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Multiple measures for college readiness

By Lexi Anderson and Mary Fulton

Roughly one third of all U.S. high school graduates do not enroll in college soon after earning a diploma.¹ There are many reasons why students do not do so, including work obligations, affordability concerns and lack of academic preparation. Yet research suggests that many of these students often aspire to a college education.² Helping these students turn aspiration into action is a policy priority for states.

One important factor in successful transitions for high school to college is demonstration of college readiness – traditionally measured by course seat time. However, as one strategy to enhance student transitions from high school to college, statewide and system-wide admission policies are beginning to assess college readiness through multiple measures.³ This ECS Education Trends report reviews these multiple measures, provides a deeper look at competency-based assessments and offers policy considerations for state and system leaders.

More states are considering multiple factors – including coursework, course rigor, GPA and assessments – for students to meet high school graduation and college admission requirements.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

At least 18 states have complete or partial alignment between high school graduation course requirements and statewide or system-wide admission standards.

Instead of completing coursework, a growing number of states allow high school students to pass competency-based assessments to demonstrate mastery of subject content. Colleges are just beginning to include these tests in their admissions process.

State, K-12 and higher education leaders should continue to work closely and explore and evaluate more effective measures to gauge students' college readiness and chances of success.



Current alignment between high school graduation and higher education admission requirements

As of the 2014-15 school year, 47 states have established minimum high school graduation requirements.⁴ Among them, 18 states have complete or partial alignment with statewide or system-wide minimum higher education admission course requirements. Historically, high schools and higher education institutions have worked toward graduation requirement and college admission alignment solely – or primarily – on course completion.

The 2014 ECS [Blueprint for College Readiness](#) examined the alignment of high school graduation course and higher education admission course requirements in the 50 states and District of Columbia. ECS' analysis found that six states have full alignment across course categories, including English, math, science, social studies and foreign language (Arkansas, Indiana, Kansas, Mississippi, South Dakota and Wisconsin).⁵

Of the 18 states with complete or partial alignment, 12 states are fully aligned in all content areas except foreign language. In these states, admission policies typically require completed units of foreign language courses, while high school graduation requirements allow for other content areas to fulfill this requirement, including career and technical education or performing/visual arts.

States are considering multiple options for students to show mastery of a subject in place of course completion or seat time.⁶ Higher education institutions also have expanded admission requirements to include indicators such as competency-based assessments, course rigor/curriculum, GPA, class rank and index scores.

Multiple measures of college readiness

To assess a student's college readiness, statewide and system-wide admission policies have started to include multiple measures in addition to classroom seat time.⁷ Providing multiple measures to show college readiness allows students to demonstrate mastery of content and their potential for success. Below are examples of the measures found in statewide and system-wide minimum admission requirements.

Competency-based assessments:

Competency-based assessments provide multiple pathways aside from seat time to earn credit for mastering a subject area.⁸ These assessments are provided at the high school and higher education level. A growing number of states' high school graduation requirement policies include multiple measures for students to show course content knowledge and mastery of a subject.

Course rigor/curriculum:

Rigorous high school coursework and an intensified curriculum have shown promise to increase enrollment in college, successful completion in first-year college courses and persistence into the second year.⁹ Aligning course rigor with higher education expectations also could reduce the number of students requiring remediation in college.

Grade-point average (GPA):

High school GPAs could be a more accurate indicator than standardized assessments to predict success in college-level courses. A recent Bates College study found that students who had strong high school GPAs performed well in college regardless of their lower standardized test scores.¹⁰ At least 20 states have GPA minimums as requirements in statewide and system-wide admission policies.¹¹

Class rank:

Class rank can provide higher education institutions insight into the predictive success a student might have in college. Nine statewide or system-wide admission policies include class rank.¹² A study conducted in 2012 found that class rank is a better or equivalent predictor of student success in college compared to standardized assessments.¹³

Assessments:

Several assessments are used to show college readiness for graduating high school students as well as first-year postsecondary students. These assessments can include Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), SAT, ACT and other college entrance exams. Twenty-four states use assessment scores in admission decisions, making assessments the most used metric in statewide and system-wide admission policies.¹⁴

Index Score:

Higher education admission policies can combine multiple measures into an equation to create an index score for college applicants. Typical elements of an index might include a student's GPA, class rank and college assessment score. Colorado, Iowa, Missouri and Utah use an index in their statewide or system-wide admission policies.¹⁵

The following section examines one of these multiple measures – competency-based assessments – and how states are beginning to respond to the innovative approach to gauging college readiness.

Portfolio

Some districts have created an additional graduation requirement where students must provide a portfolio of their work, such as writing samples, and assessment results that show mastery of skills and courses throughout their high school career. Many higher education institutions require a portfolio for students graduating with an undergraduate degree or even a master's degree. Portfolios are an innovative way to show a mastery of subjects and college readiness.

A deeper look at competency-based assessments

A significant shift is developing in U.S. high schools to emphasize the mastery of subject content and skills in addition to, or instead of, completing coursework as a means to satisfy graduation requirements.¹⁶ A similar trend is gaining traction at the postsecondary level as a growing number of institutions adopt competency-based education programs that allow students to advance through courses once they show proficiency. The acceptance of and interest in competency-based pathways potentially could merge at the intersection of high school graduation and college admission requirements.

At the high school level, several states allow students to pass competency-based assessments as a means to satisfy graduation course requirements.¹⁷ New Jersey school boards, for example, are required to establish a process for granting credits through assessments that verify students' achievement in meeting or exceeding the Common Core State Standards at the high school level. ([N.J. Stat. Ann. §6A:8-5.1](#))

Nevada school districts must allow students to receive credit without attending regularly scheduled classes if they successfully pass a performance examination selected by a committee of teachers and administrators. ([Nev. Rev. Stat. Ann. §389.670](#))

In Ohio, the state board, in consultation with the higher education chancellor, implemented a plan for students to earn high school credits based on a demonstration of subject-area competency, instead of or in combination with completing coursework. ([Ohio Rev. Code Ann §3313.603](#))

On the higher education front, only a few states or postsecondary systems appear to be incorporating competency-based measures into their admission policies. South Dakota's statewide admission policy allows students who do not successfully complete the specified years of coursework in English, math, science or social studies to meet the requirements through minimum scores on the ACT and AP exams. ([South Dakota Board of Regents Policy 2:3\(2\)A-2](#))

Under the University of Wisconsin System's admission policy, students may opt for a competency-based admission profile, which must indicate evidence of preparation in English, social sciences, math and natural sciences comparable to that of the traditional Carnegie unit structure. Admission requirements at individual institutions are equivalent to those for students who apply under the Carnegie coursework system. ([University of Wisconsin System Regent Policy 7-3\(I\)\(D\)\(2\)](#))

While competency-based admission options are fairly uncommon, states and systems might be prompted to adopt such policies as more students satisfy graduation requirements through proficiency exams and the Common Core-aligned assessments and similar college-readiness exams are more fully implemented.

Considerations for policymakers

States' efforts to increase graduation and college-going rates could be bolstered by ensuring a more seamless and successful transition for students between high school and postsecondary education. To achieve this goal, policymakers in most states will need to clearly define, align and communicate college readiness expectations; revisit the measures used to determine students' postsecondary readiness and chances of success; and encourage ongoing and meaningful collaboration among K-12 and higher education faculty and leaders.

More specifically, state leaders should consider the following policies and actions:

- ◆ Evaluate statewide high school graduation requirements and state or postsecondary system admission standards to find ways to better align the policies.
- ◆ Establish common language and clear benchmarks in the state's high school graduation and higher education admission requirement policies.
- ◆ Introduce early interventions for high school students not meeting graduation and college readiness standards by 11th grade.
- ◆ In addition to course requirements, provide multiple options for determining a student's level of college readiness and potential for success through indicators such as course rigor, GPA or class rank.
- ◆ Incorporate competency-based options, including assessments, for high school graduation and college admission to show students' subject-area proficiency.
- ◆ Create working partnerships between stakeholders at the high school and postsecondary levels, including teachers, faculty, administrators, governing bodies and policymakers, to develop or revise and periodically review graduation and admission standards.

As states move beyond coursework and ACT and SAT test scores to gauge students' readiness to graduate and succeed in college-level coursework, they should evaluate the effectiveness of the multiple and alternative measures that are used for these purposes. Moreover, state, high school and postsecondary leaders should regularly review how institutions weigh each measure, which therefore influence admission decisions. An in-depth and ongoing analysis should result in more informed policies and practices related to graduation requirements and admission standards.

The emergence of more rigorous college-readiness standards and assessments could present new hurdles for students who previously had moved from high school to higher education with relative ease. For students who typically struggle with or are overwhelmed by this progression, the new landscape of tougher requirements could pose additional barriers. A greater degree of collaboration, coordination and creativity will be necessary to more clearly define and closely align the expectations for high school graduates and success on college campuses.

ENDNOTES

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