Research Brief

Transition from High School to College

Question: **What does the literature say about effective transition between the high school and post-secondary education?**

Summary of Findings:

In a Nutshell

A disturbing number of students leave college without completing their degree or earning the credential they sought. This problem, which is especially acute for poor, minority and rural students, results in a colossal waste of talent, money, and potential productivity. Effective strategies to promote college success must include attention to academic, social-psychological, financial, and practical impediments to college completion. Fortunately, schools can play an important role in preparing students to succeed, and the earlier they start that process, the more likely it will have a positive effect on their students. Programs offered as early at the middle school have been shown to make a difference in the success rates of these students when they reach college.

Why Is It Important?

According to a study in *Black Issues in Higher Education*, the number of students who actually complete college is remarkably low. About 58% of Asian-American and white students complete a bachelor's degree within 6 years of enrollment, while the completion rate for Hispanic students is 51% and for African American students a dismal 43%. The 4 year completion rates are much worse, ranging from an average of 38% for Asian-American students to just above 21% for Mexican American youth. Private colleges have a higher 4 year completion rate (about 64%) than public colleges (24%), and women generally complete college at higher rates than men.

These disturbing patterns are produced by a number of circumstances, including the skyrocketing cost of college attendance and the need for many students to attend part time or "stop out" in order to earn enough money for future terms. But a substantial number of students simply give up – victims of the impersonality of much college instruction, the normal dislocations that accompany being away from home, failure to monitor and manage their own behavior, the lack of basic skills and prerequisite content knowledge, and a failure to become members of the college academic community.

Because of the financial and human costs of this large college dropout rate, the problem has invited the attention of government agencies, college officials, researchers, policy makers, foundations and student advocacy organizations. From this extensive study over the past two decades, core elements of the problem and promising solutions have become more clear. Not surprisingly, many of these solutions reside in the high schools and communities that prepare students for post secondary education. Indeed, many of the issues that ultimately lead to failure in post secondary education can be mediated or eliminated by the quality of the preparation students receive from their high school experiences.

The Issues and Problems

The student affairs division at Midstate Technical College in Wisconsin have compiled a very basic list of the major differences between high school and college and how these differences affect student performance and success. Although the list is largely academic, this comparison begins to introduce some of the social issues that create problems for new students as well.

Personal Freedom. High school is mandatory and, for most students, free. College is voluntary and expensive, so no one feels particularly responsible for softening the demands on people who have

"volunteered" for the experience. High school is tightly structured and scheduled, and students are generally directed from one activity to another by adults. There is little free time and even less "free choice" time. College is just the opposite: students are expected to manage their time and tasks with little direction from adults. Students are faced with a large number of moral and ethical decisions they have not had to face previously. They must balance their own responsibilities and set personal priorities. The fundamental difference is that in high school, students will be told what their responsibilities are and will be corrected if they are out of line. In college, students are seen as old enough to take responsibility for what they do and don't do, as well as for the consequences of their decisions.

College Instructors and Instruction. High school teachers have been trained in both their content field and in methods for helping students learn the material; college instructors are experts in their fields, not necessarily in teaching. In high school, teachers stay after students to make sure their work is complete, correct and on time; they often cut students a break on missing or late assignments. In college, students are expected to assume responsibility for managing their work and all deadlines; late assignments are generally not accepted. High school teachers monitor student work and offer assistance if they see someone struggling with the material. In college, students are expected to monitor their own understanding and seek help when they need it. In short, in post secondary education, students assume the major responsibility for their own learning.

Studying. Much of the "studying" done in high school is relatively short bursts of test preparation. Reading assignments are relatively short, and the material from them is often re-taught in class, so reading an assignment once (or sometimes not at all) is enough to learn the content. In college, students are expected to study 2-3 hours for every hour spent in class. They are often assigned large amounts of reading and writing that may or may not be discussed in class, although it is expected that assignments will be completed prior to the class in which the topic is scheduled. The key difference is that in high school students are usually told in class what they need to learn from assigned readings. In college it is up to the students to understand the assigned material; lectures and assignments proceed from the assumption that they have already done so.

Testing and Grades. High school grades are typically based on numerous short assignments and tests, so it is possible to do poorly on one or two of them and still earn a decent grade. In high school, "mastery" is usually seen as the ability to reproduce the content that was taught; in college, mastery is generally viewed as an analytical task, often measured by the ability to apply the material to new, complex and novel situations and problems. Also, high school teachers are likely to award grades partly on the basis of "effort" and a student's willingness to work hard. In college, there are usually fewer, much longer assignments with absolute deadlines. The emphasis is on the product – and although, being human, professors may be willing to provide extra help for students who seem to work hard and have a real interest in the subject, they are unlikely to base a substantial portion of a student's grade on these "soft" criteria.

The Impact on Students and Parents

Jess Shatkin and the Child Study Center staff at New York University have examined both the literature and their own experiences as college student advocates to identify some of the critical issues students face in post secondary education. In addition to the academic issues noted above, they pay particular attention to the psycho-social aspects of college transitions.

"College provides a time of socially recognized independence from parental rules and restrictions. Although the legal age of adulthood varies for such things as voting and drinking, going to college is an obvious sanctioned move towards independence. However, independence is not conferred automatically at a certain age or in a specific place. It is achieved by practicing how to think for oneself and take

responsibility for one's actions. College students can feel invincible and able to take risks. But both the opportunities and the consequences can be high. The college freshman will be confronted with abundant pressures related to social situations -- sex, drugs, alcohol. With respect to academics, students today are feeling increasing pressure to know what they want to do, pick a career path, and plan for their future. This pressure is causing unfortunate substance abuse, anxiety and even depression.

Challenges for the college student

Fitting in

It can be daunting to leave the security of family and friends. When going to college, students often must leave, or give up, one group (of family and friends) then accommodate and learn about a new group. It can be stressful to analyze new social norms, learn a new set of behaviors, and consider adopting a particular identity and group affiliation. The opportunities can be exhilarating but the choices should not be made hastily.

Balancing socializing and working

College offers an assortment of opportunities for advancement and distraction -- there are so many potential friends, parties, courses, things to do, places to go. Not knowing what direction is best and not wanting to miss out on anything, students often try to be included in everything.

Knowing when help is needed

Students often doubt their ability to handle their course work and may be bothered by new and unexpected feelings, precipitating a downward spiral. There is also an increased risk of certain disorders in the teen and young adult years (e.g. depression, manic depressive illness, and anorexia). Students may find themselves seeking out a mental health professional for the first time. The right help at the right time can prevent problems from snowballing.

What the college student can do

- Explore new interests, discover new places, and meet new people. These experiences contribute to college life, but getting an education should remain the student's foremost purpose.

- Before committing to any one group or trend, students should take their time getting to know other students, investigating different activities, and deciding what makes them feel most comfortable. Affiliations change a great deal over the course of the first year as students become more knowledgeable and confident.

- Participate and prioritize. No one can do everything. When students narrow their focus they often feel less overwhelmed. Finding a passion is one of the most exciting aspects of the college experience.

- Personalize the experience. It's easy for students to feel lost in the crowd. Students who take responsibility for their education by seeking out particular adults often have the best experience.

Getting to know professors will personalize college and help the student feel connected to an institution that may seem impersonal.

- Be patient. It takes time to understand the rhythm of a new academic life and for students to develop a personal learning/studying style. Over the first semester it becomes easier to understand the flow of work and realize how to accommodate different teachers' standards and course requirements.

- Evaluate the fit. Assessing how expectations meet reality during the first year is a necessary process. Some disappointment or surprises are not unusual and may require some fine tuning; adjusting one's course load, changing majors, rethinking involvement in activities. Sometimes a school turns out to be different from what was anticipated or students learn more about what truly will suit their needs. Students should get guidance and explore options and certainly consider changing schools if that's what seems best.

- Never ignore a problem. Both academic and emotional challenges are most successfully managed early when small." (Shatkin and Child Study Center Staff, NYU)

Shatkin and his colleagues do not ignore the profound effect that a child's departure for college has on parents, either. In fact, this impact may be so great that parents may actually discourage students from attending college, either purposefully or unwittingly. This problem is especially acute among parents who have not attended college themselves, so they can imagine many of the risks without having experienced the personal growth that comes from a student confronting challenges on his or her own. The Child Study Center staff offer this analysis and recommendations:

Challenges for Parents

"Moving on to college represents a significant step towards adulthood. Whether the student lives at home or goes away to attend college, the move represents an emotional separation for both parents and child. For most, the end of high school marks the symbolic end of childhood. This phase of life, especially when the student moves from home, is often referred to as "the empty nest." Many parents talk enthusiastically about the changes—they feel less constrained, have more free time, and no longer endure loud music or competition for the phone, computer or car. But a sense of loss is apparent in comments such as 'it's so quiet around here' or 'I can't believe how much less I spend on groceries.'

Feeling a void

Feelings of emptiness characterize this stage of separation—there is vacant time and cleaned-out rooms. Parents may feel unprepared or uncomfortable without their role as primary caretaker and protector. Parenting is a tough business and a double-edged sword; successful parenting requires devoting one's life to a totally dependent being to ensure a safe, independent departure into the world —leaving parents behind. Joy may be mixed with longing as the young adult takes flight from home base.

Feeling left out

Adjusting to being on the outside can be difficult when parents are no longer needed in the same ways. Even though students may have been somewhat independent while still under their care, supervision, and

roof, once in college parents are less privy to every aspect of their child's life; they no longer know the details of their son's or daughter's whereabouts and are not able to pass judgment on all their friends.

Relinquishing control

It is necessary to give up some parental control. Whether it's giving advice about selecting courses or drinking parents have to come to realize that young adults must make their own decisions. Relationships grow and change as children grow and change.

What parents can do

- Redirect time and energy previously focused on the child. Taking stock of personal interests and assets will reveal areas of life that may have been neglected. It can be time to develop, reawaken, and pursue old and new hobbies, leisure activities, and careers.

- As they play a new role in their child's life, parents must readjust their identity as parents and as a couple. The goal is to develop an adult-to-adult aspect of the parent-child relationship. Children always need parents, but the relationship may become more peer-like. Accepting that adult children want more privacy in certain areas of their lives is part of this process. If there are other children still at home, the entire family structure will change.

- Ideally, discussions about values, which have occurred throughout the child's life, serve as a foundation. Before the send-off however, it is useful to re-discuss specific issues, since college students are usually confronted with situations involving sex, drugs, and alcohol as well as tough academic and interpersonal issues. Without moralizing or criticizing, even young adults benefit from hearing their parents' views on these issues.

- Address individual needs. Parents should investigate and inquire about available resources. Arranging for necessary services for students with a learning disability, mental illness, or physical condition should be done preventively. College staff are specially trained to work with students of this age and these specialists should be identified prior to arrival.

- In the event of a crisis, it is preferable to support the student's own coping and problem-solving abilities rather than to rush in as savior, however difficult it is to hear cries of distress. Crises described from afar often sound worse than they are and can often change dramatically in the course of a few minutes or days. Parents, however, know their child best and must assess when their child needs their more direct help.

- Guide rather than pressure. Communicating educational goals and expectations should be done in a manner respectful of the student's own style and interests. College students need to pursue their own passions. Although parental input can be useful children should not be expected to live out their parents' dreams. Focusing on "my daughter the doctor" or "my son the lawyer" is unproductive. Parents must allow for the candlestick maker to emerge if that's what is best. College should be a time of self-discovery even if the process is marked by some fits and starts.

- Plan ahead. In addition to all the details of hauling stuff off to campus and buying just the right desk lamp, deciding about such things as checking accounts, phone cards, and spending money before hitting the road is useful.

- Determine appropriate expectations and guidelines and be explicit. Parents should anticipate future events and discuss issues such as curfews, financial contributions and roommate arrangements with romantic partners directly with the young adult. If parents expect or want a weekly phone call, they must say so. If parents and students want to spend a particular holiday together, they should plan ahead.

- Allow for mistakes. Parents must encourage and accept the child's ability to make independent decisions. Both the college student and the parents must realize mistakes will be made along the way - it's called life experience. Learning from mistakes is another type of learning." (Shatkin and Child Study Center Staff, NYU).

The Special Case of Poor Families

For poor and near-poor parents, these may look like pretty easy problems to solve. Often, a child's departure means that a significant source of family income has been cut off, or that resources necessary to support a child at school must be diverted from pressing needs at home. In these cases, it is essential that communities work with families before the college application and admission process starts so that they can begin to understand both the benefits of college for their child and how they might be able to make adjustments that allow them to cope with changes in family income or resource demands. Specific recommendations are provided later in this brief.

Rural Students

Rural students face special challenges when attending college, especially away from home. According to Douglas Guiffrida (n.d.) rural students from small high schools may be overwhelmed by the size and complexity of large institutions that offer many choices and options. They can also be intimidated by the diversity on a large campus – a factor that is very different from the relative homogeneity of their home communities. Finally, rural students who attended smaller schools in which teachers monitored their behavior and academic progress and often anticipated their needs may be very uncomfortable taking proactive measure to get help or advice in the larger, more impersonal college setting.

Another unique issue facing rural students is that parents may actually discourage college attendance, either purposefully or unwittingly. Many fear that once their child goes away to school, it is likely that he will prepare for a career that can be pursued only in a distant city or more developed area. In essence, in the minds of these parents, leaving home for college means leaving home for good. In a study of West Virginia students, Chenoweth and Galliher (October, 2004) found that parents who reported these types of fears actively discouraged their children from participating in a college-prep program and failed to participate in parent-involvement activities designed to help them learn about college options for their children.

Guiffrida offers suggestions for rural schools that wish to help their students prepare for the challenges of college, especially in a larger institution. Effective schools:

- encourage their students to become acquainted with the campus before they attend by doing research in advance of campus visits or discussing the school with alumni either by phone or email;

- help them become comfortable with racial and ethnic diversity throughout their high school experiences by encouraging them to learn about other cultures present on campus and interact with other cultural groups at every opportunity;
- encourage them to join extracurricular activities and to be prepared for more passive forms of involvement than they may be accustomed to in their rural high schools;
- expose students to a plethora of occupations beyond those typical of their home environments in order to reduce the risk of students becoming overwhelmed by the extensive choices available to them at large colleges and universities;
- encourage them to adapt to their surroundings and to seek help from student support services, including counseling and advising services, as needed.

Rethinking College Preparation

Conley (October, 2008) and his colleagues at the Education Policy Improvement Center in Eugene, OR, studied 38 high schools that did an exceptional job of preparing students for college success. Beyond the lists of courses that comprise many definitions of "college readiness," Conley digs deeply into the predispositions and habits of mind that affect college performance. In his useful and engaging article, he describes the "Big Four" strategies, quoted here, that students must master for college success:

> **Key Cognitive Strategies**
> Colleges expect their students to think about what they learn. Students entering college are more likely to succeed if they can formulate, investigate, and propose solutions to nonroutine problems; understand and analyze conflicting explanations of phenomena or events; evaluate the credibility and utility of source material and then integrate sources into a paper or project appropriately; think analytically and logically, comparing and contrasting differing philosophies, methods, and positions to understand an issue or concept; and exercise precision and accuracy as they apply their methods and develop their products.
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> **Key Content Knowledge**
> Several independently conducted research and development efforts [on college success] all identify a manageable set of big ideas, key concepts, and organizing principles that form the structure of each academic subject area, and they emphasize the importance of students making connections among the big ideas. This focus on the *structure* of knowledge enables students to scaffold their understandings in a way that postsecondary education can build on.
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> **Key Self-Management Skills**
> In college, students must keep track of massive amounts of information and organize themselves to meet competing deadlines and priorities. They must plan their time carefully to complete these tasks. They must be able to study independently and in informal and formal study groups. They must know when to seek help from academic support services and when to cut their losses and drop a course. These tasks require self-management, a skill that individuals must develop over time, with considerable practice and trial-and-error.
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> **Key Knowledge About Postsecondary Education**
> Choosing a college, applying, securing financial aid, and then adjusting to college life require a tremendous amount of specialized knowledge. This knowledge includes matching personal interests with college majors and programs; understanding federal and individual college financial aid programs and how and when to complete appropriate forms; registering for, preparing for, and taking required admissions exams; applying to college on time and submitting all necessary information; and, perhaps most important, understanding how the culture of college is different from that of high school.

The Conley study also reveals specific practices that the most effective schools use to prepare their students for college – in other words, to achieve "college readiness."   Because the sample of schools represented all types of high schools and a tremendously diverse student population, these principles are good starting points for any school interested in improving their students' chances for success:

Principle 1: Create and Maintain a College-Going Culture

High schools with a college-going culture project the pervasive, schoolwide belief that all students can succeed in postsecondary education. The question for students is not whether to attend college, but how to prepare for college and how to make the transition successful. [These] schools used a range of practices to create a college-going culture:

- automatically enrolled students in a program of study designed to prepare them for college;
- posted college acceptance letters prominently so that all students were aware of their peers' success;
- at award ceremonies, focused on students' academic accomplishments and recognized students who had been accepted to college;
- required all students to apply to at least one postsecondary institution.
- Faculty advisors met with students monthly to review grades, discuss course selection, and develop strategies to overcome any learning obstacles;
- college counselors worked intensively with 12th grade students, providing technical support related to college application, choice, and financial aid;
- arranged multiple visits to college campuses to demystify college, especially for potential first-generation college attenders;
- required a Senior seminar for all 12th graders, provided information, financial aid applications, encouragement, and support.

Principle 2: Align the Core Academic Program with College Readiness Standards

These schools…strove to align course expectations, assignments, goals, and activities vertically across grades 9–12, using a set of college readiness standards as the reference point.

They also required all students at a given grade level in a given subject to complete a common performance task. For example, a school might require all students taking a sophomore English course to complete the same writing task, which their teachers scored using common criteria.

Principle 3: Teach Key Self-Management Skills

[Schools used] numerous strategies and programs designed to help students improve their study skills; collect, organize, and retain factual information; take better notes; manage their time more effectively and efficiently; work in teams; and reflect on the quality of their work.

Students in one rural high school assembled work samples regularly, self-assessed their performance using a common scoring guide, and subsequently led a conference with their advisor and parents in which they presented and assessed their work and set goals. Many schools provided day planners or other time-management tools. Some schools went further by monitoring students' use of these planning tools.

Principle 4: Prepare Students for the Complexity of Applying to College

Because many of the schools we visited had large concentrations of students who would be first-generation college attenders, educators provided college information to these students repeatedly and systematically during all four years of high school. Some schools required all students to take one or more college readiness tests, such as the American College Testing Program's EXPLORE, PLAN, and ACT series or the College Board's PSAT and SAT. Student advisors helped students interpret the results and use them to become more college-ready.

Conley and the EPI Center offer
a series of tools that allow schools to determine how well they are preparing students for college. These tools can be accessed at the Center's website: http://www.epiconline.org/college_ready_services.

Ideas That Work

In addition to the recommendations from the research cited above, dozens of excellent suggestions for how schools can support college success are available from schools, colleges, and student advocates. These practical, successful practices can be found in the "Additional Resources" section at the end of this brief.

Many of them are easy to start right away; others require more careful planning and scheduling. All of them are useful tools, though, for helping students succeed.

References and Resources

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