

# Pursuing alternative paths to college

WES BEACH

While it is true, as a recent article in the Sentinel explained, that students who want to begin immediately after high school as freshmen at a state university in California are in most cases required to complete a set of high school courses in specified subjects, it is also true that college admission need not depend in any way on a person's high school record.

Many serious high school students do not find their courses to be sufficiently challenging and yearn to work at a higher level with more mature classmates. I've worked with many hundreds of such people who have cut high school short or skipped it altogether and have nevertheless reached the highest levels of formal education. Here's how this is possible.

For people 18 or older, there are no subject, diploma or testing requirements for admission to a California community college like Cabrillo College; enrollment is completely open. (There is a placement test, but admission does not depend on it.) Enrollment is less open for younger people, but there are admissions possibilities for them, too. The California High School Proficiency Exam (CHSPE) provides one of these possibilities; people who pass the exam (not the same as the CAHSEE, the California High School Exit Exam) earn a diploma-equivalent certificate that is all that's necessary for admission of a young person to a community college.

Once in college, what's required to move on to a four-year school, such as UC Santa Cruz, is a solid record in 60 semester units (two full-time years), completion of a few required courses, a smaller and different set than is required for freshman admission, and preparation

for a major. A high school record is irrelevant at this point. Transfer students enter UC as juniors on the strength of their community college records alone.

Some other colleges do not require two years of work before transfer admission. For example, the University of Oregon says on its website that, "If you have completed 36 or more quarter credits (24 of which must be graded), your admission will be based only on your college-level course work." Thirty-six quarter credits are equal to 24 semester units, a minimal full-time year at Cabrillo.

Among the students I know who have followed the path I've described are an emergency physician in Washington state who left high school after three semesters, a professor at a state college in Massachusetts who completed one year in high school, and a Harvard-educated architect who also stayed in high school for just a year.

There are other possibilities that would require another article to explain. I'll just say that one of my former students who never attended any K-12 school went directly to MIT after her years of self-teaching and is now doing extremely well in her sophomore year.

Another former student came to me when she was getting Ds and Fs in her third year at Santa Cruz High School. She left high school, attended Cabrillo, earned a grade point average of 3.8, and transferred to UC Berkeley. Had she taken to heart the limiting message that freshman admission provides the only way to college, she might have given up and faced a different and possibly diminished future.

---

*Wes Beach taught at Soquel High School for 20 years and is now the director of his own unorthodox private high school.*