

Viewpoints

Free to fail

One of the hallmarks of the free enterprise system is failure.

Less than half of the businesses that are started in the United States will be operating four years later; the majority will have failed.

Records for the performance of the Standard & Poor's 500 Index over a 50-year period indicate that, on a given day, the stock market has a 53 percent chance of being up and a 47 percent chance of being down.

School children are taught that Thomas Edison tried and failed thousands of times before inventing a workable light bulb.

In a nation with abundant opportunity, many will take chances, and some will fail. Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that Utah's colleges have created a system that gives many the opportunity to attempt to earn a college degree.

The vast majority of students who apply to Utah's colleges and universities are admitted. No college or university in the state is placed in the "most selective" category in U.S. News rankings. Utah State University admits 97 percent of those who apply. The admission policy at Weber State University is even more open.

Recently, some have criticized the extent to which Utah's colleges and universities provide access to education. The concern is that in a system that allows many the opportunity to earn a college degree, some will inevitably fail. At the University of Utah, 42 percent of the students who enter fail to earn a bachelor's degree in six years. More than 40 percent of the students who begin their studies at Weber State fail to earn a bachelor's degree in 10 years.

Because some students are failing to graduate, a 2011 state audit specifically recommended stricter admission policies with the goal of boosting graduation rates. The issue of graduation rates has also drawn national attention, and the Obama administration has floated various plans to increase graduation rates. Undoubtedly, graduation rates could be easily boosted through more restrictive admission policies. It is actually fairly easy to predict which students are most likely to succeed in completing their studies.

Students who study diligently in high school and complete a curriculum rich in English, math and science are much more likely to succeed in college. Students who only do the minimum necessary to earn a high school diploma are likely to fail in college. Therein lies the rationale for increased admission standards. If virtually any high school graduate is admitted to college, what motivation do high school students have to pursue a rigorous program of study?

There are three counter arguments to the viewpoint that colleges should only admit students who are guaranteed to succeed.

First, many of the most significant factors for predicting success in college are beyond the control of an individual student. Students from high-income families are more likely to succeed in college than students from low-income families. Students whose parents earned college degrees are more likely to earn a

degree themselves. Caucasian students are more likely to earn college degrees than Hispanic students.

Second, while it is easy to separate the students who will almost certainly succeed from those with a modest chance of success, it is much more difficult to predict which of the modestly gifted students would have been successful if given a chance. Some of those who appear to be the least likely to succeed at their high school graduation go on to earn a college degree and accomplish remarkable things.

Third, many students who fail to earn a degree fails for reasons unrelated to their ability or initiative. In Utah, family responsibilities and financial pressures derail students more often than academic problems.

The question of whom to admit to college and whom to deny is a balancing act. The decision is best made by each individual college and university in light of their mission and the students they serve. Admission policies should not be imposed by regulators.

Most policy makers would bristle at the suggestion that the ability to start a small business should be subject to host of regulations to weed out all but those entrepreneurs most likely to succeed. Is it unreasonable to apply the same logic to a student who hopes to earn a college degree?

Top of Utah Voices



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■ Commentary