

READY FOR LIFE: YES, THAT MEANS COLLEGE

The core belief here at the Forum for Youth Investment – that all young people should be Ready by 21 – ready for college, work and life – often provokes public criticism. The exchanges typically go like this:

“Not every young person needs to go to college,” calls out one person from an audience. True, I say, but all should be ready to.

“Suggesting that young people should be ready for college stigmatizes those who don’t want to go,” someone says. False, I say; our goal should be to ensure that whatever choice they make is a true choice (fully informed, well thought through) and is coupled with a viable alternative plan (a good job, the military or, yes, even marriage and parenthood).

“Not all young people are college material,” another person says. True, I say, but it is sad that we are so quick to shift the burden of our educational failures onto the shoulders of our youth.

Now, I am ready to provoke more criticism.

Not only should we make every effort to ensure that all young people are ready for college, we should stay with them to ensure that they complete some form of post-secondary credential – academic or technical. It is not enough to ensure that they are ready by 21. We need to ensure that they are credentialed by 26.

Anyone not convinced of this should down-load *College for All: The Labor Market for College-Educated Workers?*, published by the Center for American Progress (August 2008 at www.americanprogress.org). This is a must-read for those concerned that we’re misguidedly encouraging black, brown and poor youth to get degrees they can’t afford and don’t need. (Let’s be clear: The “let them opt-out” arguments are almost always being made on behalf of these students, often by adults with the same skin tones.)

The paper goes beyond offering the usual data on value of each post-secondary year or degree. It offers analyses to test whether the labor market needs and can absorb more college graduates. The answer to the question of whether those at the bottom of a sharply expanded supply of college-educated labor will reap any benefits is a clear yes.

“The effort to expand access to higher education is worthwhile in social, civic, and economic terms.” We will not, in author Paul Osterman’s words, “simply start to see more college-educated taxi drivers.”

Business leaders agree with this assessment. Corporate Voices for Working Families, the leading national business membership organization representing the private sector on public policy issues involving working families, recently released its three-pronged policy agenda on “workforce readiness” (its term for youth development). Its three focal points

are to expand learning opportunities, create alternate pathways for disconnected youth and support community colleges and lifelong learning.

When asked why increasing high school graduation rates was not one of its policy pillars, Elyse Rosenblum, a Senior Consultant Workforce Readiness Programs at Corporate Voices, offered a tellingly short reply: “It’s simply not enough.”

Every time I interview young people who are making this journey into higher education – first time college-goers who are also working; supporting parents, siblings, children; struggling to fill academic gaps; struggling to adjust to the freedoms and demands of college – I am humbled by their determination and frankly concerned by our field’s relative lack of support. Increasing matriculation rates will require a lot more than better financing schemes. It will require a significant expansion in the support base for youth and young adults.

New York-based Youth Development Institute (YDI) is one of the organizations that is addressing this need head on. Convinced that the big issue is not just getting into college, but staying in YDI has developed a series of partnerships over the years with community organizations and city colleges. The result is a tapestry of college access and college success programs for marginalized students and dropouts. [www.ydinstitute.org/resources]

YDI recently partnered with New Youth Connections (NYC), a magazine written by and for youth, to create a special issue on “How to Succeed in College’ (Sept/Oct 2008) based on roundtable discussions with students in college success programs, college faculty and former NYC writers. The insights offered in articles, interviews, quizzes and tip sheets on everything from financial aid to loneliness to study habits underscored the complexity of the journey and the value of youth and adult supports.

Read it. Then ask – what are you doing to help the young people you work with get into and through college?

Karen Pittman is executive director of the Forum for Youth Investment. This column and links to related readings are available at www.forumfyi.org