



# Policy Brief

## High School

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## Helping Equip Teachers to Answer Students' Questions on College Knowledge

By Jennifer Dounay

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### The Need

While the vast majority of students express the hope, even the expectation, that they will go to college, studies suggest that many don't know what it takes to get into college – specifically, that they lack information on:

- Courses postsecondary institutions require them to take in high school
- College placement exams
- Selection criteria
- The relative importance of various admissions selection criteria such as GPA, test scores, extracurricular activities, etc.
- Actual tuition costs for local public institutions.

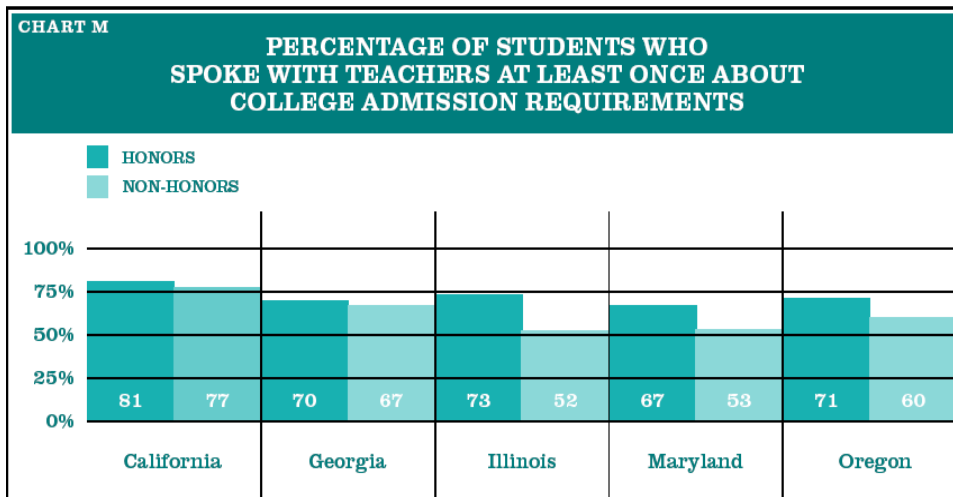
With greater numbers of high school students aspiring to attend college, the need for disseminating accurate information on all these areas is more important than ever. This brief examines the research on the current role of teachers in providing college knowledge, and potential policy responses to help teachers easily provide more accurate information to respond to the questions they are already regularly asked by their students.

### The Context

It may come as a surprise that students frequently approach their classroom teachers with questions on “college knowledge” – what it takes to get into and be successful in college. **However, it will likely come as no surprise that the vast majority of teachers have received little to no preparation to answer these questions, beyond their own experience and possibly that of their children.**

#### ***Teachers: Sought out for college advice, often underprepared for their role***

Stanford University's 1996-2002 Bridge Project sought to gauge what high schools were doing to prepare students for college – and how these meshed with college-level expectations – in California, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Oregon and Texas. The table below provides Bridge Project data on the percentage of honors and non-honors track students who reported talking to teachers about college entrance requirements at least once. **As the data indicate, roughly three out of four honors-track students and nearly 62% of non-honors track students reported speaking to a teacher at least once about college admission requirements.**



Andrea Venezia, Michael W. Kirst and Anthony L. Antonio, *Betraying the College Dream: How Disconnected K-12 and Postsecondary Systems Undermine Student Aspirations*, 2003.

David Conley, in his 2005 book *College Knowledge*, summarizes some of the project's findings:

Most students at the high schools studied gained their information about college from their parents and teachers. Although counselors remain a potentially important source of information, more than half of the ninth graders surveyed had not yet talked with a counselor about college. The percent talking to counselors increased to 77 percent in eleventh grade, but by that time most had already made decisions and taken courses that defined their postsecondary options significantly ...

It turns out that teachers are very important college advisors. Students get information about state university requirements in particular from teachers as well as counselors. Much of this advising is informal, not necessarily a part of the curriculum or the teacher's responsibility. At the same time, teachers feel unsure about their knowledge of college requirements outside their state institutions. They are even less clear about the content and uses of college placement tests. This affects both the advice they are able to give students and their ability to prepare students for such tests. Teacher knowledge of educational costs and requirements for private and out-of-state institutions tends to be very uneven as well.<sup>2</sup>

In the 2004 book *From High School to College: Improving Opportunities for Success in Postsecondary Education*, Bridge Project leaders Michael W. Kirst and Andrea Venezia provide further details from their field research in Illinois:

Most of the veteran teachers interviewed said that they knew little about college admissions and placement policies other than the fact that their 'college-bound students need four years of high school English.' For the most part, those who considered themselves 'somewhat knowledgeable' obtained their information through their own initiative. Veteran teachers who professed to having 'some degree of awareness' of admissions procedures reported that they learned what they know through 'memories, now distant,' of their own undergraduate experiences, through helping their own children with the college application process, or through their own participation in on-campus continuing-education classes and programs. These teachers reported that they, rather than their students, initiated classroom discussions of college-related issues ...

**“[A] greater proportion of students have spoken with a teacher about college admission policies than with a counselor.”**

*Betraying the College Dream: How Disconnected K-12 and Postsecondary Education Systems Undermine Student Aspirations*. p. 29

None of the teachers interviewed recalled receiving college preparation information from their school districts. Without exception, the teachers who were provided admissions and placement information received it from the guidance department or from building-level administrators ... Most teachers complained about being left out of the information loop.

At many schools, teachers reported that most of the information that filters down from the guidance office is in the form of announcements or postings notifying students about visiting campus representatives, ACT testing, due dates for college applications, and scholarship application deadlines. Several teachers remarked that they learned what they know about college requirements at the same time and in the same manner that their students did: when guidance counselors came in and spoke to their class about course registration and scheduling.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Non-honors and low-income students: Many wish to attend some form of college, but receive the least information***

Teachers in other states studied expressed similar sentiments to those above – a lack of information on college entrance policies and requirements. In most, if not all, the schools participating in the study, honors students reported obtaining information from honors teachers, while non-honors teachers voiced a perception that their students were left out of discussions about college readiness.<sup>4</sup> Student family income was also reflected in students' likelihood of approaching a teacher for college information. **For example, of the 30% of Texas students who had talked with a teacher about college, 54% were in the top two income levels.<sup>5</sup> Seventy-six percent of students who had not talked to a teacher about college were in the bottom three income levels.**

### ***High school feedback systems: Providing detailed information in some states, but not universally used by high school staff***

Mechanisms to inform high school staff of their recent graduates' success their first year of college were relatively untapped. For instance, Texas has for some years required public postsecondary institutions to report back to freshmen students' high schools on students' performance their first year of college. Yet, of the two high schools included in the state sample, one principal reported having seen the reports; the other had not. "No other school staff in the sample had heard of the reports."<sup>6</sup>

### ***High school counselors: Overextended and understaffed***

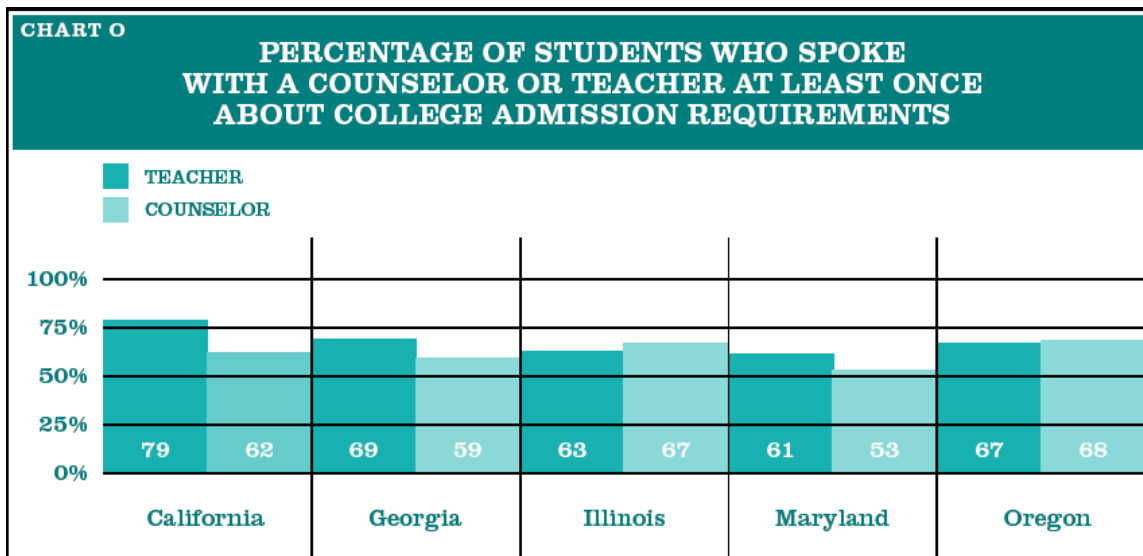
The Bridge Project researchers also found that high school counselors had large caseloads and large numbers of duties. In an urban Texas high school, the caseload was over 400 students per counselor, making it necessary for students to schedule a one-on-one appointment to meet with a counselor.

The counselors at both the urban and other Texas schools in the sample reported not having much time to devote to college readiness issues because of their other responsibilities, which at the urban school included "scheduling; test administration; coordination of programs; consultation with parents, teachers and social service agencies; referrals; guidance; school-to-college activities; school-to-career activities, including individual career planning procedures; and devising and implementing a guidance curriculum." **Perhaps as a result, three out of four (74%) Texas students reported never having talked with a counselor about college.<sup>7</sup>**

**In 2002, "The ratio of high school students to full-time guidance counselors was 315:1"**

*"High School Guidance Counseling," Fast Response Survey System (FRSS), National Center for Education Statistics, August 2003*

The table below indicates the percentage of students in the Bridge Project samples who indicated having spoken with a counselor or teacher at least once about college admission requirements. In the five states reporting such data, it was more common for students in three states – California, Georgia and Maryland – to speak to a teacher than a counselor about these requirements; while in Illinois, students were slightly more likely to report having spoken to a counselor. In Oregon, students were virtually equally likely to have spoken to a counselor and/or a teacher.



Andrea Venezia, Michael W. Kirst and Anthony L. Antonio, *Betraying the College Dream: How Disconnected K-12 and Postsecondary Systems Undermine Student Aspirations*, 2003

Conley and the Bridge Project researchers are not the sole individuals to recognize the role teachers are inadvertently asked to play in providing college admissions information, and the need for teachers to have access to accurate information about college requirements. A report by Patricia M. McDonough for the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) asks why NACAC and other organizations involved in high school counseling and college admissions decisions are not joining with policy and practitioner partners “to encourage college financial aid officers to train high school counselors, to routinely (not just at the request of the dedicated, savvy college counselor) run financial aid workshops at high schools for students, parents, and teachers....?”<sup>19</sup>

## A State Policy Response

The work of the Bridge Project makes patently clear that students frequently ask their teachers for college information. Teachers at a rural junior high school in Texas said they “would like additional information because students asked them how to prepare academically for college,” while also observing school staff would not help students prepare for college “unless they were mandated to change.”<sup>10</sup> Consequently, as Kirst and Venezia observe, “Lacking accurate knowledge themselves, teachers tend to share stories about their own college experiences. They also use their own college experience to construct today’s college preparatory standards. **Thus, much of what teachers dispense as knowledge about the college choice process is based on folk wisdom and life experiences.**”

As one means to remedy the situation, the researchers suggest that teachers can be empowered to provide this information to students in the course of the interactions that already take place during the regular school day. To this end, Kirst and Venezia make the following policy recommendations:

- Make disseminating current college policies, procedures and information the responsibility of all teachers
- Urge teacher preparation programs to include “college knowledge and counseling course requirements” for secondary-level certification
- Urge districts to introduce teacher and principal professional development programs on college knowledge, to “help ensure that school personnel have up-to-date information on admissions and placement criteria.”<sup>11</sup>

While the above recommendations are offered in response to the needs identified in the California case study, there is ample evidence that they would be helpful in addressing the low levels of college

knowledge in other states as well. In the following section, this brief highlights state policies that address each of these recommendations.

### ***Make disseminating current college policies, procedures and information the responsibility of all teachers***

In *College Knowledge*, David Conley suggests that teachers can become better prepared to provide the information students ask of them through the power of the packet: “To improve their knowledge, teachers should be provided annually with a packet and list of Web sites with key information on requirements for admission to local and state institutions. This information should be briefly reviewed annually at a faculty meeting where teachers are also provided data on how well recent graduates of the high school have fared in postsecondary education, including how many enrolled in some form of postsecondary education and how well those who enrolled performed in entry-level college courses in English, math and science.”

This group analysis would require the state to have developed postsecondary feedback systems. In fact, according to a 2006 survey of postsecondary data managers by the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, **only 11 states have connected high school records to postsecondary student data, and 10 states use state data systems to provide high schools with feedback reports on students’ postsecondary achievement in terms of need for remediation, grade point average and credits completed.**<sup>12</sup>

Though ECS is not aware of any state policies at this time that require all secondary-level teachers to be provided with college admissions information – or collectively analyze it to determine the degree to which they are adequately preparing students for college – it may be an option for states to consider in helping all students receive the college preparation information they seek from teachers.

### ***Urge teacher preparation programs to include “college knowledge and counseling course requirements” for secondary-level certification***

**South Carolina** legislation enacted in 2005 provides that, effective with the 2006-07 academic year, colleges of education must incorporate into teacher and administrator preparation programs “career guidance, the use of the cluster of study curriculum framework and individual graduation plans ... [and] the elements of the Career Guidance Model of the South Carolina Comprehensive Guidance and Counseling Program Model.”<sup>13</sup> These same items must be included in guidance counselor preparation programs statewide. **This may be the only state policy in the nation that requires teacher and administrator preparation programs to include content aimed at better preparing them to field the questions students ask about college preparation and career planning.**

The South Carolina policy also includes mechanisms to measure the quality of guidance information teacher and administrator preparation programs are providing. The section of statute that establishes the preparation program components directs the state board of education to “develop performance-based standards in these areas and include them as criteria for teacher program approval. By the 2009-10 school year, the [state] teacher evaluation system ... and the [state] principal’s evaluation system ... must include a review of performance in career exploration and guidance.”

### ***Urge districts to introduce teacher and principal professional development programs on college knowledge, to “help ensure that school personnel have up-to-date information on admissions and placement criteria”***

Effective with the 2007-08 school year, high schools in **South Carolina** will be required to “provide students with the services of a career specialist who ... has successfully completed the national Career Development Facilitator (CDF) certification training or certified guidance counselor having completed the Career Development Facilitator certification training.”<sup>14</sup> This individual must “coordinate and present professional development workshops in career development and guidance for teachers, school counselors, and work-based constituents” – in effect, providing a process for existing teachers to gain the knowledge to be required of those currently in teacher preparation programs, and ensuring that new and experienced teachers’ knowledge remains fresh and up-to-date.<sup>15</sup>

The section below raises other issues for state policymakers to consider in disseminating college knowledge to students.

### ***Align high school curricula and assessments with college entry expectations***

As the authors of the Bridge Project and others have pointed out, students (as well as parents and high school teachers) often do not know which courses young people need to take to be eligible for admission to a four-year institution. One of the 10 student misperceptions about college preparation and attendance identified by Kirst and Venezia in their research was, “Meeting high school graduation requirements will prepare me for college” – when in fact, as many readers already know, **courses required for high school graduation and four-year college admissions are generally not aligned**. Another of the student misperceptions Kirst and Venezia identified was, “Community colleges don’t have academic standards” – exposing a lack of awareness of the fact that just as in four-year institutions, students entering two-year institutions must complete placement exams in English and math.<sup>16</sup>

To address these misperceptions, a number of states have begun or implemented efforts to align high school curricula and/or assessments with college entry expectations. The 2006 ECS policy brief [Embedding College Readiness Indicators in High School Curriculum and Assessments](#) identifies various state approaches to ensure all students are getting the message on the skills and knowledge required for college readiness.

### ***Make available DIY college admissions counseling: state-supported college and careers Web site***

A growing number of states have developed Web tools designed to provide students with information on college preparation and the careers specific college majors or technical certification programs will prepare them for. The question is, again: how are students made aware of these tools, what are the mechanisms to provide them access to such resources during and outside the school day, and what preparation or guidance do they receive so as to make best use of these tools? If students are not aware of such tools, do not know how to use them (do not know the right questions to ask), or if students without Internet access at home have limited access to Web-connected computers while at school, they will do little to increase college access among those students who traditionally have the greatest need for this information – minority and low-income students and first-generation college-goers. **State and local policies should ensure every high school student is aware of the state’s college preparation Web resources and has the Internet connection, preparation and time to visit the site.**

### ***Provide the already college-bound track with accurate information on the transferability of dual credit courses***

Students who are taking advanced courses, such as dual enrollment, Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB) and honors may appear not to need college counseling – after all, it is likely that many, if not most students in such programs are there because they have their sights set on college. But taking such courses to create an impressive high school transcript is not enough.

Anecdotal evidence suggests many students in such courses are unaware that credits earned through dual enrollment programs may not be accepted for credit at all postsecondary institutions; that earning a “3” on an AP or a “4” on an IB exam will not automatically earn you credit at the college of your choice; and that state and institutional policies can vary considerably on the amount of credit and the types of courses for which credit is awarded for dual enrollment, IB and AP achievements. **State policies must clearly spell out for all dual credit students the awarding and transferability of dual enrollment credit, as well as AP and IB exam scores, for postsecondary institutions in the state.**

## **Conclusion**

The [U.S. Chamber of Commerce](#) reports that 90% of the fastest-growing jobs will require some form of postsecondary education.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, survey after survey of high school students reaches the same findings – 90% or more of U.S. high school freshmen expect they will attend college. However, these expectations for far too many students wane by the end of their high school careers, when they realize too late they did not receive adequate or accurate information earlier in their high school careers about the courses they need to take to be ready to apply for college. Along with [aligning high school curricula and](#)

[assessments with college entry expectations](#) and [involving families in high school and college expectations](#), providing all teachers with basic information about college admissions and expectations is another means ensure high school students receive important messages about college readiness early and often.

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## ***Helping State Leaders Shape Education Policy***

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<sup>1</sup> Andrea Venezia, Michael W. Kirst and Anthony L. Antonio, *Betraying the College Dream: How Disconnected K-12 and Postsecondary Systems Undermine Student Aspirations*. [report online] (Stanford: Stanford University's Bridge Project, 2003, accessed 13 March 2007); available from the Bridge Project: <http://www.stanford.edu/group/bridgeproject/betrayingthecollegedream.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> David Conley, *College Knowledge*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 19.

<sup>3</sup> Michael W. Kirst and Andrea Venezia, editors, *From High School to College: Improving Opportunities for Success in Postsecondary Education*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 143-144.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, 100, 101

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, 105

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, 103, 110

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, 101, 102

<sup>8</sup> *Betraying the College Dream*

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.nacacnet.org/NR/rdonlyres/6245DAEA-2DCB-4C5F-84BA-50D3F4124754/0/WhitePaper\\_McDonough.pdf](http://www.nacacnet.org/NR/rdonlyres/6245DAEA-2DCB-4C5F-84BA-50D3F4124754/0/WhitePaper_McDonough.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> *From High School to College*, 105

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, 74

<sup>12</sup> Peter Ewell and Marianne Boeke, *Critical Connections: Linking States' Unit Record Systems to Track Student Progress*. [report online]

<sup>13</sup> S.C. CODE ANN. § 59-59-200

<sup>14</sup> S.C. CODE ANN. § 59-59-100

<sup>15</sup> S.C. CODE ANN. § 59-59-105

<sup>16</sup> *From High School to College*, 295 (also available online

<http://www.stanford.edu/group/bridgeproject/10+Misconceptions.pdf> (accessed April 9, 2007)

<sup>17</sup> Institute for a Competitive Workforce, U.S. Chamber of Commerce *Leaders and Laggards: A State-by-State Report Card on Educational Effectiveness*. [report online] (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 2007, accessed 10 April 2007); available from U.S. Chamber of Commerce: <http://www.uschamber.com/icw/publications/default.htm>.