

# Educational Leadership

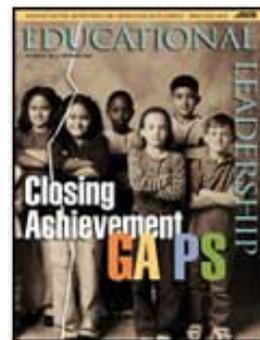
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Closing Achievement Gaps Pages 51-55

## The High School/College Disconnect

**Students, parents, and K–12 educators are not receiving clear messages about the skills that high school students need to enter and succeed in college.**

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U.S. high school students now have higher aspirations for college than ever before. During the last few decades, parents, educators, policymakers, and business leaders have pointed out that to succeed in our society, students need to go to college. Eighty-eight percent of 8th graders expect to participate in some form of postsecondary education, and approximately 70 percent of high school graduates actually do go to college within two years of graduating (Education Trust, 1999).

Unfortunately, disconnected education systems are undermining students' college aspirations. State high school assessments often stress knowledge and skills that differ from college entrance and placement requirements. Students graduate from high school under one set of coursework standards only to discover that three months later, they must meet a whole new set of standards in college. Students are simply not getting the information they need about what it takes to succeed in higher education.

### Starting at a Disadvantage

These mixed signals have disproportionately affected low-income students and students of color. As the economic benefits of holding a college degree have increased, low-income students have continued to experience much lower college enrollment and graduation rates than students in higher economic brackets. Low-income students primarily attend nonselective four-year schools or open-enrollment community colleges. For example, nearly 66 percent of Latinos—compared with fewer than 45 percent of white students with similar academic backgrounds—initially enroll at open-door institutions (Fry, 2004). Two of every three high school graduates from the wealthiest quartile enroll in a four-year institution, compared with one in five from the lowest socioeconomic quartile. At the nation's 146 most selective colleges, 74 percent of students come from the top socioeconomic quartile and only 3 percent come from the poorest quartile (Kahlenberg, 2004).

As for students of color, not only are African American and Latino students obtaining

postsecondary education degrees at a lower rate than their white, non-Latino counterparts (see fig. 1), but they are also graduating from high school with a lower level of academic skills. African American and Latino 12th graders across the United States read and do math at the same levels as white 8th graders, on average (Kahlenberg, 2004). Consequently, many low-income and minority students take remedial courses in college, a factor that lowers their chances for completing either a two-year or four-year degree or a vocational certificate. Between 1980 and 1993, for example, only 34 percent of students who took even one remedial reading course completed a two-year or four-year degree; 56 percent of students who took no remedial courses at all completed such degrees (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001).

The statistics regarding student attrition in college are equally startling. About one-half of first-year students at community colleges do not continue for a second year. About one-fourth of first-year students at four-year colleges do not stay for their second year. More than 40 percent of college students who earn more than 10 credits never complete a two-year or four-year degree. At two-year colleges, more than 70 percent of students who enroll say that they expect to eventually obtain a bachelor's degree, but only 23 percent actually receive one (Adelman, 1994).

Although student finances are an important concern, the best predictor of whether a student will go on to complete a bachelor's degree is the intensity and quality of that student's secondary school curriculum (Adelman, 1999). Broad-access institutions—community colleges or four-year institutions that admit just about every student who applies—represent about 85 percent of all postsecondary schools and educate approximately 80 percent of the nation's first-year college students. Instead of focusing on the 20 percent of students who attend the most selective four-year institutions with the wealthiest and best-prepared student bodies (Adelman, 2001), media and public attention should focus on program completion rates for students from low socioeconomic brackets attending broad-access institutions.

## **The Major Disconnects**

The Stanford University Bridge Project,<sup>1</sup> a six-year national study, analyzed high school exit-level policies and college entrance policies to see whether a discrepancy exists between the skills that each education system requires. Bridge Project researchers analyzed state and institutional policies in six states—California, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Oregon, and Texas (Kirst & Venezia, 2004). They gathered information on state-level high school graduation and college entrance policies; specifically, they studied placement policies, admissions requirements, and outreach and communication strategies at 18 selective and less selective colleges and universities.

Researchers also interviewed high school administrators, counselors, and teachers in each of the six states about high school coursework and college counseling. The schools involved were comprehensive public high schools with a broad spectrum of student achievement. Researchers wanted to learn what students, parents, and secondary school educators knew about college admissions and course placement policies, and whether these groups had the necessary resources to make informed decisions about students attending college. The findings revealed a

number of disconnects.

**Figure 1. Who Goes to College?**

	<b>Graduate from High School</b>	<b>Complete at Least Some College</b>	<b>Obtain at Least a Bachelor's Degree</b>
Asian and Asian American	94%	80%	49%
White (Non-Latino)	93%	62%	29%
African American	86%	48%	15%
Latino	61%	31%	10%

*Education Attainment for Young People, Ages 25–29, in 1998.*  
 Source: Education Trust (2001), p. 9. Adapted with permission.

*Who's getting groomed for college?* The Bridge Project data show that high school students in accelerated curricular tracks receive clearer signals about college preparation than do their peers in other tracks (Kirst & Venezia, 2004). Postsecondary education outreach efforts by high school and college counseling staff often fail to reach students in middle- and lower-level high school courses (Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003). In California, for example, 70 percent of honors students knew at least three course requirements for the California State University system, but fewer than half of the non-honors students possessed this knowledge (Kirst, Antonio, & Bueschel, 2004). Also, such resources as college counseling centers on high school campuses, opportunities to visit colleges, and visits from college recruiters are unequally distributed among high schools.

*Who's getting the right information?* Fewer than 12 percent of the students surveyed knew *all* the high school course requirements needed to enter the postsecondary institutions studied (Kirst & Venezia, 2004). This ranged from 1 percent in California to 11 percent in Maryland. Students do appear to have considerable partial knowledge of curricular requirements. Slightly more than half of the students knew three or more course requirements, but students in high tracks had more information than those in lower tracks. Although failing college placement

exams causes incoming students to take remedial noncredit college courses, fewer than half of the sampled students across the studied states knew the specific placement-testing policies for the institutions in the study. Said one Oregon community school student,

So I did my orientation, and they told me something about [placement] testing. I was like, What? You have to do a test? Nobody told me about that when I graduated from high school.

*Who's helping students prepare?* Teachers in both upper and lower high school tracks often took a greater role in helping students prepare for college than counselors did, although teachers lack connections to broad-access postsecondary institutions and up-to-date admission and placement information (Kirst & Venezia, 2004). Because most low-income and first-time college students attend postsecondary institutions near their homes, teachers should learn about the key admission and placement standards for local colleges.

*Are parents in the loop?* Many economically disadvantaged parents lack experience and information concerning college preparation. Forty-two percent, 44 percent, and 47 percent of economically disadvantaged parents in Illinois, Maryland, and Oregon, respectively, stated that they had received college information, compared with 74 percent, 71 percent, and 66 percent of their more economically well-off counterparts in the same states (Kirst & Venezia, 2004).

## **An Eye on Change**

Our research found three promising areas for immediate reform. First, all students, parents, and educators should receive accurate, high-quality information about secondary school courses that will help prepare students for college-level standards, and all students should have access to these classes. Schools should also make it clear that a minimum competency state high school graduation test is *not* intended to measure college readiness.

Second, media, policy, and research attention should focus on the broad-access colleges and universities that serve the majority of students. These colleges need the financial and policy attention of federal, state, and other leaders. Increasing the rates of student success at these colleges is a sound public investment because it would likely increase college completion rates for economically disadvantaged students and students of color.

Last, students need to understand that getting into college is not the hardest part. Local, state, and federal programs should broaden their focus beyond *access* to college to include *success* in college. True college opportunity includes having a good chance to succeed once the student is admitted. High school course content, academic counseling, college outreach, and other programming should clarify for students what it takes to succeed in both selective and nonselective colleges.

## **Strategies That Make Sense**

How can we achieve these ends? For a start, college stakeholders must be brought to the table when K–12 standards and assessments are developed and revised. Likewise, K–12 educators should participate when postsecondary education admission and placement policies are under review. Reforms across the two education systems will be difficult to implement without

meaningful communication and coordinated policymaking between the levels.

K-12 schools and districts, postsecondary institutions and systems, and states and the federal government can take the following steps to improve the transition from high school to college for all students.

- Ensure that colleges and universities publicize their academic standards so that students, parents, and educators have accurate college preparation information. This effort must go beyond targeted outreach to universal programs for all students. For example, the California State University system uses the statewide 11th grade achievement test as its placement test. High school juniors who plan to attend state schools and who have low scores on their 11th grade state test receive specific recommendations for senior year courses. In addition, states should disseminate materials not only in English but also in other languages prevalent in their states.
- Examine the relationship between the content of postsecondary education placement exams and K–12 exit-level standards and assessments to determine the possibility for greater compatibility. High-quality K–12 standards and assessments aligned with high-quality postsecondary education standards and assessments can provide students with clear signals and incentives.
- Allow students to take college placement exams in high school so they can understand college-level expectations and prepare academically for college. These assessments should be diagnostic so that students, parents, and teachers are clear on how to improve students' college preparation skills.
- Use the senior year in high school to correct college readiness deficiencies and link appropriate senior-year courses to postsecondary general education courses (Kirst, 2001). For example, students often do not take mathematics in their senior year because, technically, three years of mathematics is the minimum required to graduate from high school and get into college. Consequently, students often fail math placement exams when they enter college because they have not taken enough demanding content or have forgotten what they learned.
- Provide teachers with information about college academic standards (including placement) and application procedures. Resources should target teachers who work with students in middle- and lower-level tracks. Schools also need to provide high school teachers with more information about college placement standards so they can align their courses with postsecondary expectations.
- Expand successful dual or concurrent enrollment programs between high schools and colleges so they include all students, not just traditionally college-bound students.
- Collect and connect data from all education sectors. States and regions should create common identifier numbers for students and track students' academic progress after they leave high school. Data should include student performance on placement exams and progress made toward a degree or certificate and should tie into the state K–16

accountability system. Postsecondary institutions and K–12 schools need assistance in learning to use data to inform curricular and instructional policies and practices. For example, a recent study found that the high school textbook reading level is much lower than the college textbook reading level (Williamson, 2004). Moreover, the education assessment and research organization ACT found a major discrepancy between what high school teachers and college instructors value in student writing. College instructors ranked grammar and usage as most important, whereas high school teachers considered these the least important skills (Rooney, 2003).

- Expand federal grants to stimulate more state-level K–16 policymaking. This could include funding collaborative discussions between K–12 and postsecondary educators, with requirements for examining and improving such issues as collecting and using data across the systems. Funding could also target joint development activities that enable students to transition successfully from one education system to the next.
- Tie student aid policies to college retention and graduation rates. Colleges would receive more federal and state aid as more students *complete* degrees or vocational certificates.

These recommendations will be easier to accomplish and more effective if each state creates an overall organizational base for K–16 policymaking and oversight.

For example, Georgia created a state P-16 (preschool through postsecondary) council chaired by the governor, which includes state officials from K–12 and public postsecondary education. Regional P-16 councils across the state adapt statewide initiatives to local contexts. Having a K–16 entity within the state, however, does not ensure that innovative K–16 reforms will follow. Only a concerted effort by policymakers, educators, parents, and students will do the job.

Implementing these recommendations will not magically eliminate the dozens of reasons for poor student preparation for college.<sup>2</sup> But these are important steps toward developing a more equitable education experience for all students and providing all students with the preparation they need to succeed in college.

## **Student Misconceptions About Attending College**

**Misconception:** I can't afford college.

**Reality:** Students and parents regularly overestimate the cost of college.

**Misconception:** I have to be a stellar athlete or student to get financial aid.

**Reality:** Most students receive some form of financial aid.

**Misconception:** Meeting high school graduation requirements will prepare me for college.

**Reality:** Adequate preparation for college usually requires a more demanding course of studies than the minimum curriculum required for high school graduation, even when that curriculum is termed “college prep.”

**Misconception:** Getting into college is the hardest part.

**Reality:** For the majority of students, the hardest part is completing college.

**Misconception:** Community colleges don't have academic standards.

**Reality:** Students usually must take placement tests at community colleges to qualify for college-level work.

**Misconception:** It's better to take easier classes in high school and get better grades.

**Reality:** One of the best predictors of college success is taking rigorous high school classes. Getting good grades in lower-level classes will not prepare students for college-level work.

**Misconception:** My senior year in high school doesn't matter.

**Reality:** The classes students take in their senior year will often determine the classes that they are able to take in college and how well prepared they are for those classes.

**Misconception:** I don't have to worry about my grades or about the kind of classes I take until after my sophomore year in high school.

**Reality:** Many colleges look at sophomore grades. To enroll in college-level courses, students need to prepare for college, and this means taking a well-thought-out series of courses starting no later than 9th or 10th grade.

**Misconception:** I can't start thinking about financial aid until I know where I'm going to college.

**Reality:** Students need to file a federal aid form before most colleges send out their acceptance letters. This applies to students who attend community colleges as well, even though they can apply and enroll in the fall of the year they wish to attend.

**Misconception:** I can take whatever classes I want when I get to college.

**Reality:** Many colleges and universities require entering students to take placement exams in core subject areas. Those tests determine the classes that students can take.

Excerpted from the final policy report of the Bridge Project authored by Andrea Venezia, Michael W. Kirst, and Anthony L. Antonio. Published with permission.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The full report for the Stanford University Bridge Project is available at [www.stanford.edu/group/bridgeproject/](http://www.stanford.edu/group/bridgeproject/).

<sup>2</sup> This research focuses solely on the role of policies and programs related to high school graduation, college admission, and college placement. The project did not address issues related to financial aid, affordability, or teacher preparation and professional development.

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