

Building a Pipeline for College Access and Success

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The message that college matters is getting through to more and more young people. In survey after survey, more than 90 percent of young people say they want to go to college. And indeed, the percentage of high school graduates who continue their education the next fall rose from about 50 percent in 1980 to more than 60 percent by the mid-1990s. Young people understand that a middle-class lifestyle increasingly requires at least an associate degree.

Not only do young people want to go to college, but they will go to incredible lengths to overcome barriers. Among high school dropouts, according to a recent analysis by Boston-based Jobs for the Future, more than half find their way back to secondary learning programs and ultimately earn a high school diploma or GED. Remarkably, six out of 10 high school dropouts who earn a diploma or GED enroll in some college program by the time they reach age 25, according to a Jobs for the Future analysis of data from the National Education Longitudinal Study.

Yet the percentage of college students actually completing a two- or four-year degree has not increased significantly in more than 30 years. About 30 percent of incoming ninth-graders do not graduate from high school four years later. And too many students who start college fail to earn a degree: about half of all community college students and one in four students in four-year institutions are gone by the start of their second year. College students who earned a GED rather than a high school diploma have a very slim chance of success: fewer than 5 percent earn any college credential.

The message that isn't yet getting through to students, their parents and their schools is that to succeed in college, you need to be academically ready to do college-level work. Just showing up isn't enough. College completion correlates highly with academic preparedness for college-level work. Yet, according to one study, only 32 percent of high school graduates are academically prepared for college-level work with no remediation. According to the U.S. Department of Education, more than six in 10 community college students and four in 10 four-year college students need to take at least some remedial coursework.

College readiness is distributed quite inequitably. The lower your family income, the more likely that the combination of family background, community of residence and school and teacher quality will leave you unprepared for college success—whether or not you get a diploma after 12th grade. The overwhelming

majority of low-income young people who enter college are at best minimally qualified for college-level work.

It is not surprising—though it is shocking—that while about 70 percent of young people from the most affluent fifth of our nation's families complete college, only a little more than 10 percent of young people from the least affluent quintile ever earn a college degree. While many factors that correlate with income contribute to this disparity, there is no question that academic preparedness for college is a major determinant of who succeeds and who doesn't.

A divide

It would be easy to pin the blame for this situation on the K-12 system and leave it at that. If high schools (particularly urban high schools) better prepared students of all income backgrounds, colleges would enroll and graduate them. But that would be misreading both the problem—and a significant part of the solution.

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To reduce the high attrition among students before they complete college, we need to overcome the long-standing separation between K-12 and higher education systems, each of which developed in isolation through much of the 20th century. The disconnects between these systems—with their distinct and discontinuous academic standards, financing, accountability mechanisms, information management, and governance—create significant obstacles to successful transitions through college, particularly for students with little or no family experience with college-going.

At the same time, policy efforts to overcome that separation—which are beginning to emerge in various states—can make a large contribution to helping more young people make it through college.

Think pipeline

Increasingly, governors and state policymakers are reconceptualizing public education as a K-16 (or perhaps better yet, Pre-K-20) “pipeline” rather than a set of distinct systems. The metaphor makes visible how

students “flow” in and out of different institutions, at which points and for which students the leaks are most serious, and how to target institutional and systemic improvement efforts to plug the leaks. In this framework, high school completion becomes a means rather than an end, a transition point in the progression to a college credential.

A recent book of essays edited by Jobs for the Future staff (*Double the Numbers: Increasing Postsecondary Credentials for Underrepresented Youth*, Harvard Education Press, 2004) points to a set of policy approaches that echo the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education’s findings on how states can best pursue K-16 reform. [See “Levers For Change,” p. 16.]

Alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. While most states are working hard to raise standards for graduating from high school, even those that have made the most progress peg exit exams to 10th-grade rather than 12th-grade skills. The recent National Education Summit on High Schools has recommended ways that states can raise the bar, such as requiring a college-prep curriculum, giving college assessments to 10th-graders, matching college placement exams and high school exit tests and creating financial incentives for lower-income students to take advantage of Advanced Placement (AP), dual enrollment and other college credit opportunities.

Jobs for the Future has found from its work helping to launch what will eventually be more than 170 Early College High Schools across the United States (with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation) that one way to jumpstart policy discussions about improving alignment is to stimulate the creation of more, and more varied, quality learning environments that combine secondary and postsecondary learning for more than the most academically prepared students. Dual enrollment policies, Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate curricula, Early College High Schools and university-assisted models all provide powerful ways to bring secondary and postsecondary institutions and systems together to explain their standards and

expectations to each other, build common curriculum sequences and identify institutional and policy changes that can extend the college-going culture and college experiences more broadly.

Data systems. If educational success is to be redefined in terms of K-16 progress, state student data systems have to be able to track student achievement across the different institutions and systems. Yet only eight states currently link K-12 and higher education student records for purposes of accountability and improvement. Technical and political challenges abound, but states like Florida and Texas have shown that integrated data systems are possible.

Accountability. Behaviors change when incentives change. With high school accountability systems emphasizing graduation and exit exams and postsecondary accountability systems minimal, there is little incentive for the disconnected systems to work together to promote success across the pipeline. For this to change, states must redesign accountability systems to provide incentives within and across sectors for quality, achievement, efficiency and articulation with the next set of educational institutions. Florida’s Legislature took important steps in this direction in 2003 by establishing a unified K-20 accountability system that holds each education delivery sector responsible for high student achievement; seamless articulation and access; a skilled workforce; and quality, efficient services. Florida law also requires that the state Board of Education recommend to the Legislature a performance-based funding formula that applies accountability standards for the public education system at every level, kindergarten through graduate school.

Finance. States use totally separate mechanisms to fund their K-12 and higher education systems, to the detriment of efforts to ensure that fewer students fall through the cracks. In his essay in *Double the Numbers*, David Longanecker of the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education argues that pipeline performance can be improved through funding policies that reward success—especially for students least likely to persist.

A Mosaic of Disadvantaged Populations

Which groups of people face barriers to college? More groups than you might think. A recent Social Science Research Council report outlining a research agenda for issues of access and success in postsecondary education notes: “Traditionally, disadvantaged populations have been understood in terms of their status as students from low-income backgrounds or being the first-generation to attend college. Yet numerous other barriers to postsecondary transitions exist, many but not all of which overlap with these conventional definitions.”

Among the groups whose access to and success in college need particular research consideration, the council counts: adopted children; adult learners; Asian-Americans; African-Americans; children in poverty-level families; court-supervised minors; disabled populations; dropouts/pushouts; English-as-second-language learners; foster children; gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people; incarcerated populations; Native Americans; Latinos; immigrants; migrants; rural youth; undocumented students; and urban youth.

He proposes a funding system that rewards institutions that serve the most disadvantaged students and that rewards individuals and institutions when students complete courses and courses of study. Longanecker implies that postsecondary funding along these lines would give colleges and universities a real incentive to reach across the K-12-postsecondary divide and help high schools and alternative providers help their students become college-ready.

Governance. To bring the key policymakers and institutional leaders in a state into ongoing planning and action around reconnecting high school and postsecondary education, many states recognize the need to establish cross-sector councils. The National Governors Association's Honor States Program, which has re-granted Gates Foundation resources to 10 states through a competitive process, has made establishment of a "P-16 council" one of the non-negotiable expected outcomes.

Better results

The agenda identified here is ambitious—at a time when state policymakers generally are not. Some might argue, in the current environment, that it is better simply to keep working at the local level: forge alliances between high schools and colleges, engage local postsecondary institutions in efforts to improve high school quality and to support educationally disadvantaged students, create new school models that link high school and college learning more effectively, expand pre-college

bridge programs for students who need remediation, and keep working locally to raise instructional quality and teach literacy and numeracy. All of this is necessary—so that new solutions can be tested and refined and so that states will have models to promote as they try to drive improved student success into and through college.

However, without creative changes in state policy, local efforts to reduce the K-12-higher education divide so that more students can succeed will be difficult to sustain. State leadership is needed, because the discontinuities of state policy stand in the way of reducing glaring inequities in college-readiness and success. State policies must be reformulated, starting from a clearly stated goal that all young people should leave high school prepared to succeed in college and that the state will henceforth regard K-12 and higher education institutions as part of the same pipeline to success. Once the P-16 framework is embraced and taken seriously, changes like those noted above will have to emerge. States can't make a significant dent in college-readiness and success without real innovation in what goes on inside schools and across educational institutions—and what goes on inside and across state agencies and authorities.

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