



## High School—Transitions to Postsecondary

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### Progress and Gaps in College Preparation Policy

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Most of the nation's eighth graders aspire to college. Unfortunately, however, the majority of them will not realize their ambitions to complete their higher education and gain some advantage in the job market.

In my research since 1998, I have not focused on students who seek acceptance at elite, selective institutions but rather on the 80% of high school graduates who attend what I call broad-access postsecondary institutions. (Nearly half of first year students attend community colleges, and another 30% go to four-year schools that accept all qualified applicants.) And I look back on the last decade with some gratification and much anxiety. I have seen some, but not nearly enough, progress among high school students when it comes to being ready to go to college and get their degrees. College completion rates are stagnant for recent high school graduates, with only 24% of community college students in California receiving a vocational certificate or an associate's degree, or transferring to a four year school after six years.

At community colleges, more than 60% of students who enroll after high school end up taking at least one remedial course. Four-year institutions like those in the California State University system have 56% of entering freshmen in remediation. Clearly, the connections between high schools and higher education institutions are still not what they should be to help students prepare for college.

There are no definitive costs of remediation, but a 2008 estimate for California by the Pacific Research Institute included \$274 million in direct costs for California postsecondary institutions, and several billion for remediation costs of businesses, diminished earnings of students, tax receipts and government costs.

Media attention to poor college preparation has grown exponentially in the last decade. The policy agendas of various states have focused increasingly on college-transition problems, and some policy makers have raised specific solutions. Thirty-seven states have established P-16 councils that enable the major state decision makers to deliberate on college transition issues. But few of those solutions deal with the magnitude or many dimensions of the problem, particularly financial incentives to increase college completion and aligned classroom instruction. Action beyond agenda-setting and policy discussions has been shallow and limited.

Moreover, evaluation of new policies, both the successes and the failures, to determine what works has barely begun. And enhanced awareness of inadequate college preparation and completion is largely confined to government leaders and policy elites, with little impact on teachers or administrators at the secondary or postsecondary level.

## Four Policy Levers

In 2005, I and my colleagues at the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education identified four state policy levers that are necessary for true reform to occur:

- Standards alignment between high school and college for courses, content and assessment
- Student financial support and incentives for higher education institutions to provide better student-support services
- A data system that tracks the progress of individual students from pre-K through college
- Accountability measures that link secondary and postsecondary institutions to student outcomes, like the completion of college.

## Some Progress but Not Enough

How far along are most states in putting such policies and programs in place?

The most progress has been made in aligning high school and college standards, led by groups like Achieve Inc., an organization established by governors and business leaders. Achieve is helping the Council of Chief State School Officers and National Governors Association to create a nationwide common core of curricular standards in English and math in 2010. More states such as Georgia and Texas are using, or considering the use of, assessments at the end of high school and other means of aligning curricula with college courses. Achieve has also worked to help establish high school graduation requirements and develop other programs to ease the school-college transition in 35 states.

But broad-access postsecondary institutions rely on placement tests more than admissions scores like ACT or SAT, and few statewide secondary school assessments are aligned with those placement tests or the content of first-year college courses. Colleges use many different types of placement assessments, and most high school students do not know what those assessments will cover.

Meanwhile, *Education Week's* "Quality Counts 2008," which grades states' policies and outcomes, found that just 15 states have a definition of college readiness, and only three (New York, Rhode Island, Texas) require all students to finish a college-preparatory curriculum to graduate. Many state governments have chosen the easy route of simply specifying course labels to be taken—like geometry or biology, or three years of math—without doing much more. Further, the hard work of getting secondary school teachers to work with their higher education counterparts on subject-matter course articulation between the 10th grade and sophomore year in college has barely begun.

## Changes Needed in Financial Aid and Incentives

Improvement of federal student aid policies depends in part on how Congress reacts to the Obama administration's proposals. Although some states are focusing more student aid on needy students who complete college-preparation courses, too much federal and state money still goes to students who are so unprepared that they have little chance of college success. Congress has increased Pell grant awards for each student and this will help with more aid, but does not address the preparation issue. The Obama Administration has proposed a significant simplification in the federal financial aid FAFSA applications that now make the long form income tax return look easy to complete. The Administration's proposals to shift more student aid to direct student loans, rather than using banks, may also help increase college access.

Financial aid is not designed well for 75% of the community college students who attend part-time and live off campus. Financial aid is insufficient, and hard for part-time community college students to obtain. Federal financial aid is less for part-time students, aid forms must be filed before students decide to go to community college, and there are not enough counselors for evening students. The Obama administration has proposals to solve some of these issues as well.

In addition, the use of state financial incentives to encourage college and universities to improve student outcomes has been largely unexplored. It is less expensive for most broad access public colleges to recruit a new student rather than provide services to retain a struggling student. And unlike elementary

and secondary education, the spending patterns within postsecondary systems and institutions are mostly a black box, so we do not even know where to start. It is extremely difficult to find out how much money is spent on remediation, adjunct versus full-time teachers, and counselors. For example, the California legislature appropriates money to the state's community colleges for keeping students through the third week of a class, but it requires no other student outcomes. How can we devise a K-16 state finance system that supports efforts to lessen the need for student remediation and stimulates higher education institutions to help more students obtain their degrees? The Gates and Lumina Foundations are funding experiments to address these issues, and the Obama administration has proposed \$2.5 billion in the 2010 budget for these purposes.

Theoretically, high schools and colleges could work together to design outcomes to meet outcome accountability targets, like the need for less student remediation. Then both high schools and colleges could be rewarded financially for outcomes they produce by working together. But we are still at the early stages of figuring out how to provide incentives and rewards for college persistence and completion. Florida has a complete K-16 data system that follows students from kindergarten through graduate school. Most states are making significant data improvements (partly with federal money), but are not close to Florida.

Underlying all these difficulties are the deeply rooted policy differences between the secondary and postsecondary systems. Meanwhile, there are few deliberative forums or interest groups that can bring together representatives from both educational levels to sustain momentum.

## **Steps Forward or Steps Back?**

The future is murky, with both good and bad scenarios possible. A more positive future would include working simultaneously on all four policy levers, and a commitment to build teacher capacity to align instruction across the K-16 system. A more negative scenario would be slow incrementalism that addresses parts of the problem in an incoherent manner.

Perhaps a secondary school-improvement focus in the No Child Left Behind reauthorization will galvanize faster and more inclusive improvement. Now states have an incentive to keep secondary school assessments below college level because more students will be able to become proficient by 2014. A differential federal policy could reward states with college level assessments by extending the federal proficiency deadline beyond the required date of 2014.

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