

## High school instruction, college needs unmatched

• Teachers at different levels put a priority on different things, study says

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What students learn in high school and what they need to know for college does not always match up, according to a national survey of high school and college instructors.

Teachers at all levels value organized, coherent writing from their students. But college professors more often rated punctuation as paramount, the study says, while high school teachers placed more importance on developing a topic and writing a great introductory paragraph.

In math, high school teachers labeled higher-level subjects such as calculus as a priority.

"What college teachers say is they want students with a firm grasp of the basics," said Cynthia Schmeiser, president and chief operating officer of the education division at ACT, a college entrance exam company.

The results released today might help explain why community colleges and universities send so many freshmen to remedial classes.

Nationwide, 28 percent of incoming freshmen enrolled in remedial college classes, according to a 2004 report by the National Center for Education Statistics.

In the Cal State University system, nearly half of the incoming freshmen this year scored below proficient in English on placement tests that determine what level of courses students should take. More than a third fell short of being college-ready in math.

"Yes indeed, we do a large amount of remedial and developmental amount of work -- more than we would like," said James Murphy, chairman of the English department at Cal State East Bay.

This year, less than half showed up at Cal State East Bay ready for college math while nearly 60 percent of incoming freshmen needed remedial English classes. Out of necessity, the school runs what are known as developmental writing classes to help get students up to speed.

"Not that we don't think it's important, but it would be nice if could be done somewhere else," Murphy said.

In the state community college system, the largest in the United States, more than 300,000 students ended up in remedial classes during the last school year, according to a March accountability report.

At Diablo Valley College, math and English professors deal with an annual flood of students unprepared for college work, said Bruce Koller, an economics professor and head of the college's Faculty Senate.

"That has led to the faculty questioning whether there is a disconnect between expectations in high school and college," he said.

High school and college instructors do agree in some respects. In comments written on their survey forms, both groups report frustration with having to teach punctuation and grammar to students unable to write complete sentences or match subjects and verbs.

However, college instructors ranked punctuating the end of a sentence correctly as the second most important thing in writing effectively. High school teachers ranked that skill as the 31st most important thing.

In math, high school teachers tend to cover a broad swatch of topics, partly due to state requirements, the study says. College professors said they valued a more in-depth knowledge of basics.

ACT has surveyed teachers every three or four years for nearly three decades. The results offer a rough snapshot, rather than a scientific explanation, of high school and college expectations. The gap has neither grown nor shrunk, Schmeiser said, largely because reform efforts in elementary, middle and high school rarely included college staff members.

"Post-secondary instructors haven't always been at the table," she said. "Now we're seeing a reversal of that."

Professor Alison Warriner of Cal State East Bay serves on a state task force to improve writing at the high school level. In 2005, state superintendent of public schools Jack O'Connell created a council to foster relationships among educators at the preschool, K-12 and college levels.

This P-16 Council includes members of the business community, two- and four-year colleges, teachers, school boards, students and parents.

The gap between high school and college has also caught the attention of politicians and business leaders worried about America's prominence in the global economy.

"We are facing a kind of global competition we haven't faced before. It's fierce," said Tom Kiley, spokesman for the House Committee on Education and Labor. He said Congress may tackle the issue of relevant high school instruction when it considers reauthorizing No Child Left Behind, the federal school accountability law.

"If we want to stay competitive, we have to make sure students are ready for jobs in the area or college," Kiley said.

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BACK TO SCHOOL

The Cal State system uses placement tests to determine whether incoming students need remedial classes in math or English. Results for admitted freshmen in fall 2006:

Cal State University  
Percent of freshmen not proficient in math  
Percent of freshmen not proficient in English  
Systemwide  
37.5  
45.3  
Cal State East Bay  
51.5  
59.3  
San Jose State  
33.4  
49.3  
San Francisco State  
43.4  
45.5  
Source: Cal State University

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