

Great expectations for college achievement

Butler University and Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis co-sponsored a community dialogue Nov. 7 about the urgent need for education reform. Some of Indiana's most prominent education, business and government leaders participated. Still, we imagine many readers are asking themselves, "Why should I care?" Consider these facts:

A college diploma in 2002 is what a high school diploma was 100 years ago: the symbol of readiness for both economic mobility and responsible citizenship. Today, 75 percent of high school graduates pursue some form of post-secondary education within two years of high school graduation.

If access is increasing, quality is not. Less than half of the high school graduates who enroll in college have completed even a minimally defined college preparatory program. What happens — or fails to happen — in the schools translates into 53 percent of all college students taking remedial courses. And, while national graduation figures are hard to pin down, only half of those who say they want to com-

LETTER SPOTLIGHT

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plete a college degree will finish.

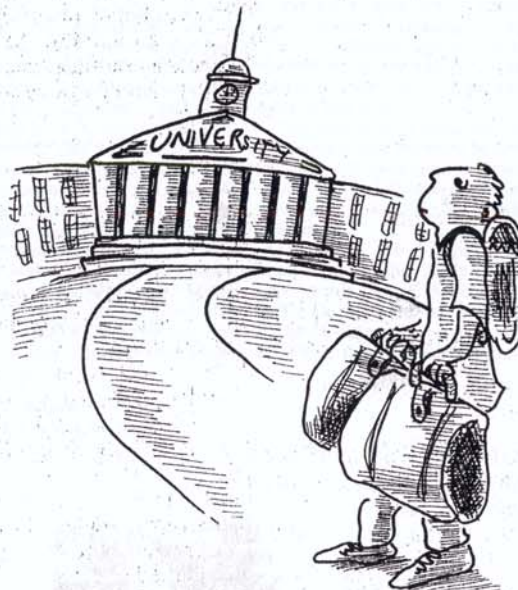
Clearly, a serious misalignment between high school exit standards and college entrance requirements has occurred. With political priority for funding emphasizing standardized test performance, secondary education has overstressed the memorization of discrete facts at the expense of students' deeper understandings of the analytical, integrative and communication abilities they will need in college.

Once enrolled in college, students face other barriers to quality. Many programs feature narrow training, passive forms of learning or both. On other campuses, the curriculum is broad but often so fragmented that students find themselves accumulating a shopping cart of disconnected courses. The college diploma too often certifies completion of educational fragments rather than a coherent plan for

higher learning.

Recognizing this gap, the Association of American Colleges and Universities has just released a comprehensive study titled "Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College." It documents the quality shortfall at both the K-12 and college level. But it also identifies a host of educational reforms at schools and colleges across the country that, if widely adopted, would significantly raise the level of students' educational achievement.

The key to excellence, the authors conclude, is a comprehensive focus, beginning in grade school and culminating in college, on liberal education — liberal not in any political sense, but in liberating students' minds



Margaret Scott Illustration

from ignorance and preparing them for intellectual development, personal integrity, engaged citizenship and productive work. The report proposes that schools and colleges work together to help all students design a program of study from school through college sufficient to achieve the recommended outcomes.

More than 500 college and

university presidents, including 12 in Indiana, have signed an AAC&U pledge to build public understanding that liberal education is the best education for all students in a world of complexity and change. Butler and IUPUI are among a vanguard set of campuses across the nation that have already begun to discuss the "Greater Expectations" goals for liberal education with the community.

Dialogues like the one that occurred in Indianapolis recently are an important first step to reinvigorating the goals and outcomes of a liberal education. But educators must do more than talk. We must make our own pledge to work together across educational levels and institutional boundaries to build a commitment to both inclusion and accomplishment for every student and the entire educational community. Our students and our democracy deserve no less.

■ Fong is president of Butler University in Indianapolis and former chair of the Association of American Colleges and Universities. Geary Schneider is the president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities. The "Greater Expectations" report can be found at www.greaterexpectations.org.