." Only 15% felt the same way about undergraduate preparation in mathematics (Boyer, Altbach & Whitelaw, 1994). Perhaps the best evidence of the academic deficiency of many entering freshmen at all types of higher education institutions is the number who must take remedial courses during their freshman year.

### Remedial Education in Higher Education

One of the best kept secrets in higher education is the large amount of course work taken by entering freshmen that does not count toward a degree. Of the 2.4 million college freshmen in 2000, 671,000 took one or more remedial courses. Parents in particular are often shocked when they find out that their teenager, who got mostly B or even A grades in high school, is required to take remedial courses in college. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2000b), 80% of public and 59% of private 4-year colleges now offer remedial courses. At public 2-year colleges, where many teens from the academic middle start in hopes of transferring to a 4-year college, the rates are even higher: 98% of these institu-

Figure 5.1 Remedial Education in Higher Education, Fall 1995



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 2000.

2-year institutions and 20% at public 4-year institutions were taking one or more remedial courses in 2000 (see Figure 5.1). Importantly, these figures are based on data provided by the colleges, and thus there is the possibility of undercounting; other sources have reported even higher figures. Also of note, the rate of remedial course-taking in college did not change much at all between 1995 and 2000.

Our purpose is not, however, to question the merits of offering remedial education at the collegiate level or to add fuel to the debate about whether remedial education at the taxpayers' expense makes any sense at 4-year colleges. But we do ask, just how effective is this remediation? Although colleges report that three-fourths of participating students pass these courses, it does not seem to matter. Having to take remedial education courses is a strong predictor of one thing, dropping out. An Ohio study found that only about a third of students who were required to take remedial courses ever graduated.

Of particular interest to this discussion is what happens to those from the academic middle. How many must take remedial courses? One answer is provided by the high school Follow-Up Study discussed in Chapter 4 (see Table 5.1).

Table 5.1 Higher Education Freshmen Remedial Courses and Sophomore Status, Class of 1998 Follow-Up Study

	Remedial English	Remedial math	Any remedial	Achieved sophomore status
Unprepared	26%	31%	46%	52%
Marginally prepared	22%	5%	27%	66%

Source: Gray and Xianli, 1999.

Respondents in the study were asked several questions to determine their academic success in the freshman year. As a group, the participation rate in remedial education was a little less than the NCFES-reported average of 28%. Few students from the prepared and about a fifth of those from the marginally prepared took remedial education. However, when one looks at the students we are interested in—those from the academic middle—the numbers are much higher. About half of the unprepared group was taking remedial courses. Similar to other national data, this study's data showed mathematics was the most common area of weakness.

So, what is the point? Our intent is not to point the finger at high schools for poor preparation. In all fairness, it must be said that high schools prepare well those blessed with the academic ability to do legitimate college-level work. Although we could fault the colleges for admitting ill-prepared students, college administrators would argue that they are providing equal opportunity through open admissions, though others argue that the true motive behind remedial education is not altruistic but tuition dollars (Roueche & Roueche, 1999).

Instead, then, our intention is to suggest that if these large numbers of students are not prepared to do baccalaureate degree academic work, then maybe just maybe—they should be doing something else. And if, given some legitimate, socially valued alternatives that make economic sense, perhaps many of these students would do something else. Without other choices, what happens to those who start college having to take remedial courses? Many fail. As Burton Clark (1962) argued, "The initial move in a cooling out process is pre-entrance testing: low scores lead poorly qualified students into remedial classes . . . which slows the students moving into bona fide courses . . . and cast doubt regarding ever graduating" (pp. 569–577).

Although in Clark's time remedial courses were confined to 2-year junior colleges, today they exist virtually everywhere in higher education except truly selective 4-year colleges. Their effect, however, has not changed over time. Enrollment in remedial courses is the first sign of trouble in the one way to win game. The second sign is the number returning home after completion of the freshman year who have not earned a sufficient number of credits to be classified as sophomores.

### College Dropouts

Of high school graduates who go directly on to higher education, the first losers are those who must take remedial education courses. The second group of losers is those who fail to persist to graduate. These include many who take remedial education and also many who do not. How many actually graduate?

Table 5.2 shows the percentage of students who actually graduate with some type of a degree five years after they start, based on the degree they were pursuing; of those who pursue a 4-year college degree, 54% graduated in five years. A newer NCLS study that tracked whether those who transfer to other colleges graduated increased the five-year graduation rate to 67% (Adelman, 1999).

Table 5.2 Highest Degree Obtained Within Five Years

Level of first institution	Highest degree completed in five years (%)		
	Bachelor's	Associate	Certificate
Total all institutions	45.8	5.1	3.3
4-year colleges	57.1	2.5	2.1
2-year colleges	7.9	13.9	7.2

Degree	Highest degree completed in five years (%)		
	Bachelor's	Associate	Certificate
Associate degree	7.5	23.7	11.4
Certificate	0.5	4.3	49.7

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 2000a and 2005

A higher percentage of those who start at 4-year institutions earn a degree than those who start in transfer programs at 2-year institutions (7.9%). In fact, of those who start a transfer program at a 2-year college, only 29% earn any type of degree five years later. This latter point is important to dwell on. Teens from the academic middle, especially those with academic credentials that predict failure in college, those from low income families, and those who have no well thought-out reasons to go to college in the first place are more often than not counseled by well-meaning adults to start at a community college transfer program. The problem is that most of these students fail.

At the same time, Table 5.2 provides insight into other ways to win. Of those who pursue an associate degree or certificate at a 2-year institution, the success rate is about the same as that for the more academically blessed who enroll in 4-year colleges. This suggests that the persistence rate is dramatically better for those from the academic middle if they pursue a certificate or associate degree program, most of which are typically career related, rather than prepare to transfer to a 4-year college. To quote Boesel and Friedland (1999),

High school graduates of modest ability or uncertain motivation who are thinking of enrolling in four-year colleges would be well advised to consider attending two-year colleges instead. If they did so, they would probably realize the same earning and cognitive skills at lower costs with less debt. (p. ix)

Of course, students drop out of college for a variety of reasons. Some of these would exist even if there were other ways to win. Of interest here are the variables that cause students to drop out and that can be influenced in high school. One way to focus on these variables is to examine students who drop out during their freshman year because, arguably, these are the ones whose failure is most related to their high school preparation.

Many parents of college freshmen spend their child's first year in college in various stages of apprehension, waiting for the dreaded "I am coming home" call. They sense, without being told, another one of higher education's well-guarded secrets: basically, combining both 2- and 4-year colleges, one-third of all college freshmen drop out during their freshman year (Noel & Levitz, 1985). Many drop

out before they even really begin. If the number of all freshman dropouts is subtracted from the number of those who leave between semesters, half of the rest drop out during the first 6 weeks. It is a mistake to think that these students simply flunk out. In fact, some data suggest that the first-year dropout rates for college freshmen are just as high for academically able students as for marginal students.

The huge number of entering freshmen who fail to return the following year suggests that many youth are making what they later decide was a bad decision. They do not necessarily fail, that can take a couple of years. Instead, they drift away. They have played the college game and made everyone happy, but high school graduation is over and the pressures are not as intense; they throw in the towel and leave school, but not without costs. According to the General Accounting Office (GAO) (1991), an important predictor of those who will default on student loan debts is whether they failed to complete their first year. Thus, for at least one-third of all college freshmen, going to college proves, in the first year, to be a very expensive mistake. One wonders how many of these, even among those who are academically gifted, did not really want to go in the first place and would have made other choices if they had had other ways to win that adults were willing to value their pursuing.

The good news is that 4-year college graduation rates may not be a bleak as was previously thought. When those who transfer to other 4-year colleges are not counted as dropouts, the six year graduation rate is reported in one study to be 68%. While the survey of households by the U.S. Census Bureau suggests this number is high, nevertheless, at least two-thirds of those who start a 4-year degree may well finish. So these are the winners in the one way to win game. Well, yes, some are, but unfortunately for some, the real bad news comes after graduation. The bad news is that almost half of those who do graduate from college will end up underemployed.

## SECTION II

### *Underemployed College Graduates: The Second Losers*

National survey data (see Table 1.1) of both high school graduates and entering college freshmen show that the principal reasons for

going to college is to get a high-paying job. In fact, economic uncertainty regarding future employment opportunities and the conclusion that only a 4 year college degree offers any opportunities have been largely responsible for the growth in college enrollments since the early 1980s. Overwhelmingly, high school graduates place their hopes for a secure economic future in one set of occupations: the professions.

In a study of graduating seniors, 49.3% of males and 68.8% of females expected to be employed in the professions (see Table 1.2). No other occupational choice was even close. Only 6.7% were inspired either to own their own businesses or to be managers or technicians (6.0%). Only 2.8% expected to enter the well-paying skilled trades. For all practical purposes, everyone has the same career plan, and its folly is obvious. Major league baseball players make lots of money, but (a) not everyone has the talent to be one, and (b) even if everyone did, there are only so many jobs in the big leagues to go around. The same is true of professional work.

The public in general and students and parents in particular seem to have faith that if one earns a 4-year degree that includes a professional credential, such as a teaching certificate or a law degree, a job will be waiting. The assumption is that the demand for professionals will increase to accommodate the rising percentage of the population who hold these credentials. By the turn of the new century, signs indicated that this faith was not well placed. At the 2004 meeting of the American Economic Association, much time was spent by presenters discussing the leveling-off of returns to a college education, and while college graduates do earn more than high school graduates, the gain is mostly due to a decrease in wages of high school graduates, not a dramatic increase in wages of university graduates (Uchitelle, 2005).

### **The Labor Market Outlook for College Graduates**

Students parents and all those promoting the one way to win strategy take note. Evidence suggests that, even among those who persist to graduate, many will end up losers. The reality is that there are not enough jobs that require a 4-year degree to go around. Projections by the U.S. Department of Education regarding degrees awarded annually, with projections by the U.S. Department of Labor regarding the demand for jobs at various levels of education (see Table 5.3),

**Table 5.3** Comparison of Occupation Supply and Demand by Highest Education Credentials in the Year 2010

	Supply	Demand	% Underemployed
First professional	81,600	69,100	15
Doctoral	47,100	76,000	0
Master's	459,000	63,400	86
Bachelor's	1,324,000	730,400	45

Sources: Supply data are from *Projections of Education Statistics to 2010* by the National Center for Education Statistics, 2004. Retrieved August 21, 2005, from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2004/200410a8.pdf>. Demand data are from "Occupational Employment Projections to 2010" by the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2004. *Monthly Labor Review*, 127, 81-105.

Note: Demand data reflect projected average annual job openings due to growth and net replacements, total job openings due to growth and net replacements during 2000-2010 was divided by 10.

predict a dramatic oversupply of those with advanced degrees in general and those with a 4-year college degree in particular.

Table 5.3 provides a comparison of the projected supply of degrees awarded at the bachelor's level or above and the labor market demand for individuals educated at these levels. Our main interest is the 4-year degree level. The annual demand for 4 year college graduates is substantial: 730,000 jobs annually. That number sounds like a lot until one takes note of the supply numbers. Annually, the nation's colleges are projected to graduate 1,324 million individuals. The implication is clear. On average, 45 of every 100 who persist to get a degree will not find commensurate employment. This amounts to over half a million persons annually and, of course, this number compounds each year. Thus, between 1998 and 2006, there are projected to be well over 4 million underemployed 4-year college graduates.

The stark reality is that, while the percentage of teens trying the one way to win paradigm increases each year and the percentage of young adults who have a 4 year degree grows each year, the percentage of all work that requires education at this level does not; the total number of jobs grows, of course, but not enough to provide jobs for all who graduate. Despite all the rhetoric about the need for further education, labor studies suggest that the percentage of all work that requires a 4-year degree is only 12%, which is only 1% higher than it was 15 years ago (Silvestri, 1997). In fact, only 24% of all

jobs in the United States require education beyond a 2-year degree; 40% of all work can be learned in only two weeks on the job.

Thus not surprisingly, an ongoing NCLS study of recent 4-year college graduates, Baccalaureate and Beyond (McCormick & Knepfer, 1996), found that almost half (43%) said that they held jobs that did not require a 4-year degree one year after they graduated. In the second follow up of the same cohort, now four years after they graduated, almost half were still saying they were in jobs that did not require a 4-year degree and had no career potential.

The mismatch between projected demand and supply of credentialed college graduates becomes even more dramatic when one looks at data for selected occupations. Table 5.4 also provides the projected average annual job openings for specific occupational groups, the number of education and training credentials awarded annually, and the resultant net demand or surplus of candidates. Notice immediately the projected net demand in professional occupations. Most high school graduates who go to college say they expect to work in the professional ranks, but there clearly are not enough jobs to go around. For example, the economy is expected to generate 623,000 jobs in the professional specialty category, but it is also projected that the higher education system will award more than 1.1 million professional undergraduate and graduate degrees. Considering that these supply figures do not include other sources of employees for these professional jobs, such as professionals trained abroad, or project the number of these jobs that may well go overseas as globalization and free trade play themselves out, it is clear that, at best, only one of two who prepare for the specialized professional ranks will find commensurate employment.

The sobering bottom line for 49.3% of male and 68.8% of female high school graduates with ambitions to enter the professions (Table 1.2) is that, at best, even among those who actually graduate from college, there will be twice as many individuals graduating with professional credentials as there will be jobs available. In fact, the data reveal many widespread misconceptions about the need for certain types of professionals. Although the oversupply of lawyers is widely known, the popular belief is that there is a national shortage of scientists, engineers, and related workers. This is a misconception (see Table 5.4). Even in the hard sciences, the supply of graduates greatly exceeds the demand, a fact that leads some, such as Rustum Roy (1992), world-renowned solid state scientist, to argue that the shortage of people in the sciences is just a myth created by the National Science

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Table 5.4 Projected Average Annual Job Openings, 1990-2005

	Openings	Number of credentials awarded	Net openings
Professional managerial executive administration	436,000	506,830	70,830
Construction managers	7,000	825	16,175
Marketing, advertising, and public relations managers	23,000	66,416	-43,416
Professional specialty	623,000	1,120,063	-497,063
Physical scientists	8,000	35,163	-27,163
Lawyers	28,806	44,314	-16,308
Blue-collar technical Craft, precision metal, and specialized repair	455,000	133,057	+321,943
Mechanics, installers, repairers	160,000	91,758	-68,242
Service occupations	882,000	237,062	+644,938
Operators, laborers	477,000	41,504	+435,496
Farming, forestry, fishing	90,000	14,547	+75,453

Source: Data compiled from Eck 1994.

Foundation to obtain greater funding from Congress. Similarly, when Congress asked the GAO to investigate claims of a dramatic shortage of college-trained information technology workers in the late 1990s, the GAO reported that the demand had been grossly exaggerated. Most recently, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Monastersky, 2004) carried an article questioning the supposed shortage of scientists and mathematicians in general. Of note, 67% of the arts and science majors in the Baccalaureate and Beyond study, for example, said they were underemployed.

As will be discussed in Chapter 7, although serious shortages do exist, they are primarily for technicians trained at the pre-baccalaureate level. In fact, the only major professional occupations in which demand for college graduates was strong in 2005 were in the health fields, computer science, information technology, and accounting.

The bad news is not confined to the professions. When looking at other occupational groups normally associated with 4-year college level preparation, one finds similar oversupplies. An example is professional managerial occupations. In this category, demand will exceed supply (see Table 5.4). A close look at the managerial occupational group however, reveals some interesting exceptions that hint at other ways to win. For example, there is an oversupply of people preparing to be marketing, advertising, and public relations managers — popular majors at 4-year colleges. Conversely, the demand for individuals with the skills necessary to manage construction projects, which are well-paid positions, greatly exceeds the supply. These positions do not require a 4-year college degree. They may not be as glamorous, but they are high-paying and offer good opportunities for advancement, a fact discussed in Chapter 7.

Certainly, some who earn a 4-year degree will find commensurate employment in the future. And who are the lucky ones? More than likely *not* those from the academic middle but those who attend the better colleges (see NCES, 2000a) and those who are focused enough to select and then get admitted to the specialized majors that are in demand in the labor market. David Autor, economist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, suggests that the demand for these academically blessed teens will always be high and they will therefore always have high earnings because there will always be a shortage of these elite teens. But while the elite are mostly all college graduates, not all college graduates are among the cognitive elite (Uchitelle, 2005).

In most cases, those populating the ranks of the losers will be from the high school academic middle who go on to try the one way to win path at institutions sometimes described as the “colleges of the forgotten Americans” (Lovett, 2005). If labor market projections are at all accurate, more and more from the academic middle will graduate from college but never find work commensurate with their 4-year degree. They will not go unemployed; many will take the better jobs that high school graduates used to hold, but these jobs will not pay wages that begin to justify the costs in terms of the time and money it took to earn a 4-year college degree. Meanwhile, as will be pointed

out in Part III of this book, there are tremendous career opportunities that many of these teens would be both capable of and happy doing that pay very well and require less than a university education. There are other ways for these young people to win.

### SECTION III

#### *More Losers: Those Who Prepare for College but Go to Work Instead*

The percentage of high school graduates who pursue full-time employment directly after high school has hovered around 30% nationally for 15 years, and in some locales and in some states, it is much higher. Significantly, more than half of those who pursue full-time employment do not take career and technical education (CTE) in high school, but in fact are quasi college prep students. How do these students who take just academic courses in high school fare in the labor market? The question becomes important in determining the need for other ways to win. Research on this point is clear that the significant economic rewards of attending college, be it diploma, certificate, associate degree, or above, accrue only to those who graduate. The only economic certainty for those who go to college and drop out is that many will end up with student loan debt that must be repaid. To probe this issue further, we return to the High School Follow-Up Studies.

#### **Dead-End Jobs for Those Without Career and Technical Education**

In our follow-up studies of high school graduates, we have been particularly interested in the postsecondary experiences of graduates who did not take CTE but went to work full time. Indicative of the persuasiveness of the one way to win press, 60% of this group had taken the SAT. This group contained a small percentage of very academically able students. The majority (82%), however, graduated unqualified for college. Those who went to work but had not been enrolled in CTE course work were the most marginal of college prep students. How did they do? Not well. Their average yearly income was \$16,303, which would be poverty level for a family of four. Of

course, many were earning even less: one-third were making between \$8,000 and \$15,000. The majority were working in services and transportation industries, followed by food service or retailing and manufacturing.

Importantly, the experiences of this group, particularly those who graduated with academically noncompetitive credentials, were significantly poorer than the experiences of those who took CTE. Those completing CTE programs of study were less apt to be unemployed and earned higher salaries. No doubt, the latter resulted from the fact that CTE graduates were more likely to be employed in work that required some prior skills. CTE graduates, for example, were more likely to have found employment in the skilled trades, health occupations, and food industries (not to be confused with fast-food service jobs).

Almost all of the high school graduates in these studies who were in the labor force worked in small firms, 39% in firms with fewer than 19 employees and 79% in firms with fewer than 500 employees. This finding is important because of the often-heard argument that high school students do not need courses that teach job skills because employers will provide on-the-job training. Small firms cannot afford to provide on-the-job training and are the least likely to do so (Carnegie, Gauner, & Villet, 1999). Indeed, studies indicate that American employers, compared with their foreign counterparts, invest less in new entrants to the workforce and in only limited cases provide extensive on-the-job training (Holtm, 1991). Many employers, particularly but not exclusively small firms, tend to expect young workers to come prepared with the necessary employment skills (Hern, 1995). Thus it was not surprising to find that only 22% of those in the labor force reported receiving formal training. The importance of training and its relationship to work that pays a living wage were illustrated by the data: those who reported having been trained by their employer were earning on average \$19,982 a year, versus \$10,000 for those who had not. Confirming other studies (Gray & Wang, 1989), the data suggest that those who think employers will train high school graduates are largely mistaken and that those who need training the most are least likely to get it unless it is in high school.

In summary, what can be said about those who take the traditional college prep program of study but go to work? Do they win or lose as a result of preparing for the one way to win game instead of

for full-time employment? Compared with those who take CTE, they mostly lose. In general, they end up in unskilled jobs in small firms, mostly in the service industries. They receive no formal training and earn only minimum wage. As a group, they are more likely to be unemployed, and, if they are employed, they are more likely to earn less than students who took a comprehensive CTE program. For those seeking to create other ways to win, it is important, therefore, to note that the most at risk among those who went to work are those from the academic middle who graduated without any work training experiences. Such findings suggest that the expectation that all high school students should or will go to college and pursue a baccalaureate degree has blurred the reality that there are many students, potentially a great many, who are employment bound immediately following high school graduation. Ironically and importantly, treating all students as college bound increases the probability that high schools will *not* serve all students and will leave a lot of teens behind.

### OTHER WAYS TO WIN

In this chapter, data from the postsecondary experiences of recent high school graduates have been studied to evaluate the merits of the one way to win philosophy. The data suggest the wisdom of questioning the one way to win paradigm among both those who head off to 4-year colleges and those who, without adequate preparation, go to work. The losers outnumber the winners.

For example, the data reveal that, of those who begin a BA program, only slightly more than half of whites and Asians and fewer than half of other people of color graduate. Furthermore, of the group that does graduate, 43% will still lose because the economy will provide too little college-level work. When one looks just at those who aspire to the professions, the majority of whom are women, the odds of winning are even worse. Of those preparing for the professions—accountants, chemists, elementary school teachers, engineers, and so forth—only one of two will find work.

Who will be the winners? Common sense and good research suggest the winners can be identified in high school. The winners will be those who graduate with academically competitive credentials that enable them to go to better colleges; these credentials will,

in turn, give them advantages in the labor market when competing for a limited number of professional and other 4-year college-level jobs.

Who will be the losers? The losers likely will be among those who graduated from the academic middle—those who were pressed into attending 4-year colleges even though they lacked adequate academic preparation or the ability to succeed. The losers will also include those who, for whatever reason, prepared in high school to go to college but went to work instead. Thus it is difficult not to conclude that losers outnumber winners in the one way to win game.

We make one final point. If so many young people in the academic middle are being hurt at great cost to themselves, to their parents, and even to the United States as a whole by the one way to win paradigm, and if those who need help the most are hurt the most, why isn't corrective action being taken? The answer lies in the politics of the academically average in U.S. high schools, which is the topic of Chapter 6.

### NOTE

1 Hudson Institute (1997). *Workforce 2020*. Washington, DC: Author.

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## CHAPTER SIX

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# *Who Cares? The Politics of Average Students*

A great many people think they are thinking when they are merely rearranging their prejudices

—*William James (1842–1910)*

**I**n terms of achieving their expressed postsecondary education and career goals, more than 50% of all high school graduates fail. Nationwide, 85% of high school graduates want to obtain a 4-year college degree, but only 40% graduate from high school with the academically advanced credentials to indicate adequate preparation for college-level academic work. While 30% of teens never graduate from high school and 30% of those who do graduate go to work, all the rest go on to college, mostly to 4-year colleges, despite inadequate academic preparation. Thus it is not surprising to find that among those who go to a 4-year college, one-fifth have to take remedial courses sometime during their freshman year in college; among those who start at 2-year colleges with the intent to transfer to a 4-year college, it is almost one in two. Five years later, of those who started at 4-year colleges, about 65% actually graduate. Of those who start at public 2-year colleges with the intent of transferring to a university, only 7% have earned a baccalaureate degree five years later (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). The rest of the

students "cool out" of the higher education system, but not before most have accumulated significant debt.

Meanwhile, the employment prospects for those who do persist and obtain a 4-year degree worsen. Whereas in the past one in every five persons with a college degree failed to find commensurate employment, today it is almost one in two. Department of Labor data indicate that in fact, only about a fifth of all occupations require a baccalaureate or graduate degree. Although 4 year college graduates do not go unemployed, more and more end up in jobs that require only a high school diploma or less and that do not pay wages college graduates were led to believe would be there for them.

Meanwhile, the nation faces an unprecedented shortage of technicians trained at the pre-baccalaureate level. Non-native-born workers in the 1990s filled almost half of all openings in these areas. And, while the nation's firms search the world to fill high skill/high wage technical occupations, growing numbers of American college graduates end up in low-paying occupations struggling to pay off student loan debts.

Not a very pretty picture, is it? Yet few want to talk about it. It is the "quiet dilemma." Quiet because students, parents, the education community, and, of course, elected officials running on education reform platforms are largely silent about the consequences of providing high school students with only one way to win. Meanwhile, politicians continue to speak and act as though it were the 1980s, they sense little advantage in taking on a problem no one wants to acknowledge even exists. Others take financial advantage of the situation. These are the strange politics of one way to win, or the "must go to college" mentality. While the nation's elected officials talk about opportunity, the facts seem to suggest instead that there is a conspiracy going on. More specifically, it is the strange politics of "average students," the most common victims of providing only one way to win.

## SECTION I

### *High School Politics and the Academic Middle*

To understand the politics of the one way to win conventional wisdom, it is first of all important to understand that the kids whom it hurts the most, namely, those who make up the academic middle,

have no advocates either locally or nationally. At the federal level, the Washington, DC, advocacy (a fancy name for lobbying) scene is a good illustration. At least 30 groups promote themselves as advocates for children with special needs. There are lobbyists for college students, for Ivy League colleges, for land-grant universities, and for unemployed engineers, to name a few. But as far as we know, there is no advocacy group for academically average students in general and in particular kids who go to work directly upon graduating from high school. In fact, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation seems to view the latter as school system failures that confound the view "that everyone should prepare to go to college."

At the local level, the academically blessed have many advocates—for example, their parents who serve on public school boards, high school teachers who love to teach advanced placement (AP) and honors courses and school administrators who see admissions at prestigious colleges as the zenith of educational effectiveness—but average teens have no one. For example, at high school graduations, it is rare that a listing is provided of students who have obtained full-time jobs. Meanwhile, it is very likely that a detailed account will be provided about each student who has been admitted to college and even more accolades given to those who have gotten scholarships to do so.

Whereas special needs students have an army of advocates—laws and lawyers seeing dollar signs to safeguard their rights, average students have neither, a situation that led the authors of *The Shopping Mall High School* (Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985) to label them the "unspecial." In reporting the results of an ethnographic case study of several high schools, Powell et al. (1985) were struck by the invisibility of average students; in fact, they were so invisible that high school educators had difficulty describing them:

Indeed, one important characteristic is the very absence of precision [in high school teachers' minds] about exactly who they [the unspecial] are. They were variously the "invisible people," "the middle of the class," and "that great gray mass area." Those who don't belong anywhere, the people who don't fit into any . . . categories. (p. 174)

Powell et al. (1985) go on to confirm the argument made here, that the unspecial are the majority.

Words like average, middle, normal, and regular were often used to describe quite different kinds of adolescents. Some enrolled in college-preparatory programs but were not in advanced or honors courses and therefore were no longer special because post-secondary education was a mass expectation. Others saw the unspecial as a contemporary version of traditional "general" students—shaped neither by clear college expectations nor a focused vocational education program. To others the unspecial were those on the top end of the bottom spectrum (p. 175)

And they have no advocates.

Another fundamental characteristic of the unspecial is that they have no important allies or advocates. Top track students are blessed with a strong constituency of parents. The handicapped and those with a highly focused vocational interest, even the unruly, had their spokespeople, usually organized lobbies or political groups that generated money or mandates from legislatures and courts. (p. 176)

While we would hope that the findings of this study of the American high school, probably the best ever done, have been corrected in the intervening 20 years, data suggest that if anything, conditions for students in the academic middle have gotten worse. Data from the Economic Policy Institute (Rothstein, 1997) confirm this observation. Between 1967 and 1996, the percentage of school budgets spent on regular education (that part of the budget that supports education for the academic middle) dropped from 80% to 57%. Meanwhile, the percentage of the budget spent on special education, bilingual education, and other programs for special students increased from 4% to 22%. In other words, while education budgets have grown over the years, the percentage of dollars spent on those in the academic middle has actually decreased.

The parents of these youth are largely silent, either because of the feeling that no news from school is good news or because they lack the savvy or the combativeness to effect change. For example, whereas parents' organizations are the norm at elementary schools and are typical at middle or junior highs, they seldom exist at the high school level. Why? One reason is that high school

educators do not encourage them. Another reason is that the parents of the silent majority are, by now, almost completely silent. It's not that they don't care, they just seem to give up. As one counselor said, "Most parents are too busy trying to survive [raising a teenager] to try to tell the schools what to do" (Powell et al., 1985, p. 177). This is too bad because high school educators also have largely given up trying to advise students, particularly those from the academic middle, on what to do. In the worse case, NCTB has made many of these students liabilities to schools desperate to avoid the dreaded "needs improvement" label.

### WHY HIGH SCHOOL EDUCATORS LOOK THE OTHER WAY

Conversations with high school principals, counselors, and teachers (the authors of this book have, at various times, served in all of these positions) leave little doubt that these professionals are aware of the growing number of academically average youth in the college prep programs who do not do very well but still go on to 4-year colleges. In fact, school guidance counselors are increasingly amazed at the ease with which students with mediocre academic credentials gain admittance into what used to be fairly selective colleges and universities. They also are well aware that few high school students know why they are going to college except that their parents want it, everyone else expects it, and there appear to be no alternatives. Here we get to the heart of the matter.

High schools are public institutions and, as such, are quite responsive—better yet, vulnerable—to community desires. The old saw among superintendents of schools was and still is that as long as the band plays on time, the football team has a winning season, and the students get into college, the public is happy. It's true. National data indicate that most parents want their children to go to college, and in this day and age there is little stopping them. In the light of the politics that exist today in most high schools, few principals are willing to deliver this message: many students enrolled in the college prep program are not prepared to do baccalaureate-level work. In a society in which "kill the messenger" is the rule, the lack of willingness to deliver this message is understandable. In fact, parents often do not wake up until the dreaded SAT or ACT college admissions

test scores arrive. Meanwhile, school personnel are thankful that this insight is coming from someone else.

If the high school culture was not already highly unfavorable to those in the academic middle, along comes NCLB. Now high schools have something new to worry about, and it is definitely a good news/bad news situation for kids in the academic middle. The Act requires that not just students but schools be assessed and that schools where the kids do not meet standards are judged as needing improvement. Of course, all this is grist for the press, hungry for any negative local news.

The implication of the Act is that students in the academic middle are academically average because they do not have good schools and qualified teachers, that they are not held to high expectations in school (meaning they are lazy), and that they will improve if held accountable (tested). Now, in at least one respect, the assumptions of this Act are correct: for those in the academic middle, there is little incentive to apply themselves in high school. By the eighth grade or earlier, they know that they are not going to ever be the kind of student who gets into the better colleges or even graduates in the top 20% of their high school class, thus enabling them to negotiate a lower tuition at colleges with empty seats (which is most of them). They also know, however, that getting into college somewhere is a certainty, and it does not matter much what course they take or what scores they get on state-mandated or college entrance tests. School systems and schools may be concerned about NCLB, but most of the kids in the academic middle aren't. In fact, among those less blessed with academic ability, the tests are a joke, they know their results before they even take the tests, and many just blow them off. So much for the NCLB's master plan!

Now for high school teachers and administrators, these students, particularly those who are not the most motivated to take these tests, become a real problem. They become the enemy from within who drags down the school's test scores. Unless they happen to be an important member of some athletic team—and thus of some specific value—the reality is that their high school would be better off without them. So, when they stop coming to school, there is little incentive for the school staff to make much of an effort to find them. While this sounds like a harsh indictment of the American high school staff and hopefully completely unfair to most of them, the data are clear. In virtually every state, the four-year ninth grade to senior dropout rate went up in the 1990s era of state and federal testing programs.

## ARE SCHOOL GUIDANCE COUNSELORS THE VILLAINS?

Over the years, in talking about the one way to win problem with employers, employee groups, educators, and even some parents, the natural question is, "Whom can we blame?" The number one suspects are almost always high school guidance counselors, who are viewed as the professionals responsible for providing teens with reality therapy. Realistically, parents have only themselves to blame. A typical explanation given by counselors goes this way.

For years, all we counselors hear are digs about the supposed case of successful college graduates who report that their guidance counselor told them not to go to college. After 20 years of this abuse and criticism, most counselors are a bit gun shy about presenting any information, let alone advising that anyone should not go on to college.

Then there is the "kill-the-messenger" attitude of all too many parents that leads school counselors to look the other way when kids make plans that are clearly quixotic. It is easy to understand such attitudes. An increasingly frequent story told by counselors is about the calls they get from irate parents because the counselor even suggested to their child that they consider anything other than the one way to win strategy. Neither school officials nor school board members see any reasons to push the issue. What they observe is that colleges are admitting kids no matter what their credentials are, and as long as that is the case, who wants to fight the battle to change the one way to win mind-set of students and parents?

One other issue is more difficult for high school educators to duck: how can students be in a college prep program of study and get good grades, yet end up in remedial courses in college?

## THE POLITICS OF GRADE INFLATION

Perhaps the best example of schools caving in to the one way to win mind-set that everyone should go to college is the grades kids get. Periodically, the media write about something called grade

**inflation** The term means that grades go up without requisite evidence that learning is increasing too; in fact, data often suggest just the opposite. For example, although SAT entrance test scores have stagnated over the years, the grade point averages (GPAs) reported by entering college freshmen keep going up. In a survey conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute (Engle, 2004), 47% of entering 2003 college freshman reported that they graduated from high school with an A average; in 1968, only 18% so indicated. Again, one wonders what an A average really means because as grades go up, the amount of time students say they spend studying continues to go down. Only 34% of entering 2003 college freshmen indicated they studied at least six hours or more per week. What is going on? Some authors (Sedlak, 1986) suggest that a stalemate exists between teachers and the academically average youth in their classes. Teachers ask little of academically average students, in return, these students ask little of their teachers.

### THE STALEMATE IN HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOMS

Understanding the stalemate that exists between high school teachers and average students in college prep classes requires an appreciation of the impossible catch 22 situation that high school faculty find themselves in because of public demands. High schools are asked to do the impossible: be rigorous but ensure that everyone gets grades that will enable him or her to get into college. The situation has gotten even worse. Now, some states have scholarship programs that guarantee significant financial grants to all those who earn a certain GPA. Guess what happens? The percentage of kids who get this average miraculously goes up every year, but their college entrance exam scores do not. Meanwhile, colleges do whatever it takes to fill seats, including discounting tuition cost to students who have a certain high school GPA, which adds even more pressure for high school teachers to give out inflated grades.

Maybe it is possible for high schools to be rigorous yet ensure all students will earn good grades, and at the same time prevent one-third from dropping out (high school bashers have made careers of suggesting that such action is possible), but under the circumstances,

it is not. As the experience at colleges (where most high school bashers work) has shown, grade inflation is difficult to control. This point was aptly illustrated by cartoonist Gary Trudeau in his panel about a fraternity member who sued the university because he got a B+ instead of the expected A. Obviously, problems with grade inflation are not confined to high schools.

The public simply will not accept one basic reality: if a normal population of high school students is put into college prep courses that carry high academic performance standards (not to be confused with high expectations, which should be the norm for all students), not everyone is going to do well. Thus if everyone is to do well as indicated by the grade received, the only solution, at least given the current student-to-teacher ratio in U.S. high schools, is to lower standards. This is exactly what is occurring in the college prep classes taken by those in the academic middle of U.S. high schools. Academically average students and their parents ask no questions as long as everyone gets above-average grades and gets into college, today, that is virtually ensured. If no one looks too closely at the learning that may or may not be taking place in classes populated by the academic middle, then everyone is content.

One reason for this complacency is that parents of the academically blessed know that their kids receive a different college prep curriculum from those in the academic middle—one with real standards and tough grades—offered under code names such as AP or honors courses. These are the courses and grades the few really selective colleges look at.

The politics of the situation allows no other solution. The public wants all students in high schools to graduate with high academic credentials so that they can go to college, but for a variety of reasons, this task cannot be done. All but a few of these reasons are outside the schools' control, so high school faculty compromise: they offer a real AP or honors college prep program for those who have the ability to do it and a less rigorous college prep curriculum for those who cannot or will not do as well. In the latter classes, teachers ask less of the students; in return, students and parents do not hassle the teachers. This standoff will not be easy to change as long as one way to win goes unchallenged and most colleges practice overt or covert open admissions.

## SECTION II

### *Taking the High Ground: The Role of Elected Officials*

Whereas the one way to win paradigm is costing the government billions, hindering economic growth, and resulting in more youth failing than succeeding, one might expect elected officials to speak out about the need to consider alternatives to a 4-year college education. As columnist Robert Samuelson (1991) suggested—no doubt with tongue in cheek—all government officials have to do to solve the problem is to announce that they will no longer support higher education budgets without performance standards and that they will no longer fool our students or waste taxpayers' money by sending people to college who are not ready. Not surprisingly, none have taken his advice.

Some states are now looking at higher education expenditures in relation to strategic economic development plans. And in such states, more taxpayer money for colleges is not as automatic as it was in the 1990s. Even Congress is coming to view higher education as a sector similar to health care in that costs are out of control and increases in federal financial aid lead to higher tuition costs, not more affordability for students. But then there is NCLB, which suggests that while elected officials are increasingly skeptical of ever-increasing tuition costs, they still believe—at least for the record—in the one way to win philosophy.

When it comes to one way to win, the rhetoric is classic political smoke and mirrors, at least at the federal level. Congress passes legislation that increases the dollar amounts for student aid, and then its members hit the campaign trail to bring the good news to their constituents. They fail to tell the whole story, however, that although Congress has passed a bill to increase student aid benefits, there is no money to fund it. Thus, in late 2004 the U.S. Office of Education added more restrictive regulations regarding student financial aid eligibility, disqualifying tens of thousands of student who would have gotten aid in the past.

In the light of the political hay to be made from supporting the one way to win mentality, it is clearly unrealistic to think the federal government will urge the public to consider alternatives to a 4-year degree leading to a career in the professional ranks. In fact, often the

political returns from promoting college attendance are so high that they actually lead to proposals that make no sense. For example, in the mid 1990s, one proposal called for a payback schedule for direct student loans that did not cover loan interest; over time, then student loans would actually increase in size!

One final and important point should be made regarding politician's use of the one way to win mentality to increase public approval of their performance. By doing so, they in effect lend considerable credence to the validity of the one way to win paradigm. When the president of the United States asserts that any one who wants to go to college should be able to, the message is interpreted in a far larger context than may have been intended. In the country's classrooms and households, the message means that everyone should go to college. Some believe it even insinuates that something is wrong with anyone who does not aspire to college. If there is a positive sign in all this, in the 2005 budget proposal, the federal administration proposed legislation designed to increase attendance in high skill community college programs that were to be coordinated closer with industry, a very encouraging sign.

## SECTION III

### *One Way to Win: Opportunity or Opiate*

Ultimately, the bottom-line origin of the one way to win mentality is fear. Public opinion polls of teens and their parents regarding the economic outlook for this generation are consistently pessimistic. Neither teens nor their parents expect that they will be able to maintain the same level of lifestyle that their parents enjoy. The majority think programs such as Social Security will be long gone before today's teens reach retirement.

Fueling the pessimism is economic globalization. For example, many parents of kids in the academic middle worked and earned a respectable living in the textile industry. In 2005, the last tariff regulations that protected what remained of these industries were forced to expire due to mandates by the World Trade Organization. These jobs have gone overseas and will not return. Predictably, exporting of jobs was a major issue in the 2004 presidential elections. In fact, the position of both candidates is telling. While bemoaning the loss

of jobs overseas as the other candidate's fault, they both were on record as supporting free trade. Neither candidate had an idea of what to do to stop job loss, nor does anyone else, it seems.

While there is much debate regarding the pluses and minuses of globalization, one thing seems clear: wage rates for similar work and thus standards of living worldwide will regress to a mean. For highly developed countries such as the United States, this is not very good news. Yes, some countries and some firms will benefit handsomely from globalization, but, despite much free trade rhetoric to the contrary, it is hard to understand how it cannot hurt just as many. The reality is that jobs will go to localities where, for a given skill level, wages are the lowest. The implications are dramatic. Were it not for federal farm aid, there would already be much less produced in the United States; almost any agriculture product can be produced cheaper somewhere else in the world and shipped to the United States overnight.

Politicians know this, of course; they are clever people. The problem is that they do not know what to do about it. There is definitely an attitude that nothing can be done about it: the typical response is the old saw, "The horse is already out of the barn." Even the revered Alan Greenspan, head of the Federal Reserve Board, was at first stumped when asked at a congressional hearing if he knew what could be done about job flight. Guess what he finally advised? Send more teens to college. Lester Thurow, the renowned economist, says much the same thing in his book *Fortune Favors the Bold* (2003).

To modern day geniuses such as Greenspan and Thurow, and seemingly to everyone else, college has become the last great hope. Unfortunately, it is a false hope. More and more college graduates will not lead to more and more jobs that pay a college-level wage, only more and more college graduates with more and more debt taking jobs that pay a high school wage. This generation is in the competition of its lifetime, namely, the competition for high wage employment. There is not enough of this kind of work to go around. And with globalization, virtually any qualified person from any country can compete for the limited amount there is.

This is rather dismal news. It is not the kind of uplifting message politicians like to deliver; it does not tend to get votes. To them, the solution by which to appease the voters is to make it possible for everyone to go to college, even though those who try and fail will greatly outnumber the winners. Faced with the fearsome reality of a

not-too-bright economic future and the political necessity of keeping it to themselves, elected officials, with few exceptions (Congressman John Peterson of Pennsylvania being one such exception), endorse the one way to win solution. And it works.

Given these political realities, it seems justified to conclude that in the United States today, the primary function of the "one way to win/everyone needs to get a university degree" message is *not* that of providing sound advice regarding career opportunity, for clearly this advice leads the majority of today's youth to make bad career decisions, but instead to make them and the populace in general complicit to the fact that there is not enough opportunity in the new global economy to go around. Its major role is that of a social opiate.

Baccalaureate education in general and open admissions in particular serve to deaden the common sense of the populace. It deadens their justified fears of hard times ahead. And unfortunately, like most opiates, it works. Public opinion polls find, for example, that when students fail in high school, they blame the schools, and when they fail in college, they blame themselves—*not* the system, not the government, not economic policy. They conclude that they were given a chance, but they screwed up. The fact that they had little real chance in the first place is a reality they are never told; what they are told is that there is only one way to win and, for whatever reason, they blew it.

Of course, there are other ways to win, ways that have greater odds of winning. But most teens and parents have been so convinced by the one way to win message that they are afraid to take a different path. It is a difficult situation.

## SECTION IV

### *Behind the Scenes: Those With Vested Interests*

Each year higher education in the United States is a multibillion dollar business. Revenues for higher education institutions alone are now over \$120 billion. This amount may be just the tip of the iceberg because untold billions are generated by products and services related to higher education: College sports on national television, college and financial planners, moneylenders, T-shirt manufacturers, textbook publishers, beer distributors, and providers of cram courses

for entrance tests, to cite a few all add up to staggering amounts of money. The one way to win mantra is essential to keeping this market booming, and promoting the one way to win philosophy is a marketing essential not just for colleges but also for firms of all kinds that feed off college students.

Thus colleges and universities have become big business, and, as with all businesses, a steady supply of customers is essential. In turn, a steady flow of customers requires a product in demand. The one way to win paradigm provides the rationale for the demand for a baccalaureate education. The point is that, although most endorse one way to win because they believe it is sound advice for today's youth, others promote the value of college because their jobs depend on it. It is in their interest to promote the myth.

No doubt, the largest vested interest in one way to win is the higher education community itself. Higher education is a huge service industry. It sells a service (education)—or more accurately, products (degrees)—employs people, and portrays itself as meeting a need and creating opportunity. If someone dropped in from another world and observed this activity, however, these efforts would more resemble marketers' efforts to create a need for a product in a saturated market.

Obviously, all is not well in this multibillion-dollar enterprise. The industry has overexpanded: classes are undercontrolled in small but expensive liberal arts colleges; in big university branch campuses and other such higher education backwaters, classroom seats and dorm rooms are empty, and revenue is down. Thus recruitment and retention, not excellence, are the priorities at all but relatively few colleges. Although administrators at most colleges act as if admissions were selective, admissions are truly selective at only about 250 of the more than 3,000 institutions of higher education. In fact most higher education institutions practice open admissions. Most take the best that apply even if the best of these are not well qualified to do college work; as the adage goes, 'Poor students are better than no students.' What other explanation is there for the fact that 80% of all public 4-year colleges "offer" (a code word for require) remedial courses for entering students?

One major tactic used by higher education in its increasingly sophisticated marketing efforts to keep colleges and universities full is to reinforce and play off the one way to win mentality. These efforts have been very successful. Opportunity and college have

become synonymous, thanks in part to these efforts. Suffice it to say that higher education is a strong political force working overtly and covertly to sell and perpetuate one way to win.

Questions about the sincerity of these efforts are left to the reader to decide. The point is that those who seek to promote other ways to win should understand that the United States has an oversupply of baccalaureate degree-granting colleges: between 1980 and 1990, the number of public and private baccalaureate-level colleges actually increased despite a decreasing number of high school graduates. You can expect these institutions to push hard the one way to win concept.

One final group deserves mention among those with a vested interest in one way to win, the moneylenders and financial planners for whom college mania has become a source of growth and profit. In December 2004, Sallie Mae, the largest, now private, student financial aid lender, alone held 110.5 billion dollars in student loans, most all of which were guaranteed by state or federal government. Need money for college? Plan now for college, and ask about student loans. Are tuition bills due? Consider a home equity loan. These messages are heard day after day. A house used to be the largest purchase made by a family, now, for many, it is their children's education. By promoting their services, these financial institutions are reinforcing the message and keeping public faith in higher education alive and well; after all doing so is a dollars and cents issue. Were the one way to win myth exposed, it would result in declining profits.

### OTHER WAYS TO WIN

In this chapter, we have explored the political realities behind the apparent lack of public concern for the plight of those from the academic middle of high school graduating classes and the almost universal faith in the one way to win message. Aware of no other socially acceptable and economically promising alternatives, many in the academic middle are heading off to college despite being unprepared for it. Even among the academically blessed, many also head off to college by default and would make other choices if given a chance. Most in the academic middle never graduate and are only successful in accumulating significant student loan debt.