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Harvard Report Proposes Diverse Academic Paths

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By concentrating too much on classroom-based academics with four-year college as a goal, the nation's education system has failed vast numbers of students, who instead need solid preparation for careers requiring less than a bachelor's degree, Harvard scholars argue in a **new report**.

Leaders of the **"Pathways to Prosperity" project** at the Harvard Graduate School of Education argue for an education system that clearly articulates students' career options as early as middle school and defines the coursework and training required, so young people can chart an informed course toward work, whether as an electrician or a college professor.

The Feb. 2 report arrives as experts are trying to define what skills are necessary for work and for higher learning.

The proposal from an esteemed school of education sparked immediate concern by raising the specter of tracking, in which disadvantaged students could be channeled unquestioningly into watered-down programs that curtail their prospects.

The Harvard study also drew notice because it was driven in part by the concerns of one of its co-authors, **Robert B. Schwartz**, a champion of higher academic expectations for all students, who said he began to doubt the wisdom of a "college for all" approach to education. Another co-author, **Ronald Ferguson**, the director of Harvard's Achievement Gap Initiative, is a national expert on improving learning opportunities for disadvantaged children.

Job Demands

The authors contend that their vision would expand opportunity for all students, especially those who face the dimmest prospects now because their education stops at high school. Rather than derailing some students from higher learning, their system would actually open more of those pathways, they say, by offering sound college preparation and rigorous career-focused, real-world learning, and by defining clear routes from secondary school into certificate or college programs.

"Every high school graduate should find viable ways of pursuing both a career and a meaningful postsecondary degree or credential," the report says. "For too many of our youth, we have treated preparing for college versus preparing for a career as mutually exclusive options."

The Harvard report echoes concerns, captured in a stream of papers since the late 1980s, that young people not bound for college face a daunting employment landscape. It draws on data showing that six in 10 Americans don't earn associate's or bachelor's degrees by their mid 20s. In the next decade, half the new jobs will be "middle skills" occupations suited for those with associate's degrees, or vocational or technical training. Many of those jobs pay more than jobs typically held by workers with only high school diplomas, and some even pay more than the average job held by a four-year college graduate, according to the study.

It is that picture that has led President Barack Obama to urge all Americans to obtain at least one year of training or higher education after high school.

Drawing on European systems of vocational education, they argue for an American version of a "more holistic" education that would involve employers in defining the skills necessary for work and providing internships, apprenticeships, and other opportunities linked tightly to students' courses of study. Pivotal to such a system would be career counseling embedded in schools from early in students' education.

A focus on better preparing students for middle-skills jobs is long overdue, said Anthony P. Carnevale, one of the job-market experts whose research is cited in the study.

"If there is one thing in education that I would tell the president to do, this is it," said Mr. Carnevale, the director of the **Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce**. "Since 1983 and *A Nation at Risk*, we've been very single-minded about kids going to college. It's good, but it's too narrow."

But creating varied pathways is fraught with political peril because of the risk that some students will be held to lower expectations, Mr. Carnevale said.

In apparent anticipation of such concerns, the authors say that students would "not be locked into one career at an early age." But they also say that "the coursetaking requirements for entry into the most demanding four-year colleges should not be imposed on students seeking careers with fewer academic requirements."

Premature Shift?

Some education advocates reacted with alarm to the recommendations, especially given the virtual absence of career counseling in the K-12 or community college system to help level the playing field between disadvantaged students and more-fortunate ones.

"They're arguing for different standards and separate tracks," said Kati Haycock, the president of the Education Trust, a Washington-based group that focuses on policies to improve education for low-income

students. “Every single time we create multiple tracks, we always send disproportionate numbers of poor kids and kids of color down the lesser one. Until we can find a way not to do that, then people like me will object.”

Mr. Schwartz of Harvard acknowledged that the report wades into “tricky terrain.” But he said that tracking is “when schools make decisions about what kids are capable of and what their futures are. It’s pervasive in our schools, and it’s a huge problem.

“But I wouldn’t confuse that form of tracking,” he said, “with trying to create a system in which by the time kids hit 16, they and their families have some real choices to make.”

Michael Cohen, who succeeded Mr. Schwartz as the president of Achieve, a Washington-based organization that works with states to raise their academic expectations, took issue with the report’s depiction of the college-readiness agenda as having failed. Only recently, he said, have states adopted course requirements that reflect the skills and knowledge needed for college and good jobs.

“To say we’ve tried this and it failed seems a bit premature, like snatching defeat from the jaws of victory,” he said.

In addition, he speculated, shorthand rhetoric might be confusing what people mean by “college for all.”“No one is talking about preparing everyone for four-year colleges, or even two-year colleges,” said Mr. Cohen. “It’s a straw man. Everyone from the president on down is saying, ‘Some form of training after high school.’ ”

The report cites what it considers exemplary career and technical education programs, such as California’s Linked Learning initiative, which includes about 50 schools. At one of those schools, Construction Technology Academy at Kearny High School in San Diego, students study architecture, engineering, and construction along with the typical core curriculum. Some go on to apprenticeship programs, some to community colleges, and some to universities, but all students study the principles of engineering, computer-assisted design, carpentry, and electricity.

“There are no traditional separations between the students headed to one place and those headed to another,” said Gary Hoachlander, the president of ConnectEd, a Berkeley, Calif.-based nonprofit group that supports Linked Learning schools. “They all study the same things. And those connections are what’s so powerful.”

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