

Viewpoints

Learning from Achilles as well as Pythagorus

On the first Friday in June, the Utah Board of Education gave preliminary approval for a plan to bolster requirements in mathematics and English for students in the K-12 grades. In large part, efforts to adopt more rigorous standards in mathematics and English are motivated by the desire to ensure that high school graduates are ready for college.

Among the state's school districts, the Canyons School District is arguably at the forefront of this effort. The Canyons District has proposed offering an

advanced diploma option to verify that graduates are prepared for the demands of college. The advanced diploma, which requires a curriculum focused on math, English, and the sciences, has received the endorsement of the Commissioner of Higher Education, the Salt Lake Chamber, and the Utah Technology Council.

Having spent the better portion of my career as a university professor and administrator, I applaud efforts to strengthen standards in math, English and other core subjects. High school graduates should certainly be able to read important literary works, write a coherent paragraph, and understand and apply basic mathematical principles.

Regrettably, a surprising number of high school graduates can't do those things. At the same time, beefing up requirements in mathematics, English and other core subjects will not be enough to ensure that high school graduates are ready to succeed in college or other endeavors.

Beyond knowledge of specific academic subject matter, a significant number of entering college students lack the necessary work ethic to succeed in college. As one example, national surveys indicate that 77 percent of first-year college students come to class without completing the required assignments (2009 National Survey of Student Engagement).

Those students that do make an effort to complete assignments frequently make a half-hearted effort. Many faculty will tell you that students need to spend at least a couple of hours outside of class working on homework and other assignments to adequately prepare for a class session. Surveys of first-year college students indicate that the time they spend preparing for class is measured in

minutes rather than hours.

If you speak with a college professor at the end of the third week of classes, they are likely to tell you that several of their students have not yet bothered to show up for a single class meeting. They will also say that a larger number of students attended one or two class meetings but have not been heard from since.

There are dozens of opinions regarding the cause for contemporary students' aversion to hard work. Near the top of my own list would be hubris. Today, you will

find astonishing examples of hubris among professional athletes, financiers, and politicians. Unfortunately, the hubris epidemic has also infected students and they are suffering.

Consider an interesting fact. If you test students' performance in math, U.S.

students perform at lower levels than students in 23 other countries. On the other hand, if you ask students to rate their own competency in math, U.S. students rate themselves higher than students in any other country. U.S. students consistency overestimate their own competence.

The connection between hubris and study habits is inescapable. Why would a student spend hours studying if they already believe they are competent?

The study of history and the classics is filled with examples of hubris because scholars have long understood the dangers of overestimating one's own abilities. Therein may lie a small piece of the solution.

In addition to mathematics and English, school districts should consider strengthening the study of history and the classics. The study of Achilles should join the study of the Pythagorean theorem.

Students should contemplate General Burnside's failure at the Battle of Frederickberg, Icarus' flight which brought him too close to the sun, General Custer's underestimating the strength of the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne, and Arachne's weaving contest with Athena. Those who do so may be less likely to succumb to hubris and more likely to arrive at college expecting to do some work.

Top of Utah Voices



Michael Vaughan

■
Commentary

Michael Vaughan is Weber State University's provost. He accepts e-mail from readers at MVAUGHAN@Weber.edu