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COMMENTARY

The Inadvertent Bigotry of Inappropriate Expectations

By Chris Myers Asch

Several years ago, I took a group of low-income middle school students to a motivational talk at a local university. A dynamic young professor encouraged them not to settle for anything but the best. After the presentation, he asked the students what they wanted to be when they grew up. One of our girls (I will call her Shanika) answered excitedly, "Nurse!"

"Nurse?" the professor asked, disappointed. "How about doctor? Don't you want to shoot high?"

Shanika's face fell. Though I sympathized with the professor's intended message, I was incensed. Not only was he wrong on a practical level—this country faces a serious nurse shortage—but he exemplified the haughty disdain with which many educators and policymakers view careers that do not require a bachelor's or advanced degree. Shanika did not need to hear that her dreams were not up to snuff. Unfortunately, that is a message students hear all too often in our college-obsessed culture.

I thought of Shanika as I read about President Barack Obama's new plan to overhaul the No Child Left Behind law—the current version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act—that has driven school reform for the past eight years. Dismissing as "utopian" the Bush administration's goal of having all students be "proficient" by 2014, the Obama "blueprint for reform" advocates an ostensibly more realistic goal of having every high school graduate be "college- and career-ready."

The blueprint represents an important revision of current law. As someone who founded and ran a college-prep enrichment program for at-risk secondary school students, I appreciate and applaud the administration's effort to raise expectations and encourage students to go to college. But I also recognize the potentially distorting effects that our college obsession can create, and the blueprint only feeds this obsession. "College- and career-ready" may be the new catchphrase, but the emphasis is all on the "college" part—the proposal all but ignores alternatives to college.

This is shortsighted because, simply put, some students should not go to college, or at least not a four-year college.

I know, I know. Writing that sentence can incite the wrath of the "achievement police," the legions of self-appointed guardians of high expectations (and, I confess, I have at times been an officer in this force myself). To even broach the idea that some students may not be suited for a four-year college degree can invite scornful accusations that one is perpetuating, in George W. Bush's memorable phrase, "the soft bigotry of low expectations."

We have so effectively pushed the notion that "success equals college" that other options, such as vocational education, seem horribly limiting and even discriminatory. But college prep has become a one-size-fits-all approach to secondary education, and some students simply do not fit. Though it may be difficult to conceive for the highly educated professionals who devise curricula and policies, college is not always the best choice for students whose interests and skills lend themselves to trades rather than a college degree.

Frustrated or bored within a college-prep curriculum, many of these kids may wind up dropping out of school, contributing to a dropout crisis that has claimed more than 6 million young people ages 16 to 24. Once they drop out, their chances of future economic stability decrease markedly. [The Center for Labor Market Studies](#) estimates that dropouts earn less than half as much annually as high school graduates do. Lacking real skills and the confidence that accompanies them, these young people often turn later to trade schools and for-profit colleges, racking up extraordinary debt in order to compensate for their lack of preparation for the real world.

Young people should have a variety of good options. Alongside a challenging college-prep curriculum, our schools should offer more rigorous and relevant vocational education programs and apprenticeships that build on students' interests and help them develop real-world skills that will give them an economic foothold after graduation. We should bolster partnerships with nonprofit organizations and businesses that agree to provide training and development while students earn their high school diplomas. And we should not, as many educators do, discourage students from pursuing military careers.

As a nation, we need young people to become skilled carpenters, electricians, lab technicians, nurse practitioners, and drill sergeants—certainly more than we need the corporate lawyers, policy analysts, and consultants that our universities pump out each year.

By pushing college to the exclusion of other options, we indulge in what might be called "the inadvertent bigotry of inappropriate expectations." If we are not careful, we can send a subtle message to students who fail to live up to those expectations: "You're not good enough." And that can be as dispiriting and discouraging as "You're no good."

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'College- and career-ready' may be the new catchphrase, but the emphasis is all on the 'college' part.

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