



Aligning Policies in High School and Higher Education To Support Student Success and Completion



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The Challenge of High School Reform

Most states have now established policies that effectively define college and career readiness as a core goal of high school education. This priority represents a natural continuation of a long tradition of policies and practices that have raised academic standards and broadened access to college-preparatory courses that were once the province of a privileged few.

Progress in increasing the proportion of high school students taking college-level coursework has been substantial. Today, roughly a third of all U.S. high school students take Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate courses, and enrollment in these courses has been growing steadily at 6% to 8% a year.¹

Dual and concurrent enrollment programs have been growing quickly as well, although the students targeted by such programs vary considerably by state. Today, more than 80% of all U.S. public high schools participate in dual enrollment arrangements with local institutions of higher education.²

Even in mathematics, which is broadly perceived to be a primary barrier to students' academic advancement, there has been remarkable progress. In 2011, roughly a third of all recent high school seniors who transitioned directly to higher education had taken calculus in high school. Only 30 years ago, fewer than half of American high school graduates had completed even Algebra I and geometry.³

But, while increases in advanced course-taking are good news by any measure, there is clear evidence that a significant majority of today's high school graduates are underprepared for postsecondary education.

A decade ago, about 54% of students who matriculated in postsecondary education earned a credential within six years of their

freshman year.⁴ In August 2012, ACT reported that 60% of high school seniors were at significant risk of failure in college, and a full 28% failed to meet any of ACT's college-readiness benchmarks (which cover material in mathematics, science, English, and reading).⁵

In addition, in ACT's analysis, more than half of all African American and Hispanic students failed to meet a single readiness benchmark. These data are especially sobering when one takes into account that ACT's college-readiness benchmarks are set at levels that correspond to students' having a 75% chance of earning a grade of C in a relevant college course.⁶

And, of the one third of students completing calculus in high school, more than half begin their college math career in a course they had completed in high school. As one measure of this failure to thrive mathematically, total enrollment of new freshmen in second-semester calculus has actually dropped from more than 112,000 students a year in the early 1980s to fewer than 85,000 a year today.⁷

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In many states, policymakers are betting that the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) will improve students' readiness for higher education. But, these new standards, which call for schools to help students to develop deeper disciplinary knowledge, the ability to productively engage with complex informational texts, and the capacity to demonstrate their knowledge on new types of assessments, will, at least in the short- and mid-term, decrease the percentage of students who meet college-readiness benchmarks. Early evidence for this claim comes from Kentucky, where Common Core-aligned state tests produced a significant decrease in students scoring at the proficient level.⁸

The political reality of these lower proficiency rates is that growing opposition to raising academic standards and to related curricular modernization efforts will continue to gain momentum and threaten hard-earned gains in the quality of American education. A related reality is that in the face of new standards that will further stress the capacity of our education systems, public support for the CCSS and the PARCC and Smarter Balanced assessment consortia will likely erode.

In fact, the 2012 Met Life *Survey of the American Teacher* found that fewer than a quarter of teachers and principals believe the CCSS will lead to greater learning, and insider surveys of state and national policymakers show a majority now believe both assessment consortia are "off track."⁹ Thus, policymakers and school officials committed to the CCSS and its objectives will be required to carefully manage public expectations and to design accountability and reporting systems that enable school systems to respond productively to the new demands being placed upon them.

One of the many challenges policymakers and education leaders will face is defending the appropriateness of single measures of college readiness given the enormous, and healthy, diversity of American higher education institutions. Citizens will continue to ask tough questions about the Common Core. Is *readiness* for the engineering program at MIT the same as *readiness* for our local community college allied health or welding programs? Is *college readiness* really the same as *career readiness*? And even harder questions will be asked about the validity of any measures of career readiness in a rapidly changing global economy.

To help address these definitional challenges, the National Academy of Sciences convened a study group, chaired by the distinguished learning scientist James Pellegrino (of the University of Illinois at Chicago), charged with defining the set of competencies at the heart of such constructs as **deeper learning, 21st century skills, and college readiness**. The study committee's report, *Education for Life and Work: Developing Transferable Knowledge and Skills in the 21st Century*,¹⁰ found limited evidence for many of the claims made by policy advocates concerning the validity of measures on these policy-critical constructs.

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The Challenge of Higher Education Reform

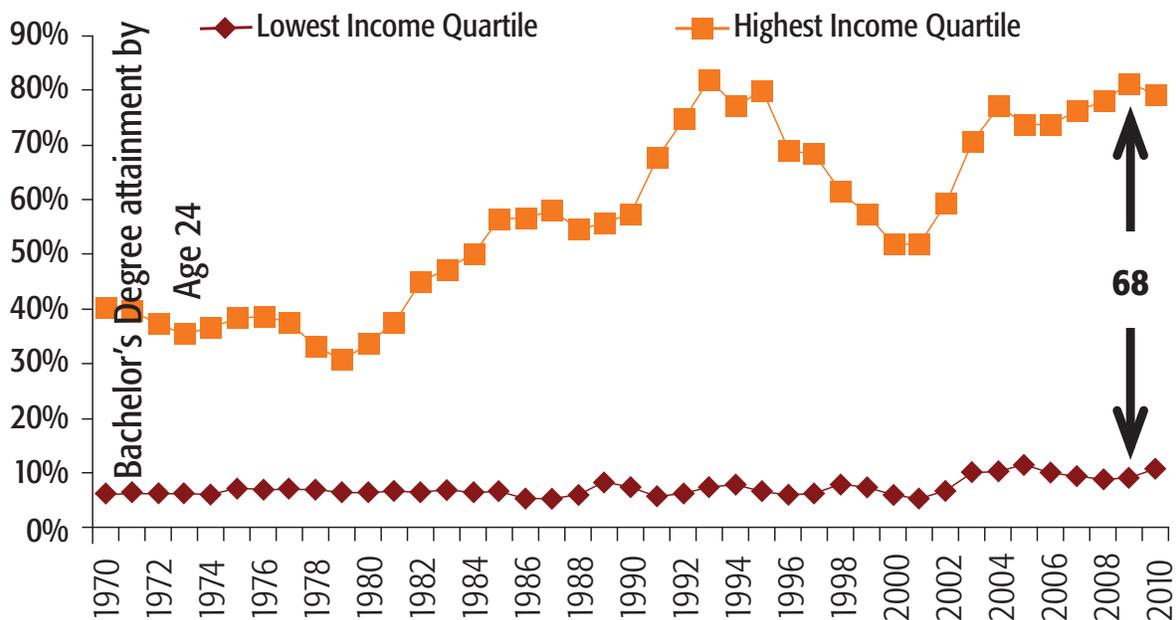
As states work to improve their K-12 systems, they are also—in the interest of maintaining or advancing their economic competitiveness—undertaking parallel reforms to increase the productivity of public higher education. Driven in significant part by the higher wages associated with completing a higher education credential, growth in higher education enrollment over the past two decades has been healthy. There has not been a concomitant increase in the proportion of students earning certificates, licenses, and degrees that have labor market value.¹¹ While the dominant arguments for increasing higher education attainment rates are framed in terms of future earning power and related tax revenues, policymakers should also attend to the growing evidence that degree attainment has other important benefits, including higher levels of civic participation and healthier lifestyles, some of which are passed down to degree holders' children.¹²

In this context of heightened focus on efficient attainment of a degree or certificate, reforming *remediation* (also known as developmental education) has taken center stage in many higher education improvement efforts. There is growing recognition that the remedial programs in open-access institutions are burial grounds for the aspirations of too many students seeking a better life through education.

And, among the academic challenges impeding these students' success, introductory mathematics classes can be particularly debilitating.¹³ Only 20% of students referred to developmental mathematics courses in community college complete a college-level math course within six years. Only about one in 10 community college students who are referred to remedial programs graduate on time, and only about a third of students in four-year institutions who begin in remedial courses graduate on time.¹⁴ For students starting in the most basic levels of developmental education, the results are far worse.¹⁵

Among the most important putative benefits of higher education is its role in facilitating upward social and economic mobility. But the data on degree completion—sorted by students' family income—show just how much work needs to be done if this hopeful goal is to be made a reality. There is a large, persistent gap between the higher education attainment rates of students in the bottom income quartile and those in the top quartile.

Table: Bachelor's degree attainment for high-income young people is 68 points higher than bachelor's degree attainment for low-income young people



(Source: This table was adapted from a table titled *Bachelor's Degree Attainment by Age 24 by Family Income Quartiles, 1970 to 2010*, used in a presentation by Kati Haycock, president, Education Trust.)

In essence, states must help bring about a significant shift in the imperatives of public higher education: from access and quality to access, quality, and *completion*. The policy wave is cresting, with growing numbers of states implementing changes in the financing of higher education that signal new priorities.

If states are to increase the proportion of residents completing certificates and degrees, both legislatures and the governing bodies of higher education systems need to **look afresh at established structures for developmental education**, which are shaped more by the weight of history than by the needs of today's economy and programs of study.

It's time as well to **reexamine policies that limit the transfer and accumulation of legitimately earned credits** as a step toward addressing what is, in too many cases, a landscape littered with credits lost not from student failure but from a lack of coherent, aligned institutional policies.

And states should also **assess counterproductive financial policies that work against low-income students' ability to attend school full time**. While it is imperative that federal financial aid policy be reformed, states must also examine the effects their financial aid policies have on the ability of students—and especially low-income students—to meet state completion goals.

And, perhaps, most importantly, states will need to **enact policies that hold the K-12 and higher education systems jointly responsible for students' successful transition to college**. New research on California's community colleges shows clearly that college practices are decisive determinants of students' success—even for students with virtually identical high school academic profiles.¹⁶

Bringing about needed changes in higher education will not be easy for institutional leaders. In the short term, adopting practices associated with higher completion rates can depress enrollment, thereby threatening institutions' financial viability.¹⁷ Indeed, many open-access institutions are seeing drops in enrollment of 10 to 20 percentage points after implementing practices such as denying access to students who cannot meet higher admissions standards, eliminating late enrollment (which has been shown to be associated with high dropout rates), and mandating attendance at orientations, which is a particular challenge for working adults.

And it is likely that colleges and universities will resist some calls for increased financial transparency and accountability, in part because of a legitimate fear that the unbundling of internal cross-subsidies will threaten their ability to provide public goods, such as the creation of new knowledge, one of higher education's primary contributions to society. Policymakers will need to be careful not to endanger the great strengths of American higher education but rather to ensure that institutional practices are aligned with their missions. These missions are compatible with increasing completion. But most state policies disproportionately incentivize attention to access. It's time to reset the balance.

The Challenge for Policymakers

The challenge for state policymakers is not only to promote the modernization of their K-12 *and* higher education systems, but to do so in ways that facilitate the seamless transition of students from one system to the next. Herodotus tells the story of the engineer Eupalinos, who coordinated the digging of an aqueduct through Mount Kastro by two teams that started at opposite ends of the mountain and aimed to meet in the middle. That nontrivial problem was solved using the mathematics that students learn in today's Algebra I and geometry courses. The task facing policymakers will require considerably more technical skill, as well as political prowess.

The natural place to start is in the complex landscape that constitutes the transition from high school to higher education. Some viable starting points include the following:

- States could revisit **existing K-12 structures that support college readiness**, including dual enrollment, Advanced Placement, and International Baccalaureate programs, early college high schools, and new career and technical education (CTE) arrangements such as those recently adopted in Nebraska to ensure that they are supporting their stated functions.
- States could also **focus on higher education structures that increase college success**, including early admission policies, summer bridge programs, co-requisite course sequences, and regional consortial arrangements (such as those in Long Beach and the Rio Grande Valley), that have dramatically improved college success rates of low-income students. The challenge will be to reconfigure the existing landscape of too-often-siloed individual, uncoordinated structures and strategies into coherent, aligned support systems that enable students to move quickly and successfully into higher education.

Perhaps the greatest practical problem faced by policymakers is to stand firm in resisting “magic bullet” solutions to this set of complex challenges. To echo Albert Einstein: When tackling a challenging problem, make everything as simple as possible, but not simpler. And, by all means, make sure you are working on the right problem.

Endnotes

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This paper is the first in a series of four.

1. [*Aligning Policies in High School and Higher Education To Support Student Success and Completion*](#) (Uri Treisman, Charles A. Dana Center, The University of Texas at Austin)
2. [*Bringing High School Students to College Readiness—Before High School Graduation: What Do Research and Experience Tell Us, and Where Do We Go from Here?*](#) (Jennifer Dounay Zinth, Education Commission of the States)
3. [*Solving the College Readiness Puzzle*](#) (Bruce Vandal, Complete College America)
4. [*The Importance of the Common Core State Standards and Assessments to Achieving K-12/Postsecondary Education Alignment*](#), (Paolo DeMaria, Education First)