

Denver Post

guest commentary

College tracking critical

By J.B. Schramm and Carrie A. Besnette

Thursday, July 24, 2003 - There's breaking news about how America moves talent from high school to college - and it isn't the Supreme Court's affirmative-action decision.

It's that the measurement of college enrollment is about to become real.

Affirmative action is one tactic in the larger - and less controversial - effort to democratize higher education. Since the GI Bill, more and more Americans have had the opportunity to go to college; and in the last 10 years, policymakers have started talking about America as a "K-16" nation. Indeed, leading school superintendents, like Arne Duncan in Chicago, say their goal is not just high school graduation, but preparation for and transition to successful postsecondary study.



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Until now, though, that kind of leadership has been largely rhetorical. While schools can and generally do measure high school graduation, there has been no practical way to track the college enrollment of a district's graduates as they spread out across the state or around the country. A good, but incomplete, measure has been initiated by a few states like California and Florida, which track students who attend in-state public colleges.

But now America can put its "metrics" where its mouth is. This summer, the National Student Clearinghouse, a nonprofit organization that captures enrollment data on 91 percent of college students in America, will start making its student enrollment verification services available to schools nationwide. Principals, superintendents and communities can now know whether, and where, their students enroll after high school - and whether or not they stay.

This is good news for everyone who thinks that more Americans ought to have the chance to go to college. And since recent Labor Department statistics show that the top five growing job sectors require college degrees - and the top five shrinking job sectors do not - most people would probably agree that expanding college opportunity is a high priority.

To take full advantage of the National Student Data Clearinghouse's new resource, three things need to happen:

- First, school districts and boards of education should insist on college enrollment as a core measure of their district's success. If you don't measure it, you telegraph that it's not important.

- Second, parents should demand that college enrollment be the measure of success for their school districts. If parents

insist that college should be the goal of high school, district leadership will follow.

- Third, the Bush administration should make college enrollment one of the key measures for school "report cards" under the No Child Left Behind Act. Along with annual testing of students in specific subjects like reading and math, districts should be measured on the rate at which their graduates enroll in college.

It's rare that a service comes along that makes it easy and affordable for us to implement one of our main goals. College enrollment measurement is one of those services. By taking advantage of this new tool, we'll show we believe college is important for every community in America, regardless of race or economic background.

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