

# ED477830 2003-01-00 Overcoming Senior Slump: The Community College Role. ERIC Digest.

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## Table of Contents

If you're viewing this document online, you can click any of the topics below to link directly to that section.

<a href="#">Overcoming Senior Slump: The Community College Role. ERIC Digest.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">NATURE OF THE PROBLEM.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">CONSEQUENCES OF SENIOR SLUMP.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">COMBATING THE PROBLEM.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">CONCLUSION.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">REFERENCES.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>



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## Overcoming Senior Slump: The Community College Role. ERIC Digest.

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A growing body of literature suggests that high school curriculum, especially during the

senior year, is greatly lacking in academic intensity. A recent report from the National Commission on the High School Senior Year indicates that students find the last year of high school to be "a waste of time" and "boring" (2001, pp. 16-17). Not only are students not being challenged during their senior year, they are also not preparing for college. The Education Trust reports that while almost three-quarters of high school graduates are entering higher education each year, only about half of these students have completed at least a mid-level college preparatory curriculum (4 years of English, and 3 years each of math, science, and social studies), and these numbers drop to about 12 percent when 2 years of foreign language and a semester of computer science are included (2001). These reports conclude that high school students need to be engaged in more rigorous coursework, and they advocate the involvement of higher education institutions in providing opportunities for high school students to enroll in more challenging courses. This digest will examine this high school curriculum issue, and in particular, its implications for higher education and the role that community colleges can play in combating "senior slump".

## NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

Rather than using the final high school year to prepare for college, an increasing number of seniors are studying less and electing to take less demanding courses (Kirst, 2001). According to Kirst (2001), this "senior slump" is due in part to higher education institutions failing to provide sufficient incentives for seniors to complete challenging coursework. College admissions decisions do not depend on second-semester courses or grades. Additionally, community colleges often send weak signals to high school students about the preparations they need to make in order to succeed in college - only when students arrive for orientation or registration are they informed that they must pass placement exams before they are allowed to take credit courses (Rosenbaum, 1998 as cited in Kirst, 2001).

## CONSEQUENCES OF SENIOR SLUMP

A wasted senior year of high school can result in negative social and economic consequences for students during college. Kirst (2001) indicates that students who waste their senior year, even if they engaged in challenging courses during their preceding years of high school, are often unprepared for college-level work and are more likely to drop-out. These claims are supported by recent studies by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). According to a study conducted by Adelman (1999), the strongest predictor of whether a student gains a bachelor's degree is the level of academic rigor of his or her secondary education, and Horn and Kojaku (2001) found that three years after entering a 4-year postsecondary institution, 87 percent of those students who had completed rigorous coursework in high school had persisted and remained continuously enrolled at a 4-year college or university, whereas only 62 percent of students who had not taken rigorous secondary coursework did the same. The consequences of "senior slump" are also reflected in the rising numbers of students

who must take remedial courses. Recent figures compiled by the NCES show that nearly half of all 4-year college students are required to complete at least one remedial course (Adelman, 1999), and the Bridge Project at Stanford University estimates that over half of the students entering community colleges directly from high school do not meet the placement exam standards (Kirst, 2001). Among those requiring remediation are students who took rigorous courses during their early years of high school, but because they wasted their senior year, forgot what they had previously learned. These students waste time and money by having to repeat topics they studied in high school instead of moving on to college-level work.

## COMBATING THE PROBLEM

Rather than blaming the K-12 system for their incoming students' lack of college preparation, community colleges are increasingly working together with high schools in programs of early intervention that combat "senior slump." This type of community college involvement is especially important in districts where high schools are unable to offer advanced courses due to staffing and financial restraints (Robertson, Chapman & Gaskin, 2001). Three types of community college programs that provide opportunities and incentives for high school students to be engaged in advanced and college-preparatory coursework are:

- \* **Concurrent Enrollment Programs:** These programs offer community college-level courses to high school students on either the high school or college campus. Students enrolled in these courses usually receive academic credit on both their high school and college transcripts. Policymakers praise concurrent enrollment programs for providing more academically challenging and rigorous coursework to high school students and for increasing student aspirations to attend college (Boswell, 2001).

- \* **Distance-Learning Courses:** An increasing number of community colleges are creating distance-learning courses specifically for high schools. These "virtual high schools" provide students with the opportunity to take advanced and more rigorous courses that are not offered at their high schools (Carr & Young, 1999, A53).

- \* **Middle College High Schools:** Middle colleges are high schools that are fully housed on the campuses of community colleges or universities. These schools explicitly target students who are identified by their teachers and counselors as being at-risk for dropping out of high school (Cunningham & Wagonlander, 2000). Students at MCHS's are encouraged to take advanced courses and may earn college credits and even an associate's degree by the time they graduate from high school. The National Middle College High School Consortium reports that middle college collaborations have resulted in improved school attendance rates, improved grades, higher high school graduation rates, lower dropout rates, increased rates of college attendance, and increased job placement rates (Cunningham & Wagonlander, 2000).

In addition to the benefits that students receive from engaging in rigorous courses,

these programs can also benefit students financially. Total college tuition costs can be reduced for students in these programs in two ways: (1) by accelerating progress towards an undergraduate degree, and (2) in many states, by providing totally or partially subsidized tuition costs for the college courses (Boswell, 2001; Carr & Young, 1999).

Community colleges can also benefit financially from these programs. Twenty-seven states allow both the K-12 school district and the community college to count concurrent students toward their enrollment numbers for state financial support (Boswell, 2001), and middle college collaborations allow both the high school and community college to apply for a broader range of grants and funding opportunities (Lieberman, 1998). Programs allowing high school students to take community college-level courses can also raise the image of a college's community service orientation, can serve as an excellent admissions recruitment tool, and can aid community colleges in attracting better-prepared students (Chapman, 2001; Lieberman, 1998).

## CONCLUSION

"Senior slump" in high school can have negative consequences for students in college, including higher remediation and drop-out rates. While the college admissions process may contribute to this slump by not stressing the value of the senior year, higher education institutions can help combat "senior slump" by collaborating with K-12 institutions in early intervention programs. Community colleges are involved in a variety of these programs that provide opportunities and incentives for high school students to engage in academically rigorous coursework. By providing advanced courses to high school students, community colleges are effectively working to reduce the social and economic costs brought about by "senior slump".

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