

SPONGE EDUCATION

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In Korea, getting into a college is extremely difficult, but once enrolled graduating from it is easy, virtually automatic. In the U.S., getting into a college is relatively easy, but completing four years of study and graduating successfully is rather difficult.

In Korea, getting into a college, especially a prestigious one, is considered one of the most significant achievements in one's life, a milestone of critical importance. The reason for this is simple: What school a person graduates from determines the trajectory for the rest of his/her life -- good job, good marriage, good prestige, good fortune and good life. The destiny of one's life is almost completely determined by what college he/she graduates from. The actual substance of college education matters little.

This explains why the nation is so consumed by college preparatory systems, be they elite private high schools, hundreds upon hundreds of after-school tutoring schools known as 'hagwon,' or private individual tutoring, not to mention tens of thousands of overseas dispatch of youngsters, resulting in many families with split living (one parent staying in Korea and the other staying overseas with youngsters).

The basic program of these college preparatory systems is simple: let the students soak up as much knowledge as they can so as to score perfect or near-perfect scores in SAT and similar tests. Study up to 15 hours a day, soak up as much knowledge as one can, cram up everything you read and be able to spit back out as one takes SAT and other similar tests. Get perfect scores in all subjects or you are a failure. So we get high school graduates with impressive reservoir of gained knowledge – physics, chemistry, math, history, geography, English grammar and composition skills. So what happens when they get to prestigious U.S. colleges?

Unlike the societal situation in Korea, here in the U.S. getting into a college is not the end of highschoolers' life goal; it is only just the beginning. The prime mission of college education is not so much to just learn more knowledge, but **to learn how to learn** new knowledge, acquire and develop skills to navigate through

new and uncharted territories of new knowledge, and to become creative, innovative, free-thinking and self-sufficient citizens of the world.

I find the products of the Korean preparatory schools to be woefully inadequately prepared for the real challenges of college education in the U.S. I speak from my own experience of having taught such students at Duke University. The intense training these Korean prep schools provide to their students, drilling tons upon tons of knowledge into passive 'storage,' is what I call a **'sponge education.'** Students absorb facts and knowledge much as sponges soak up water: they are **'walking wikipedias.'** Sponges, however, can be squeezed bone dry.

Korea can do much better by preparing their students to be ready not just to learn more knowledge, but **to learn how to learn** new knowledge, acquire and develop skills to navigate through new and uncharted territories of new knowledge, and to become creative, innovative, free-thinking and self-sufficient citizens of the world.