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Texas Developmental Education Crisis

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List of Abbreviations

CC	Community College
DE	Developmental Education
IB	International Baccalaureate Organization
STAAR	State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness
THECB	Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board
TEA	Texas Education Agency
TEKS	Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills
TAC	Texas Administrative Code
TSI	Texas Success Initiative Assessment

Legislation, Assessments, and Projects Referenced

- 1984 Texas Education Code [TEC] §21.721, Grade Requirement for Advancement or Course Credit
- 1993 Grants to Texas schools for retention reduction (\$5 million)
- 2007 Texas House Bill 1, Section 50 (“Rider 50”) to create pilot Developmental Education programs
- 2009 Texas Senate Bill 1, Rider 45 to promote increased post-secondary education Enrollments
- 2010 Developmental Education Demonstration Projects (2-year span)
- 2011 State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness instituted (standardized tests) and 2012–2017 Statewide Developmental Education Plan created
- 2013 Texas Success Initiative Assessment (TSI) instituted (college-entrance exam)

Texas Developmental Education Crisis

Developmental education (DE) in colleges has been the subject of considerable research because of the poor academic outcomes of its students. Low graduation rates have caused many to label the issue the DE crisis (Sullivan, 2017). Another group of researchers analogized the issue as follows: “Our first premise is that if underprepared postsecondary students were a disease, the Center for Disease Control would declare a public health emergency” (Booth et al., 2014, p. 8). Providing training in reading, writing, and math, and DE is the primary method of college access for students with poor scholastic performance. However, many have decried the failure of DE thus far in serving as a transformational, affordable remedial tool and in reducing ethnic and racial gaps in academic achievement (Charles A. Dana Center, Complete College America, Inc., Education Commission of the States, Jobs for the Future, 2012). For DE students entering community colleges (CC) in 2006, only 8.4% graduated by 2009 (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board [THECB], 2018, Jan. 15). In the same year, the THECB responded to Riders 45 and 50, state-legislated mandates, to improve DE outcomes by developing Texas’ first statewide DE plan (Texas Workforce Investment Council, 2010).

The DE Plan contained six goals including providing funds for conducting DE trial projects, training DE educators, and increasing course quality and efficacy (THECB, 2009). Rider 50 also contained instruction to the Board to produce a DE best-practices report (THECB, 2013, Jan. 1). The Board supplied that report with findings from a study of DE in Texas entitled 2009 Developmental Education Program Survey (THECB, 2009). The survey data augmented a literature review of DE research from the previous 20 years. Using those two sources, the Board then produced requests for applications for pilot DE programs where educators would try to

improve student outcomes by experimenting with new course and support interventions (THECB, 2013, Jan. 1). In 2010, the Board funded 2-year Developmental Education Demonstration Projects in four universities and the following CC districts: Alamo, El Paso, Lone Star, San Jacinto, and Tarrant County (THECB, 2013, Jan. 1).

The following year, the Texas 82nd Legislature instructed the Board to develop a DE plan that would improve DE student outcomes while being cost-effective. The Board then created the 2012–2017 Statewide Developmental Education Plan containing goals and objectives for DE programs based on the 2009 DE Plan, the Developmental Education Demonstration Projects pilots, and other research findings (THECB, 2012, Dec. 1). The plan contained direction for higher education DE departments, and a vision:

By fall 2017, Texas will significantly improve the success of underprepared students by addressing their individualized needs through reliable diagnostic assessment, comprehensive support services, and non-traditional interventions, to include modular, mainstreaming, non-course competency-based, technologically-based, and integrated instructional models (THECB, 2012, p. 7).

Another survey, the *2011 Developmental Education Program Survey*, provided Texas DE progress data (THECB, 2012). Both surveys showed 95% or more of educators ($n = 67$ both years) used placement test scores to indicate college readiness before DE enrollment. However, 79% of colleges did not require DE students to retake the same placement test before exiting the DE program. Also, around 20% of reporting DE programs had no plan in place for DE course evaluation. The survey also showed colleges were using a wide variety of placement tests. The Board then received a legislative directive to create a statewide placement test better suited for college readiness standards in Texas (Booth et al., 2014). In 2013, the Board instituted the use of

the Texas Success Initiative Assessment (TSI). Although students with sufficiently high scores on other tests, such as the ACT or SAT, can avoid taking the TSI, it is the primary placement tool currently in use (THECB, 2017, October).

In 2014, the Public Policy Research Institute at Texas A&M University analyzed the results of the pilot projects and found only five of the nine projects produced improvements in DE outcomes (Booth et al.) with course acceleration and various support systems (Figure 1). Two of the four universities, and three of the five CCs had success, which researchers defined not as graduation but as students passing DE or core classes. San Jacinto CC, Tarrant County CC, and Lone Star CC showed increases of 12%, 4%, and 2%, respectively (Booth et al., 2014). El Paso CC had a decrease of 13%, and Alamo CC showed no meaningful change. Overall, 62% of community college students passed their DE courses.

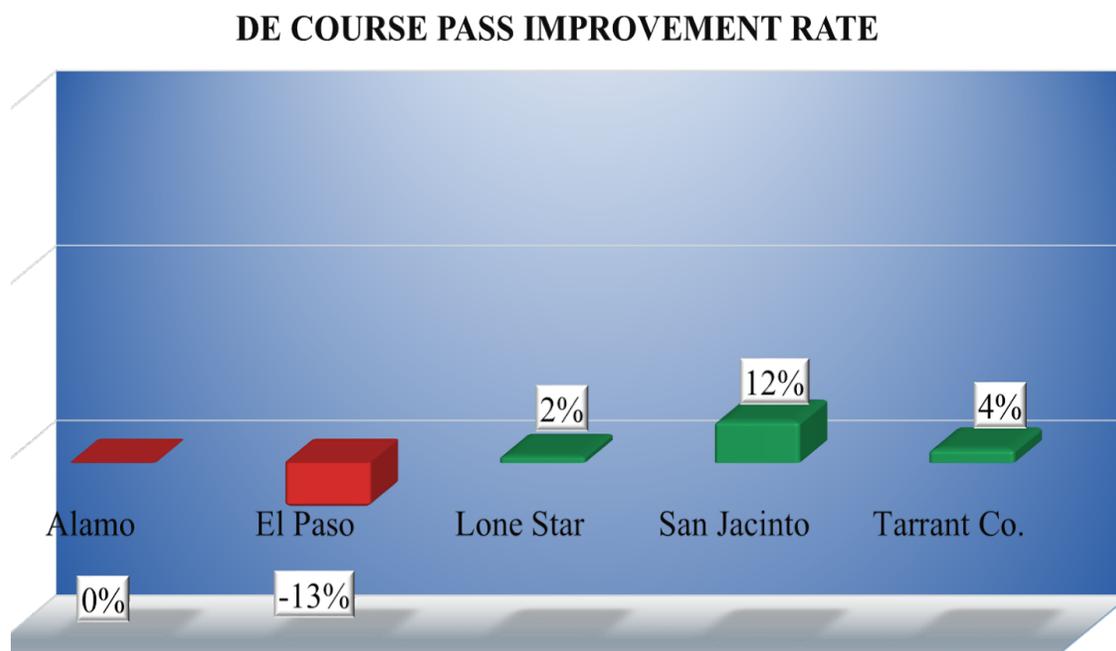


Figure 1. DE course pass rate improvements of Developmental Education Demonstration Projects. Compiled from Booth, et al., 2014.

There was not a focus on DE program exit testing or curriculum standards outside of teacher collaboration, instructional strategies, and academic support suggestions. Based on the project findings, the researchers recommended that DE programs contain accelerated classes, but only for higher proficiency DE students with a strong study ethic. They also suggested administrators offer DE courses with variable week durations. However, the Board doubted educators statewide would be able to replicate the multimillion-dollar grant expenditures (THECB, 2013, Jan. 1). Also, large scale, meta-analysis research from Columbia Teacher's College showed various DE models had overall neutral to negative medium- and long-term effects on DE writing student success (2014). For students who pass DE writing courses while lacking college-ready writing skills, it is not known if their course instructors pass them due to low course rigor, administrative pressure, or social grading. The following contains a brief historical overview of issues surrounding primary, secondary, and college writing standards, college preparatory efforts, and writing in the workforce.

Lower Education Writing Standards, Tests, Outcomes, and Contingency Standards

For Texas public schools, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) compose state standards. These standards are defined for English II, a high school course with a standardized test whose students must pass to graduate (19 Tex. Admin. Code §110.37):

(A) plan a piece of writing appropriate for various purposes and audiences by generating ideas through a range of strategies such as brainstorming, journaling, reading, or discussing; (B) develop drafts into a focused, structured, and coherent piece of writing in timed and open-ended situations; (C) revise drafts to improve clarity, development, organization, style, diction, and sentence effectiveness, including use of parallel

constructions and placement of phrases and dependent clauses; (D) edit drafts using standard English conventions; (E) publish written work for appropriate audiences.

Student perspectives can offer insight into understanding how secondary teachers may navigate state writing standards. First-year English Composition students in one study at George Washington University reported having practiced synthesizing and writing summary-responses during high school. However, higher level writing such as criticism, modifying writing for given audiences, and problem-solution identification tasks were rare (Carnegie Mellon University, 2016). Other research from Tyre (2012) revealed secondary English teachers share a preference for creative over rhetorical writing assignments. Another study found the length of high school writing assignments never exceeded five pages in most teachers' assignments (Sanoff, 2006). In significant contrast, the International Baccalaureate (IB), a high school honors diploma, requires a senior thesis of up to 4,000 words (IB, 2004, Sept.).

Testing

The State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) are designed to align with the standards above. The TEA denotes the STAAR as the “foundation of the accountability system for Texas public education” (2017a, p. 4) and quotes the 1984 state education law prohibiting social promotion or passing a student who has academically failed. To show proficiency in writing and to graduate from high school, students must pass English Assessments within the STAAR. The test contains a writing prompt, which external reviewers score, as well as multiple-choice questions of sentence and word level errors.

Outcomes

Data from 2011 showed only 24% of high school seniors nationwide demonstrated proficient writing (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2011), and those demonstrating advanced writing composed less than five percent of the student body. In Texas, results for the fall of 2017 showed that out of 16 possible points for composition, high school students who completed English II had an average score of 7.6 points, or 48% (TEA, 2017c). That number roughly equals the percentage of graduates testing into DE courses upon college enrollment (THECB, 2019, July). In addition, DE admissions are not exclusive to low-scoring high school graduates. Forty percent of students who graduate high school with self-reported A grade point averages have failed to pass Texas' main college entrance test in math, reading, and/or writing upon college enrollment (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2016).

Contingencies

Despite low STAAR pass rates and subsequent low TSI pass rates, over the past 30 years, the TEA and the State Board of Education have instituted a myriad of pathways to avoid student retention. In the early 1990s, schools received grants to produce zero retentions of first and second graders. In 1996, students who failed the STAAR precursor, Texas Assessment of Academic Skills tests, could advance based on attendance in an extended school year program (TEA, 2017a). Parents who requested retention for their children had to attend meetings with school officials who often tried to dissuade them. Currently, in kindergarten, first, second, and third grades, Texas primary school educators retain only 2% to 4%, yet nationwide approximately 30% of early elementary level students fail to meet grade standards (TEA, 2017). In grades four to eight, 0.4% to 0.8% of Texas students repeat grades (TEA, 2017). School officials and education rights advocates cite overcrowded classrooms, psychological harm, and

insignificant benefit as rationales against retaining elementary students (Radcliffe & Blakinger, 2017). Mechanisms exist within Texas school law, as well, whereby students failing standardized tests continue to advance for most grades. The TEA requires students to repeat only at grades five and eight if they fail the STAAR test for their grade. All other students who fail the test may continue to the next grade and retake the test later. For high school seniors who do not pass required courses, Texas state law states the following:

A student in 11th or 12th grade who did not perform satisfactorily on the STAAR test in no more than two courses may be permitted to graduate if an individual graduation committee determines the student is qualified to do so. Tex. Educ. Code §§ 28.0258, 39.023(c); 19 Tex. Admin. Code §101.3022.

Also, an Admission, Review, and Dismissal Committee can decide on STAAR test waivers or accommodations for those classified as special education students (TEA, 2018). Beyond providing waivers and committee decisions to promote students, between 2011 and 2015, school administrators ignored STAAR test results three of the years since its inception due to undecided standards or test vendor problems. In the spring of 2018, another widespread testing computer glitch affected more than 100,000 students taking the test (Platoff, 2018). Additionally, although in 2011 the STAAR test replaced a prior state test to provide “more rigor” (p. 4), EOCs went from 15 required subjects to graduate, to five in 2013, to three in 2015—provided a committee agreed— (TEA, 2018). Moreover, when juniors or seniors fail STAAR tests, relatively few repeat a grade. Students are permitted to fail a STAAR three times. The following Texas Education Code segment lists failure contingency plans.

TEC §28.0211(a-1) requires school districts to provide accelerated instruction in the applicable subject area each time a student fails to perform satisfactorily on an

assessment administered in grades 3–8 (i.e., who does not achieve Level II: Satisfactory Academic Performance). Similarly, TEC §39.025(b-1) requires school districts to provide accelerated instruction to each student who fails to perform satisfactorily on a STAAR EOC assessment (TEA, 2016).

If a student fails a STAAR three times, a 4-person committee can promote that student by requiring remedial work and/or a project. Similarly, when students fail courses in middle or high school, many take extra training that the school provides (TEA, 2018, April), after which their teachers deem them to possess the knowledge or skill required, and they continue to advance with their peers. Alternatively, if students can pass the TSI in math, reading, and writing, they can advance or graduate. Thus, while the STAAR indicates the readiness of students to advance grade levels, TEA members have created many ways to sidestep the consequences of failing. Despite a 1984 Texas law and a federal law banning social promotion, or passing students who fail to show required skills, (TEA, 2017a), around 90% of those who failed STAARs in the lower grades in 2013 advanced to the next grade; of those students, only one-fifth passed their next STAARs (Diagnostic Learning, 2016). Additionally, approximately 85% of Texas high school graduates received a diploma designated as the Recommended or Advanced High School Program, representing students ready for college scholastics (TEA, 2017b), yet 50% or more of the graduates were not able to demonstrate college-entry skills by passing the TSI. Thus, while there are standards for successful secondary school completion that match or exceed those determined necessary for college level entrance, and though proficiency tests seem rigorous enough, around half of all Texas students graduate high school without the knowledge and skills to succeed in postsecondary coursework (THECB, 2019, July).

Higher Education Writing Standards, Tests, Outcomes, and Contingency Standards

Texas' College and Career Readiness Standards for English writing are as follows:

Compose a variety of texts that demonstrate clear focus, the logical development of ideas in well-organized paragraphs, and the use of appropriate language that advances the author's purpose. 1. Determine effective approaches, genres, rhetorical techniques, and media that demonstrate understanding of the writer's purpose and audience. 2. Generate ideas and gather information relevant to the topic and purpose, keeping careful records of outside sources. 3. Evaluate relevance, quality, sufficiency, and depth of preliminary ideas and information, organize material generated, and formulate thesis. 4. Recognize the importance of revision as the key to effective writing. 5. Edit writing for proper voice, tense, and syntax, assuring that it conforms to Standard American English, when appropriate (TEKS, n.d.).

For students unable to pass such standards, state objectives, four through eight, for DE Integrated Reading and Writing courses are their next challenge. As viewable in a document of THECB (n.d. -a.), the DE standards are similar to the College and Career Readiness Standards, and perhaps lesser in scope than the Texas' high school writing objectives:

4. Describe and apply insights gained from reading and writing a variety of texts. 5.

Compose a variety of texts that demonstrate reading comprehension, clear focus, logical development of ideas, and use of appropriate language that advance the writer's purpose.

6. Determine and use effective approaches and rhetorical strategies for given reading and writing situations. 7. Generate ideas and gather information relevant to the topic and purpose, incorporating the ideas and words of other writers in student writing using

established strategies. 8. Evaluate relevance and quality of ideas and information in recognizing, formulating, and developing a claim (pp. 250–251).

Testing

When high school graduates enroll in college, they typically must show college readiness through a standardized test. Fourteen states have standardized placement tests (Bettinger & Long, 2005), and 12 states have state-mandated cut-off scores. For college level placement, Texas' main assessment is the TSI. In 2015, a lower cut score of 340 for multiple choice writing questions replaced the previous 350 cut score (THECB, 2017, October) for college entrants, which had already been lowered from an initial cut score of 363. With a score range of 310–390, 340 represents less than 50% accuracy. The essay section score indicating college readiness is 5 out of a range of 0–8 (TSI Practice Test, n.d.), or a 4 can qualify a student if the multiple-choice writing score is at least 340 (College Board, 2014). The Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), one of the tests accepted in place of the TSI in Texas, had a national writing score average of 489/800 (2011), or 61% of possible points (Leal, 2012). Students who score 480 on the SAT reading-writing segment are exempt from taking the TSI (Texas Admin. Code § 4.54, 2016).

For DE students, another high-stakes assessment is the one whereby they exit DE. Students who take more DE courses than average face an increase in tuition. Until recently, the state of Texas subsidized a maximum of 27 course hours of DE. As of the fall of 2018, though, the maximum course hours dropped to 18 (THECB, 2018). Along with bringing financial impacts, DE exit assessments can also bring placement consequences. Students who exit DE programs prematurely can fail core classes. After passing three levels of DE courses, fewer than one-third of students passed first-year English Composition (Teachers College Columbia

University, 2014). Thus, decisions of college-readiness and the methods for arriving at those decisions have great impact. However, the exit process can vary greatly depending on which college a student attends. The Texas Administrative Code Rule §4.59 titled Determination of Readiness to Perform Entry-Level Freshman Coursework states:

An institution shall determine when a student is ready to perform entry-level freshman coursework using: (1) Developmental education coursework and/or intervention learning; (2) Student performance on one or more appropriate assessments, including scores resulting from a student's retaking of the TSI Assessment; and (3) Student qualification for one or more TSI exemptions as outlined in §4.54 of this title (relating to Exemptions, Exceptions, and Waivers) (para. 1).

As shown, students can exit DE programs based on TSI test scores, exemptions, or by completing an intervention. An intervention may include tutoring or other short-term support strategies or projects (Morales-Vale, 2017, October). Clearly, students exiting DE by completing an intervention or course work could have far different writing skills than those who passed standardized tests such as the TSI or SAT. Those who cannot demonstrate basic writing skills usually take mandatory DE courses. Many colleges nationwide now offer corequisite enrollment in DE courses alongside first college-level courses so as not to delay or discourage students. Researchers found low self-esteem among students who were taking more than one DE course (Martin, Goldwasser, & Harris, 2016).

High-Validity Testing. In contrast to DE programs where a single instructor may assess a high-stakes final examination, other program administrators employ measures that provide significantly higher validity of results. For example, the IB employs procedures that provide a

95% confidence score of results, reflecting the likelihood of experienced examiners marking the essay in very similar ways (IB, 2004, Sept.). One of those validity measures is the use of external examiners to grade a student's culminating essay. Examiners undergo extensive and ongoing moderation, or calibration, and there are different examiners for marking various aspects of the essay. Braun's study (1988) confirmed the validity of using of co-raters, noting that though valid raters disagreed regarding various details of student accuracy, overall ratings would usually be similar. The SAT employs and trains raters to follow identical scoring standards for the essay test (SAT Suite of Assessments, 2018). Along with validity, the IB considers proper assessments to include equity (unbiased scoring regardless of race, ethnicity, educational background, or other trait), manageability (related to student and teacher effort needed to prepare for a particular test), and reliability (IB, 2004, Sept.). One description of the IB program from a United Kingdom college administrator contains the following: "The IB is independent, it is outside national influence and the meddling of successive education ministers, and it has had zero grade inflation, which appeals to universities looking for consistency" (IB, 2015, para. 3). Sadler (2013) stressed the importance of such academic integrity.

The way in which academic achievement standards are assured needs to be transparent to colleagues, students, quality assurance agencies and the wider society. The pursuit of assured grades and academic standards could, if successful, have far-reaching implications for teachers, graduates and higher education institutions (p. 14).

Outcomes - Workforce Writing

The real proof of high school, DE, and college-level course effectiveness is graduate performance in the workplace. The societal expectation is that college graduates have high

levels of critical analysis, math, and literacy skills, yet many newly-employed graduates lack the writing skills needed in their jobs and must take additional training (College Board, 2014). Fink (2013) laid a disturbing indictment on the status of higher education:

Students are not learning even basic general knowledge, they are not developing higher-level cognitive skills, and they are not retaining their knowledge well...there is no significant difference between students who take courses and students who do not (p. 4).

Also, in a large-scale survey of 400 U.S. businesses, graduates from high schools, community colleges, and universities rated deficient in writing (The Conference Board, Inc., Partnership for 21st Century Skills, Corporate Voices for Working Families, & Society for Human Resource Management, 2006). Eighty-one percent of high school graduates, 46% of 2-year, and 26% of 4-year graduates performed poorly in job writing (Figure 2). The survey findings also reported the vast majority of business owners list employee writing skills as being critical for job success by facilitating communication and efficiency. Spelling and poor grammar construction in various types of company reports and communiques were common. The survey findings revealed around 24% of businesses test job applicant writing skills before hiring. Hansen (2017) also noted approximately 33% of the work force perform poorly on their writing responsibilities.

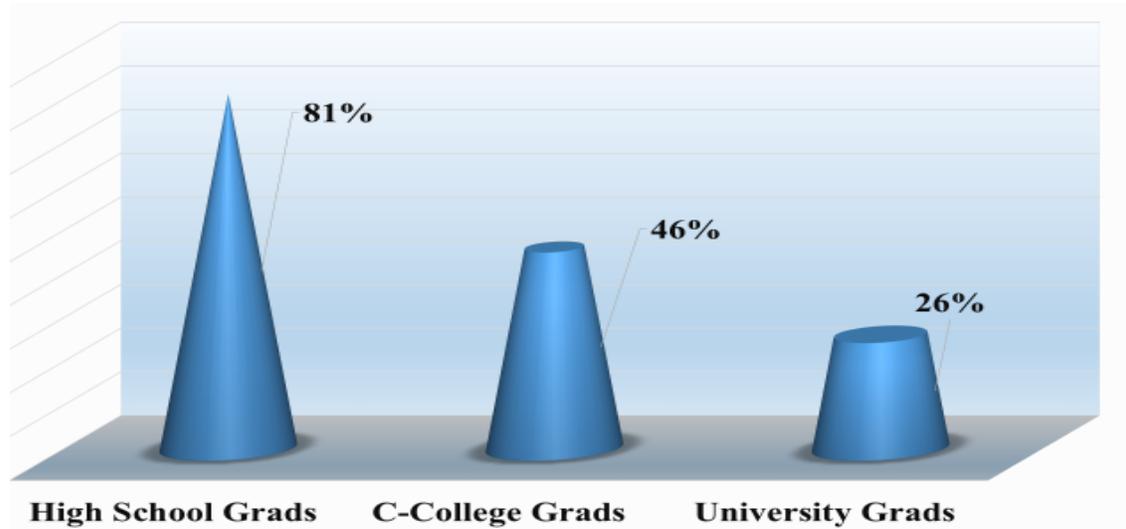


Figure 2. Graduates with poor writing in the workforce.
Compiled from The Conference Board, Inc., 2006.

The National Commission on Writing noted most corporate professionals write 30% of a typical work day, and writing skills are essential qualifiers for hiring and promoting (2004). The report also discussed the presence of a “growing concern within the education, business, and policy-making communities that the quality of writing in the United States was not what it should be” (p. 3). Additionally, researchers in Texas found a neutral impact of DE on various educational and labor markets (Martorell & McFarlin, 2010). They conducted a longitudinal, regression discontinuity study of approximately 250,000 Texas first-year English Composition college student outcomes from 1991 to 2000. By obtaining access to THECB and testing vendor student-level data using encrypted social security numbers, they tracked the students. Being a remedial student of any type constituted the study’s major independent variable. They also analyzed data from Texas’ Unemployment Insurance system available from the Texas Workforce Commission. DE writing correlated with “large negative effects on most outcomes” (p. 23). The outcomes measured included graduation and job earnings six and seven years after first enrolling in college (Martorell & McFarlin, 2010).

Contingency Efforts

In the event that P–12 academic standards and assessments do not serve to prevent high school students from graduating without basic reading, math, and writing skills, contingency efforts in the way of college-preparatory organizations and P–12 alignment networks exist. Such efforts are not new. Higher education alignment efforts and organizations have existed for centuries (Parker, Bustillos, & Behringer, 2010). Nearly 40 such organizations dedicated to student college readiness function in Texas alone (Barnet et al., 2012). One such organization, founded in the mid-1990s, is the American Diploma Project Network, a 35-member state network (ADP Network, 2017).

Another category of interventions addressing the DE issue is P–12 alignment of curriculum with higher education institutions to obviate the need for DE. Termed P16 Councils or Initiatives, educators and others in a majority of states contribute to the formation of legislative action and create networks across the educational spectrum in an effort to produce college-ready students (Parker et al., 2010). However, despite the proliferation of preparatory organizations and networks, high numbers of students continue to demonstrate deficiencies in basic educational skills (Bettinger & Long, 2005).

Conclusion

In light of unsatisfactory educational outcomes in lower and higher education in Texas, the practice of instituting progressively lower academic standards should be reconsidered. The continual stream of students who graduate and demonstrate low proficiency in writing skills in the marketplace reflects poorly on the academic integrity of their colleges and universities. It is

inherent to the job of educators to be gatekeepers, ensuring the academic proficiency of students who pass their courses. If the issue of academic rigor, which is necessary for high-level learning, fails to be a priority of educational leaders, it is doubtful whether the current stream of students and dollars will continue to flow to higher education institutions. If the line of rigor between respected colleges and so-called degree paper mills begins to blur, educators may wake up to a culture that is not willing to traverse traditional educational pathways which are no more than a shadow of the intellectual fortresses of the past. Rather than continuing to lower educational standards, educational researchers and legislators should return to the standards that made American schools and colleges the destination of choice for many in the world: academic tasks that are challenging, testing methods that are strict and valid, and degrees that employers trust to represent graduates with critical and advanced skills.

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