

## **WISCAPE**

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### **State Strategies for Promoting Access and Retention in Postsecondary Education**

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### **State Policies to Increase Retention and Persistence**

#### **History of the high school-college connection**

High school and college have evolved along separate paths in the United States. From the inception of public education, the two systems have been relatively independent from one another. One of the primary reasons for this disconnect is the nature of educational governance. The United States has one of the most decentralized public school systems in the world. Without a strong national presence controlling and governing schooling, no governmental agency has been responsible for connecting pre-collegiate and postsecondary systems. K-12 education is characterized by independent school districts, currently about 15,000 in number. The postsecondary system began as a series of independent private institutions. By the time states began to establish colleges, a long history and tradition of independence existed among colleges and universities. The result of these historical antecedents is that few strong governmental mechanisms exist in states or at the federal level to connect secondary and postsecondary education.

Also compounding the dilemma has been the fact that American high schools have always been concerned with more than college preparation. Unlike secondary school systems elsewhere in the world that have functioned historically to channel students into different institutions based on test scores or other measures, the United States adopted the comprehensive high school model, particularly in the postwar era.

American education now has the most complex set of K-16 governance and policy mechanisms of any system in the world. All the complexity leads to serious difficulties getting them to function together well. The policies that connect the systems are largely the result of practice, rather than vice-versa. Common practices often become policy, rather than policy shaping practices designed to serve a social purpose. The effect has been to create a hodgepodge of policies and requirements for transition from high school to college. The more confusing a process, the more it favors the privileged, and the more difficult it is to establish accountability to improve the process.

As it stands, admissions and placement requirements are highly complex, from the students' point of view (and the counselor, teacher and parent, as well). While evidence suggests that students are vaguely aware of the general requirements, these do not necessarily direct student energy and effort very effectively. This is particularly true of college placement practices. The net effect is that many students view college preparation as a series of tasks to complete and not as knowledge to master and skills to develop. Subsequent to matriculation, they are often shocked and dismayed by the expectations faculty have for them. This results in the freshman year that serves as the *de facto* admissions process by weeding out students. This affects most significantly those students who received the least information about what they need to do to succeed in college.

### **Matching aspiration, preparation, and performance**

Against the backdrop of these policies, a range of surveys conclude that 90% of students entering high school say they are going to college. Although a large proportion of students take some form of a program of study that includes courses that meet some college requirements, far fewer take programs that meet all requirements and that include classes that develop the skills needed for success in college. Well over two-thirds eventually go on to postsecondary education. About 46% of those end up taking one or more remedial courses. Students who must take a remedial course in reading see their probability of graduating cut almost in half. More than half change institutions at least once. Measures of persistence-to-degree vary, but some indicate that in the best case about 63% of students entering all postsecondary institutions including community colleges earn a credential of some sort, not necessarily a college degree.

There is a mismatch among aspiration, preparation, and performance: Why?

### **Bridge Project Findings**

The Bridge Project studied student knowledge of the UC, CSU, and community college systems requirements. It conducted interviews and focus groups with 450 students at high schools in or near Sacramento, California, 25% white, 75% other races/ethnicities, predominantly middle and low SES.

The survey asked students to indicate all the types of college to which they aspired at 9th and 11th grades. Twenty percent of 9th graders aspired to community college; by 11th grade this had doubled to 40%. The proportion aspiring to a CSU campus increased by about 8%. Fifty-one percent of 9th graders aspired to UC Davis; this decreased by 11th grade to 45%, but those aspiring to other UC campuses increased by 10%. All racial groups aspired about equally to community colleges, but African-Americans had significantly lower rates of aspiration to all UC campuses and to CSU campuses other than the local CSU.

Most students get their information on college requirements from parents and teachers. The percent talking to counselors increases from 45% in 9th grade to 77% in 11th grade. Students also get information from older siblings, parents, and friends. The accuracy of this information varies greatly.

Students are realists. The stronger their GPA, the less interest in community college, and vice-versa. The “crossover point” GPA at which students shift their aspirations from community college to a four-year college is between a B- and a B. Significant differences in aspirations begin to come into play at the B+. Students getting Bs now represent a very wide continuum of college preparedness. This suggests a form of grade inflation or at least a lack of consistent school-wide grading standards.

The Bridge Project concluded that college preparation is knowledge-intensive. In general, that knowledge is more prevalent among the more privileged. Schools have few systematic means to ensure all students have this knowledge. Schools and communities face a serious challenge continuously educating students regarding college admissions requirements, since each year a new uninformed group enters. The effects are greater in communities with little previous experience with postsecondary education.

First-generation students face a series of unique problems and challenges. They lack familiarity and experience with the processes and may rely excessively on anecdotal information of dubious accuracy. Students may have unreal expectations fostered by inaccurate information or perceptions. These students are more easily influenced to make rapid and significant changes in their plans. College attendance has not necessarily been a life-long goal for the student or a family focus. These students are more oriented toward community colleges, and they need accurate information on requirements and financial aid to be readily available to them.

The college preparation and admission process is particularly complex and confusing from the perspective of the first-generation college attenders. The more complex a process, the more it favors those who understand the system and the more it disadvantages those who don't. One result of complexity is that it is easy for students to make bad decisions or to close off options without knowing they have done so. Despite some recent reforms, high schools continue to be largely fragmented experiences for students. High schools are not well organized to provide the type of support first-generation college attenders in particular need. More importantly, students can make many poor choices or fail to meet requirements for certain institutions, without knowing they have done so until it is too late.

This study did not investigate challenges associated with admissions tests (e.g., ACT, SAT, SAT-II), but these are significant. They include student registration problems, knowledge of deadlines, lack of access to preparation courses, and fee waivers. These tests pose a serious barrier to many students, not necessarily because of their content, but simply due to the procedural requirements associated with registering in a timely fashion.

### **What changes can high schools make?**

What can be done to resolve this dilemma? High schools and postsecondary institutions can begin to work together to develop a simplified system where students can't make bad decisions. The high school curriculum can be focused to a much greater degree on a common core of academic expectations aligned with college success. Each student can be expected to develop in eighth grade a personal educational profile that establishes the student's educational trajectory and exactly what must be done and when

to remain on that trajectory. Parents, teachers, and counselors can then review this document frequently.

High schools also must develop common standards for grading across similar classes, if they remain committed to course-based grading as their primary means of assessing student work. One way to do this is to work with postsecondary partners to produce exemplars of student work that illustrate acceptable performance in particular classes. The performance levels are keyed to what is necessary eventually for success in entry-level college courses.

A more fundamental change is to move from grades to proficiencies. Identifying what students need to know, what they actually know, and the gap between the two is a key capability high schools must possess if they are ever to prepare students better for college success. To achieve this goal requires clear, valid standards that connect with college success, an increased emphasis on assessment, and a reorganization of instruction to focus on the knowledge and skills necessary to achieve and demonstrate the proficiencies associated with postsecondary success.

### **What policy changes can states make?**

To achieve better alignment between high school preparation and college success requires a range of policy mechanisms and specific policies. As noted earlier, the K-12 and postsecondary systems operate in relative independence from one another. This is the first issue that will have to be addressed. Here are some suggestions on how greater alignment can be achieved.

In each state, K-12 and higher education systems must begin to meet on a regular basis to analyze how the systems align or fail to align from high school to postsecondary education. These meetings need to include examination of a range of policies. To facilitate this process the state would create a “high school-postsecondary articulation commission” composed of members of the state education department, the state postsecondary governance agency or agencies, and the governor’s office. This commission would be charged with a range of activities to bind the two systems together more closely, including addressing issues of articulation and expectations across system boundaries, determining how well students are making the transition from high school to postsecondary education, and recommending policies to increase the success of students as they transitioning from high school to postsecondary education.

By adopting broad goals, the Commission sets the stage for specific actions by both systems. The postsecondary education system’s charge is to develop statements of knowledge and skills for postsecondary success in a format that parallels state academic content standards. These standards are then cross-referenced to state standards and assessments to determine the match in expectations. Joint high school-college committees are convened to address the gaps and clarify overlaps in expectations to create a fully aligned system designed around progressively more challenging standards. The K-12 system is charged to modify its standards and assessments accordingly, and the postsecondary system modifies its admissions requirements and placement methods to bring the two systems into full alignment.

State government has a number of specific responsibilities in this scenario as well. The governor and legislature create a budget category for programs that span the K-12 and postsecondary systems and develop an interagency process for generating this budget

request. The Commission sets performance targets and timelines to reduce remediation rates, sponsors studies to determine the causes of freshmen failure, and develops policy changes to reduce remediation rates. The Commission then sets goals to increase the proportion of students from underrepresented groups who are prepared to apply to college. The state board of education and state education department are charged to develop and implement policies to increase the proportion of students from underrepresented groups that take college preparatory programs while in high school. The Commission organizes review teams that are charged to guarantee that the quality of college preparatory courses is adequate to ensure college success for all students.

Once a tight connection between high school exit criteria and postsecondary admission criteria exists, it is possible to examine placement and related policies more closely. The instruments used to make placement decisions and the courses into which students are placed become fully aligned with state standards, assessments, curriculum frameworks, and high school educational offerings. Similarly early admission, dual enrollment, and dual credit programs requirements are tied to the articulated standards and assessments. The policies postsecondary institutions follow to place students, waive or offer college credit based on Advanced Placement, SAT-II, or International Baccalaureate examinations also come into alignment with a more uniform set of expectations and standards. Finally, teacher education program content and exit standards are aligned with state content standards and K-12 assessments. New teachers demonstrate that they can teach to the standards and enable students to pass state assessments.

Requirements for financial aid and scholarships are also aligned to send a consistent message to students. The state education department and postsecondary education office are charged to make student data records fully compatible between systems to allow more complex information on student performance to pass from K-12 to higher ed more easily. Coordination with Tech-Prep programs is necessary to ensure students who pursue professional-technical programs do not have to do so at the expense of college preparation. This type of alignment allows for greater coordination and integration of outreach programs to increase the pool of students from underrepresented groups.

### **Moving the concepts forward with demonstration projects**

Federal, state, and local funds will need to be available for demonstration projects. The purpose of the demonstration projects is to create successful models of articulation and high student success rates. Successful projects then serve as the templates for state policies and programs.

States are already doing much of what is described here. However, no state has yet put all the pieces together. The next step will be to make all of these connections within one system, and to witness the major changes in governance and policy structures that occurs. The final test will be whether more students are prepared to succeed in college upon completion of high school.

## **Standards for Success**

A national-level process sponsored by the Association of American Universities and The Pew Charitable Trusts has taken the first step toward establishing a set of standards that identify what students need to know and be able to do to succeed in entry-level university courses. Standards for Success was sponsored and endorsed by 26 leading research universities. The project identified what students need to know and be able to do to succeed in entry-level university courses. The standards have been adopted by the College Board for inclusion as foundational elements in the 2005 version of the SAT, PSAT, and AP tests. The project has also developed a set of University Work Samples that identify what students are expected to do as well as the actual work they produce in entry-level university courses. These resources can be used as a starting point when developing standards that connect high school and college or in determining the expectations each system holds for students. For more information on Standards for Success, visit the website at [www.s4s.org](http://www.s4s.org).

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