



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

About College Access and Success

What is the “achievement gap” and how serious is it?

The achievement gap refers to the discrepancy in academic achievement among different ethnic groups and/or socio-economic groups. High school graduates from lower-income families and those from racial and ethnic minority groups are far less likely to enroll in college than other students. Of those who do enter college, many never complete a college degree. This leads to a cycle of discouragement for students, a squandering of their talents, and an inefficient use of public and private resources.

Aspirations alone are insufficient for students to achieve their potential. Although during the mid-1960s, Congress passed a number of laws, such as the Higher Education Act, to promote equal educational opportunity for low-income and minority students, the achievement gap persists. High school graduation, college enrollment, and degree completion remain strongly related to income and race. Only 61 percent of young people from low-income families can expect to graduate from high school, and just one in three will enroll in college.¹ By their late 20s, more than 30 percent of Whites have completed four or more years of college, but fewer than 20 percent of African Americans and only approximately 10 percent of Hispanics have done so.²

Is college the best option for all students? If not, why prepare all youth for college?

Educational and economic opportunity is part of the American Dream that now requires a postsecondary degree. Research provides compelling evidence that when children are given a challenging academic curriculum and are supported by skilled teachers with high expectations, they can and do achieve at high levels.³ We need an educational system that expects and encourages students from all backgrounds, from pre-school on, to prepare for postsecondary education and succeed once there, regardless of the form of education they plan to pursue.

Today, college readiness and job readiness require similar skills and competencies. Successful performance in the 21st century workforce requires reading and mathematics proficiency comparable to the levels needed by individuals entering college.⁴

One of the most important choices youth have to make is whether or not to attend college. To ensure that all youth have this choice, a college-preparatory curriculum should be the default educational preparation path for all students.

Can we afford to send everyone to college?

We can't afford *not* to send our students to college. The US is facing a shortage of skilled workers, and advanced skills are critical for both individual success and a competitive economy.⁵ Everyone benefits when all students can fulfill their potential and earn a college degree. Twenty-four of today's 30 fastest growing occupations require a postsecondary credential for most workers.⁶ Greater access to a college degree will lead to a more

skilled workforce and a more prosperous America. In 2005, median earnings for a full-time worker between the ages of 25-34 with a bachelor's degree were \$13,900 higher than those of a high school graduate. The gap increased to \$22,900 for workers between the ages of 45-54.⁷ Not only does this earnings disparity limit life opportunities for individuals, but collectively it has a major impact on our national fortunes, shrinking Gross National Product (GNP) and tax revenues. According to one study, if minority participation in higher education equaled that of Whites, over \$231 billion a year would be added to the GNP, and \$80 billion in additional tax revenues would be collected.⁸ As our population becomes increasingly diverse through immigration and other factors, failure to educate underserved students will have potentially devastating effects on our future prosperity.

What prevents students from going to college?

Most young people in our society hope and plan to enter college, but too many confront significant obstacles along their educational journey. Historically, students from low-income families, students of color, and students with disabilities have had limited opportunities to attain college educations. Many underserved students attend schools that lack a rigorous college preparation curriculum, lack qualified teachers and counselors, and have insufficient financial resources. These students don't know what actions they need to take to plan for college, and they may not have support from adults and friends who can guide them. Often, as a result of social or linguistic barriers, their families do not have ready access to college planning information. Financial aid support to complete college is typically insufficient to address the needs of low-income students, who may therefore be unable to enroll in college. The educational pathways that lead to college and promising careers remain blocked for too many young people.

Why do so many students who start college leave before finishing degrees?

Many students are inadequately prepared for the challenges of college and may leave due to discouragement at the difficulties they experience with demanding college-level academic work. Problems caused by poor preparation are hard to overcome because many colleges do not provide students with the academic and social support needed to develop the reading, writing and study skills necessary for college-level work. In addition, because many students lack sufficient funds to cover the costs of attending college, students often work 20 hours a week or more, leaving them insufficient time for studying or seeking help from professors or peers.

How does financial aid impact decisions about college?

Low-income students face formidable financial barriers to college, and adequate financial assistance is critical to support their college enrollment and persistence.

In 1972, Congress created Basic Educational Opportunity Grants (now Pell Grants), the first federal grant program to award financial aid directly to low-income students. Financial aid, however, has not kept pace with increasing college costs or with inflation and often pays for only a portion of what low-income students need to attend college. Even with grant aid to assist with tuition and fees, after costs such as room, board, and transportation are included, attendance at a public four-year college costs an average of 47 percent of the annual income of low-income families, and a private four-year college costs 83 percent.⁹

What does the Pathways to College Network mean by "college?"

"College," as the Pathways to College Network uses the term, includes two- and four-year degrees as well as high-skills certificate programs.

What is an “underserved student,” as defined by the Pathways to College Network?

By “underserved student,” the Pathways to College Network means low-income students, students who are the first generation in their families to complete college, underrepresented minorities, and students with disabilities. While Pathways focuses on youth, we also recognize the importance of improving postsecondary access for adults who need further education in order to achieve their goals.

When do students need to begin preparing for college?

As early as possible. Even in preschool, students begin laying the foundations for college work. By kindergarten, students begin the crucial process of learning to read. By third grade, children need to have acquired strong reading skills as a basis for successfully progressing and being prepared for rigorous middle and high school courses. Middle school is where students need to develop the study habits for rigorous college preparatory courses, begin learning about the educational prerequisites of different careers, and complete Algebra I in preparation for advanced math courses in high school.

What is meant by a “college-going culture?”

A “college-going culture” is a constellation of school expectations, values, and activities that comprehensively supports a vision of college opportunity for all students. In schools with a college-going culture, teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators believe that all students are capable of high academic achievement and preparation for success in postsecondary education and work. Such schools have high academic expectations for every student, regardless of racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, or disability status. A school with a college-going culture provides all students with the rigorous coursework and academic and social support needed to succeed in postsecondary education and work.

Why is it important to have “high expectations” for students?

Research and effective practice strongly suggest that students will rise to the challenge when we have high expectations for their academic success. High expectations motivate students to achieve and to make earning a college degree a personal goal. Students need a rigorous curriculum and support from teachers, family, and peers to prepare for college access and success. Effective college opportunity programs must reinforce high standards and explicitly articulate acceptable levels of academic performance.

What is meant by a “college-preparatory” curriculum and “college-readiness?”

A “college-preparatory” curriculum implies four years of English, three and preferably four years of math, three years each of social science and laboratory science, and two years of a second language. “College-readiness” implies that all entering freshmen should be able to enroll in college-level courses without first requiring remedial coursework.

What is the single most important action that our leaders need take in order to make college access and success a reality?

Leaders need to change how they think about and how they act on who should go to college. A college degree is part of the American dream and a path toward greater economic opportunity. Universal college-readiness and achievement—with a focus on increasing access and success for underserved students—is a new paradigm for education and for the country. Completing a college education must become an attainable goal for all young people, just as graduating from high school has been in this country since the mid-1950s. Leaders across all sectors of society need to embrace this idea and help convince others that this change is urgently needed.

References

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The Pathways to College Network, a national alliance directed by TERI, advances college opportunity for underserved students by raising public awareness, supporting innovative research, and promoting evidence-based policies and practices across the K-12 and postsecondary sectors.

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