

Graduates unprepared for college academics

By BRIAN NEWSOME THE GAZETTE

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Thousands of Colorado high schoolers are graduating this month with plans to go to college in the fall.

Hundreds of them will be academically unprepared when they get there.

Those students will take — and pay for — remedial classes that don't count toward a degree.

Despite an increased emphasis on making every graduate college-ready, a diploma in hand isn't always enough. The students most affected are those with average grades in average classes — and the ones who set their sights on the nearest community college.

Ashley Russell, 18, graduated from Widefield High School a year ago. She had good grades in high school English but still needed two semesters of remedial English at Pikes Peak Community College.

"Some of the stuff in college I'm learning for the first time," she said.

The numbers are not significantly changing, but they've gained greater attention in recent years as more high school graduates go on to college.

"I think in the last few years it's become an expectation that everyone does go to college," said Sandy Collins, director of secondary services for Falcon School District 49.

Educators say the need for remedial work is fueled largely by a lack of communication between high schools and colleges about what's important to know. They also say high school students need to pay closer attention to class selection and grades, especially in the senior year when many coast toward graduation day. And, some say, high school should be more rigorous.

A \$20 MILLION PRICE TAG

The Colorado Department of Higher Education estimates students and the state paid about \$20 million for remedial classes in 2006 at Colorado's two-year colleges.

"It has to do with (the) fundamental, efficient use of resources in our college setting, which ought to be to do college work, not to make up for things that kids didn't get under control in their high school education," said the department's executive director David Skaggs.

For the past several years, the department has released annual reports on remedial education. The latest numbers were released in March.

About 30 percent of recent high school graduates who went to Colorado's public colleges last year were assigned to remedial courses in at least one subject, the report said. The number rose to about 56 percent at two-year colleges.

Nearly 61 percent of students were assigned to remedial classes at Pikes Peak Community College.

Even in the Pikes Peak region's top-performing high schools, as many as 20 to 30 percent of graduates needed remedial help in college.

Among graduates of Sierra High School in Harrison School District 2, seven in 10 were assigned to remedial work. Sierra had by far the highest percentage of graduates who scored below 19 on the ACT.

Part of the problem is that high schools and colleges don't talk much. Last month, ACT released a national curriculum survey in which thousands of high school and college educators were polled. It found that high schools are covering a broad range of topics, especially in the push to meet state standards, without the depth many colleges want.

In math, for example, the survey found that high school teachers gave advanced concepts more importance than college instructors, who preferred a rigorous understanding of the fundamentals.

School districts work constantly on curriculum "alignment," an education buzzword for keeping students on a steadily progressive path from kindergarten to 12th grade. Some say the idea should be expanded to include preschool and college.

"More and more educators are looking at birth to 21 and not just K-12," said Harrison Superintendent Mike Miles. "I think people understand that they have a responsibility that goes beyond (high school)."

PPCC President Tony Kinkel is talking with area superintendents about how his campus and school districts can bridge the disconnects in their curriculums, said Tina Getz, who leads the college prep English program at PPCC.

GETTING MORE RIGOROUS

A high school diploma may reveal little about a student or even a school. After all, students who earn D's in basic courses earn the same diploma as those making straight A's in advanced or college-level classes.

That makes for a moving target when tackling unpreparedness.

"It's such an individual thing," said Kathryn Fruh, postgraduate counselor for Doherty High School. She tells her students that they need to take responsibility for their education by doing more than the minimum that's asked of them.

Still, she and others concede that schools are responsible for rigorous curriculum, especially in the senior year when many students have met basic requirements and coast through a light courseload.

At Doherty, for example, staff decided to cut three English classes a few years ago partly because they were not rigorous enough.

“I hold their feet to the fire and insist that they continue taking math,” Fruh said.

The Higher Education Department sends letters to high school juniors who score below certain levels on the ACT, urging them to take math, English or other basics their senior year to avoid being caught off-guard in college.

It’s also raised the minimum requirements students must meet to get into fouryear colleges, which has prompted many school districts to raise their graduation requirements.

Russell, the Widefield graduate now at PPCC, was glad to get the help in her remedial classes, but she regrets that her two semesters of English won’t count toward her criminal justice degree.

“It wasn’t a bad class,” she said, “but it would’ve helped if it had actually transferred or was worth something.”

PPCC’S Getz said remedial help can be discouraging for recent high school graduates, but she points out that it helps people succeed who otherwise would not have. The lost tuition on remedial classes will be regained by the earning potential of holding a degree.

“I think the bottom line is you’re creating access.”

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