

What's Wrong with the American Dream?

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What's wrong with the American Dream? Nothing really, except that it simply doesn't mesh with the American Reality. That wouldn't matter one way or another, except that policy-makers and bureaucrats make decisions every day based on some false assumptions regarding this sought-after objective. Perhaps worst of all, by misunderstanding the American Reality, we are creating a climate that penalizes and frustrates those who are affected most – American young people.

The American Dream that most Americans hold dearly is that every child will attend and graduate from college; and by *college* we refer to a traditional, four-year college. This is particularly true for all families who want their children to do better than the previous generation; and since most students do not pursue such an education, this pretty much has an impact on us all.

We all aspire – or should – to be “all that you can be,” as the U.S. Army ads so cleverly said. But when we make plans and allocate resources based on the assumption that this dream will come true, we do a major disservice to the public, to parents, and most of all to young people who are led to believe that the world is waiting for every college graduate. So, what is the real story – the whole story – about the American Dream?

How many people actually achieve this educational level? What should policymakers know about the realities of collegiate success and job availability? Is this a reasonable and appropriate goal to promote to today's young people?

In order to understand and appreciate the whole story, it is essential to examine several significant factors in combination:

- High school graduate rates,
- Traditional four-year entrance and graduation rates, and
- Entry-level requirements in the job market.

According to the National Center for Higher Education Systems (NCHEMS), the high school graduation rate in Texas, for example, is approximately 62 percent. This figure represents a comparison of ninth graders who graduate four years later. Of those students, approximately 32 percent immediately enroll in college. NCHEMS estimates that number of students graduating from a four-year public institution in Texas with a baccalaureate degree is 11 percent – after six years!

To fully appreciate the real impact of these percentages, the figures have to be translated into corresponding numbers. Percentages of percentages are almost impossible to comprehend. Here is what these percentages represent in pure numbers:

Of every 1,000 high school students in Texas, 62 percent equals 620;

Of those 630 who graduate from high school, 32 percent enroll in a traditional, four-year institution, which equals 198;

Of those who enroll in a public institution, 11 percent graduate after six years, which equals 22!

Only 22 out of 1,000 high school students in Texas achieve the so-called American Dream in Texas!!¹

What do you suppose the other 978 students do? The answer to that question shortly.

First, let's look at the job market, which tells us two things:

1. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, most of the new jobs will not require a traditional four-year degree; rather these jobs will require some technical training beyond high school; and
2. Most of these new jobs won't be created by the Fortune 500 companies but by small businesses that don't have training departments. That is important because it means that prospective employees applying with small businesses must come prepared to work properly with the right skills and competencies without much additional training. What this adds up to is the fact that we are misrepresenting the realities of the workplace in our inaccurate concept of the American Dream.

To complicate things further for the poor graduate of a traditional, four-year public institution, these institutions feel no obligation or responsibility to connect their curriculum to a particular job, nor to provide their graduates with much support beyond graduation to find meaningful employment using the education provided unless the graduate pursues a professional degree such as MD.

So, what do we need to do to change the education-related American Dream? What we must do is to encourage the policy-makers to examine the full picture regarding high school and college entrance and graduation rates – beginning with the 9th grade cohort, not the 12th grade cohort. This would represent an examination of the majority of our citizens – those who don't graduate from a traditional, four-year college.

In addition to encouraging students to understand the realities college success, they should be taught to appreciate the concept of work – yes, it's a four-letter word but not a dirty one; everyone is expected to do it.

By giving students an understanding of the real world of work, they will come to recognize that while people should aspire to be all that they can be, our society needs people to do all kinds of jobs – and most of these jobs do not require a traditional four-year college degree.

We must strive to give dignity to work. We must realize that it is all right and indeed appropriate to be satisfied and comfortable doing what it is we are happy doing. The realities

¹ To calculate the actual numbers for your state, see the data at the National Center for Higher Education Systems.

of the marketplace are that there are more people doing rather than leading. Each company has only one president; but it has many employees, doing a variety of jobs. Not everybody can be, should be, or wants to be “boss.” Hey, that’s okay.

We must commend those who work, who vote, pay their taxes, who are responsible citizens. All of our citizens deserve an educational system that gives equal weight to the so-called American Dream, as well as the American Reality. Preparing people for the world of work – especially those who do not or will not pursue a baccalaureate degree – is a wise investment and one that will repay the student and society many times over.

Earlier I asked if only 22 of every 1,000 high school students actually achieve the American Dream, what happens to the other 978. Here’s the answer:

Many of them drop out of high school and flounder around. For those who graduate some go to work at a minimum wage job and maybe enroll in some college later; some enroll in a community college, where, unfortunately too few graduate; some enroll in a state university where too many are ill prepared to do the work and where retention is a challenge. Some enroll in a private career college, which has a much better graduation and placement track record.

Recognizing the importance of a postsecondary education in the world of work should be the driving agenda to connect high school with college as quickly as firmly as possible. Policy-makers at the local level should examine all of the educational resources within the community and encourage all students to choose from between and among those that best suit each student’s occupational desires and their educational preparedness. Such a plan would bring all players to the table and the ultimate benefactors would be the students, as well as the community where a constant supply of qualified employees would be available.

The next time a parent tells you their plans to send his/her son or daughter to the state university, ask what the youngster expects to do to earn a living when they graduate.

The next time someone tells you about the American Dream, tell him/her the whole story of the American Reality. You just might help someone make a better educational decision.