



***Double the Numbers: A Jobs for the Future Initiative***

# Fast Track to College: *Increasing Postsecondary Success for All Students*

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**PREPARED FOR THE CENTER FOR AMERICAN PROGRESS**

## About Double the Numbers

*Fast Track to College*, prepared for the Center for American Progress, is one of a series of *Double the Numbers* publications from Jobs for the Future. *Double the Numbers*, an initiative of JFF, is designed to deepen support for policies that can dramatically increase the number of low-income young people who enter and complete postsecondary education. The initiative sponsors activities to identify new and promising approaches, at the federal and state levels, to increasing efficiencies and reducing inequities in secondary and postsecondary education attainment. *Double the Numbers* publications address controversial policy debates around improving high school completion and the transitions to and success in postsecondary degree or credentialing programs. They propose creative ways to break through existing barriers to improved educational and economic outcomes, particularly for students from groups traditionally underrepresented in higher education. *Double the Numbers* is supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Ford Foundation.



# Fast Track to College:

## *Increasing Postsecondary Success for All Students*

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# Fast Track to College:

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### Executive Summary

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Access to family-supporting jobs now requires education or training beyond high school, but college is becoming less affordable and the education “pipeline” from high school to and through college remains shockingly inefficient, despite the reform efforts of the past several decades. According to one study, for every hundred students who enter ninth grade, only eighteen will complete any kind of postsecondary degree within six years of graduating from high school. If current trends continue, the majority of American young people will not achieve the postsecondary credentials they need for full participation in society and the economy.

In an ideal world, if resources and capacity were no constraint, the United States would make 14 years of publicly funded education universal. In the real world, we cannot achieve the quantum leap in educational attainment that the nation needs without reconfiguring the use of time and money across the K-16 system.

It is time to reinvent the relationship between American high schools and postsecondary institutions so that every student has a chance to attend college and complete some kind of postsecondary credential (e.g., industry certificates, apprenticeships, Associate’s degrees, Bachelor’s degrees) by the age of 26. Specifically, the development of three “fast track to college” alternatives to the traditional high school senior year would enable students to get a head start toward the goal of education through grade 14:

- *An Academic Head Start on College* would give academically motivated students the option of accelerating their progress through high school and college, perhaps earning an Associate’s degree at the same time as a high school diploma or within the next year.
- *An Accelerated Career/Technical College* would move secondary career/technical education to postsecondary institutions, giving career/technical students a head start on earning transferable college credits at the same time as they prepare for entry-level jobs.
- *A Gap Year/College in the Community* would give students a deliberately structured “gap year” *in place of*, rather than after, the traditional senior year. This option would include a combination of a half or full year of community service and a half or full year of work experience.

States would be the focal point for developing, testing, and refining these alternatives. The federal government would support state innovation by providing seed money and regulatory flexibility on a competitive basis over a six- to twelve-year time period. The goals would be to:

- *Increase* the numbers of students who complete postsecondary credentials;
- *Reduce* the time it takes them to do so; and
- *Eliminate* disparities in educational attainment by race and income by the end of the decade.

# Fast Track to College:

## *Increasing Postsecondary Success for All Students*

### Introduction

Slightly over 50 years ago, leaders from half a dozen elite universities and college preparatory schools convened to explore ways to improve the relationship between the last two years of high school and the first two years of college.<sup>1</sup> Seeking to make those years more coherent and continuous, the voluntary, non-governmental group developed a far-sighted recommendation for a new program—Advanced Placement (AP)—that has since become a major feature of American education, with over 1 million tests taken in 2001. The expansion of AP shows that secondary and post-secondary institutions can work together to bridge the divide between them, if they decide to do so.

#### **The leakage is unacceptable all along the educational pipeline:<sup>2</sup>**

An astounding number of students fail to complete high school. As many as 30 percent of entering freshmen leave school without a regular high school diploma. In some urban districts, 50 to 60 percent of ninth graders drop out before earning a diploma. The overall expansion of educational attainment has actually hit a plateau: the high school graduation rate peaked in 1970 and has not improved through most of the past two decades.

Large numbers of high school graduates are unprepared for college work. About one in three college freshmen takes at least one remedial course in reading, writing, or math. In urban community colleges, that percentage can be about three in every four new students. Minorities are less well-prepared in high school than their white peers: only 47 percent of African-American and 53 percent of Latino high school graduates were academically qualified for college, compared to 68 percent of white students, according to a U.S. Department of Education study of 1992 graduates.

While the proportion of high school graduates who begin college has increased dramatically in the past two decades, the percentage who complete any level of post-secondary education has yet to rise significantly. More than one-fourth of students who enter four-year colleges and nearly half of all who enter two-year institutions do not return for their second year. The percentage of 25 to 34 year olds who have successfully earned a college credential has not changed significantly in three decades. Nor has the 30-percentage point gap in college entry between high-income and low-income students.

The growth of Advanced Placement also demonstrates how blurred the boundaries between the last two years of high school and the early years of college are becoming in today's educational landscape. Another sign of this blurring is the increase in dual enrollment programs that allow students to enroll in college-level courses while they are in high school. It is estimated that almost half of high school juniors and seniors today are enrolled in some type of dual credit course (Clark 2001). Early college high schools—new, small schools structured to allow students to graduate from high school with up to two years of college credit—are also attracting great interest. Clearly, the public and policymakers are eager for ways to accelerate young people's advancement to postsecondary education.

But such programs are growing in an ad hoc way. For the most part, they are not reaching the young people least likely to go to college, nor are they being shaped intentionally to significantly increase the numbers of students who *complete* education credentials beyond high school. This is unfortunate. In today's world, we cannot leave to chance the likelihood that most young people will complete education beyond high school. This does not mean that all students should complete a four-year baccalaureate degree, but all young people will benefit from education and some kind of credential beyond high school, including two-year Associate's degrees, industry certificates, and apprenticeships.

In many ways, the blurring of the boundaries between high school and college is a sign of what a 21st century education system should look like, one in which most students graduate high school ready for college and go on to earn a postsecondary credential, while attainment gaps by race and income are eliminated.

To achieve this vision, the United States must increase the number of its college graduates more rapidly than at any time in the past 50 years, and in ways that make college success likely for a rapidly changing population. It must do so at a time of record federal deficits and ongoing structural deficits in many states.

# The Challenge

*Economic success and full participation in our democracy require education beyond high school.*

Income and education are more closely linked today than at any time in our history. College graduates earn on average 70 percent more than high school graduates—a gap that has more than doubled in the past two decades even as the number of college-educated workers has risen. Even one year of postsecondary education can increase lifetime earnings by as much as 15 percent (Carnevale and Desrochers 2001). High school dropouts are four times more likely than college graduates to be unemployed. Higher levels of education produce civic benefits as well: better educated individuals are more civically engaged, voting in higher proportions than those with lower levels of education.

*Despite the powerful connection between education and economic well-being, too few young people continue education beyond high school.*

The statistics are familiar. By age 30, only 29 percent of Americans have completed a Bachelor's degree and 7 percent an Associate's degree. A recent study from the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (2000) shows that for every 100 young people who enter ninth grade, only 67 graduate from high school within four years, only 38 enter college, 26 are still enrolled in college after their sophomore year, and 18 graduate with either an Associate's or Bachelor's degree within 150 percent of the required degree time (that is, within three years to achieve an

We cannot achieve the quantum leap in educational attainment that the nation needs without reconfiguring the use of time and money across the K-16 system. The relationship between secondary and postsecondary education in America again needs breakthrough thinking.

Associate's degree, six years for a Bachelor's) (see Chart 1).

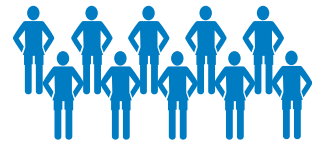
What happens to the rest? A significant number eventually reenter the education system, completing GEDs or enrolling in community colleges or job training programs, but the majority do not. As a result, the nation is falling behind. Data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development show that the United States has slipped from first to fifth place in the proportion of its population aged 24-35 who obtain a postsecondary degree—behind Canada, Ireland, Japan, and Korea. Despite considerable investments in

## CHART 1

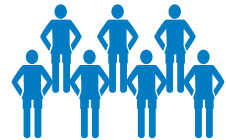
### THE EDUCATION PIPELINE IS BROKEN

Gaps in Attainment Are Caused by Failures at Critical Points Along the Education Pipeline

For every **ten** students who start high school...



Fewer than **seven** will get a high school diploma



**Four** will enroll in college

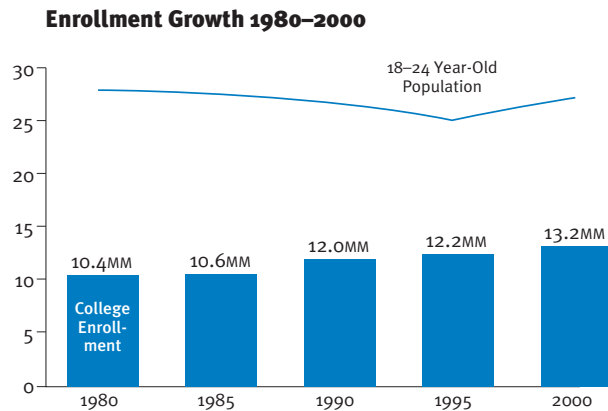


Fewer than **two** will complete an Associate's or Bachelor's degree within 150% of the required time



Source: National Center for Higher Education Management Systems

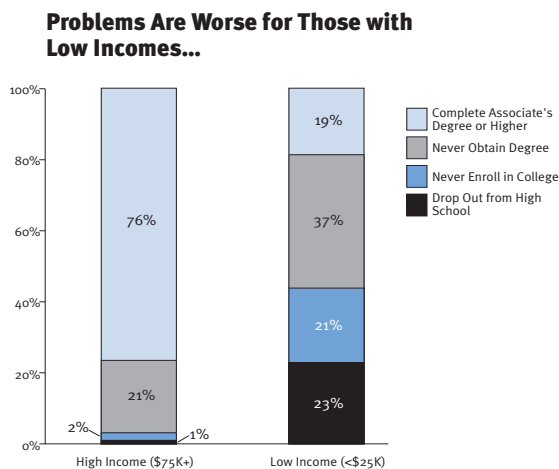
## CHART 2



Note: Includes only Associate's and Bachelor's degree-granting institutions.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Higher Education General Information Survey (HEGIS), "Fall Enrollment in Colleges and Universities" surveys; and Integrated Postsecondary Education Data Systems (IPEDG), "Fall Enrollment" surveys. Data prepared August 2002.

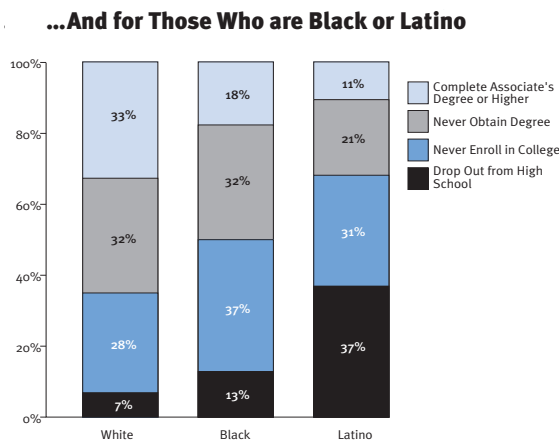
## CHART 3



Note: Data represents survey responses in 2000 from the cohort of 1988 8th graders.

Source: NCES National Educational Longitudinal Study, 1988/2000

## CHART 4



Note: Educational attainment for 100 kindergartners.

Source: Education Trust; based on U.S. Bureau of the Census. Current Population Reports. Educational Attainment in the United States, March 2000

financial aid and other policies, postsecondary enrollment levels in the United States have shown a compound annual growth rate of less than 3 percent over the past two decades (see Chart 2).

Who is being lost? When? Analysis conducted by the Parthenon Group for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Jobs for the Future indicates that breakdowns occur all across the education pipeline, with especially problematic patterns for low-income and African-American and Hispanic youth (see box, page 2 and Charts 3 and 4), who are at risk all along the way.

Low-income Americans are far less likely to complete high school, enroll in college, and obtain a postsecondary credential than their middle- or higher-income peers: only 20 percent of students from families with incomes below \$25,000 ever complete an Associate's degree or higher, compared to 76 percent of those with incomes above \$75,000 and 45 percent of those whose families earn between \$25,000 and \$75,000.

Similarly, only 18 percent of African Americans and 9 percent of Hispanics between 25 and 29 years of age have earned a Bachelor's, compared with 34 percent of whites.

Moreover, low-income and minority students tend disproportionately to select non-degree programs at the postsecondary level and are more likely to attend for-profit or less than four-year institutions (see Charts 5 and 6).

### Demographic changes will likely exacerbate the problem.

At the very moment when higher levels of skills and credentials are required to ensure a family-supporting income, the fastest growing segment of our population consists of the young people who have been served least well by our education system: low-income and minority youth. Almost all the net change in the U.S. labor force between now and 2050 will be comprised of Hispanics and blacks and other non-white groups. Because of the lower average educational attainment of these rapidly growing groups, the share of workers with some education post-high school is projected to



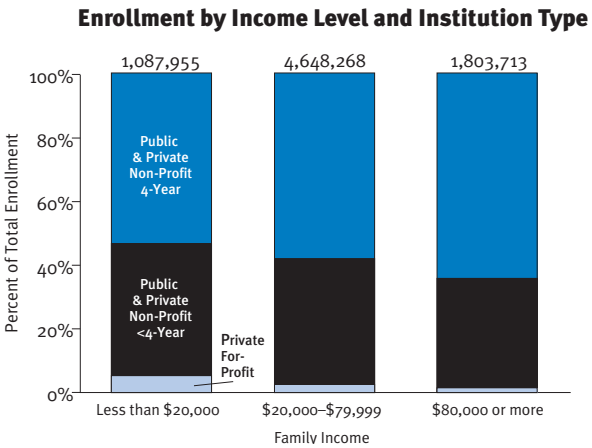
increase only 4 percent over the next 20 years, compared with a 19 percent rise since 1980. Some researchers project a net increase through 2020 in the number of people with *less* than a high school education.

The low “yield” of Americans with some education beyond high school has many causes. Some of these appear at the secondary level, such as high dropout rates and academic achievement below the level needed for postsecondary success. Others occur at the postsecondary level, where large numbers of young people take remedial courses and many never complete degrees. Still others have to do with challenges at the point of transition between high school and college, with many young people failing to apply to college—or finding it increasingly out of reach financially.

State budget deficits over the past several years have exacerbated these problems, bringing higher student tuition and fees at the same time as financial aid for needy students has declined. Even as state allocations for postsecondary education and training shrink, many public postsecondary institutions are experiencing overcrowding. These challenges are likely to become worse over the next decade, in the face of pressure to accommodate the growing demand for postsecondary education. Analysts like Patrick Callan of the Institute for Higher Education Policy warn of an impending “demographic tidal wave,” starting in states like California and Texas where the numbers seeking access to higher education are rising so fast that low-income students are likely to be pushed out from over-subscribed four-year institutions; and even two-year institutions are becoming over-subscribed.

Given current enrollment patterns, economist Anthony Carnevale estimates that by 2020 U.S. employers will need 14 million more workers who have some college education than our educational institutions are likely to produce (Carnevale and Desrochers 2001). If current education attainment levels persist, the majority of our youth will not complete a postsecondary credential—at a huge loss to themselves, our economy, and our democracy.

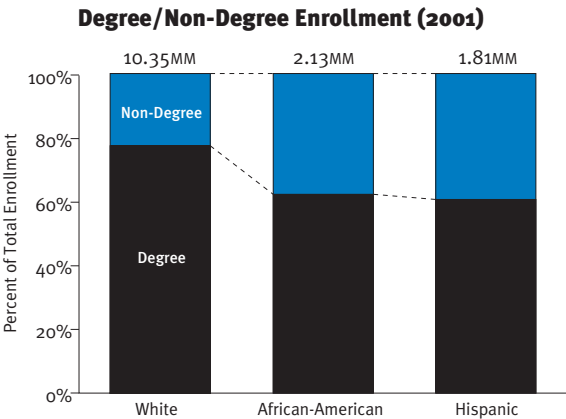
**CHART 5**



Note: Only includes dependent students.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, NCES, 1999–2000 National Postsecondary Student

**CHART 6**



Source: NCES Report on the Education of Hispanics, 2003 and NCES Fall Enrollment Survey, 2001

**Existing approaches to education reform are necessary but insufficient for meeting this challenge.**

By and large, existing approaches to education reform focus on making the structure we have work better. Secondary education reform efforts emphasize higher standards, rigorous curricula, improved teaching, and stronger accountability systems. At the postsecondary level, the emphasis has been on strengthening access for underrepresented populations and providing stronger supports for students during the freshmen year. Neither education level has made a meaningful attempt to recapture the large number of students who drop out.

With the important exception of efforts to align K-16 as a single education system, education reforms at the secondary and postsecondary levels over the past decade have remained largely separate from one another.<sup>3</sup> The structure itself, designed to meet the needs of the industrial economy of the last century, is part of the problem.

***To improve the performance of its education pipeline, the United States needs to strengthen the connections between secondary and postsecondary education.***

If the end goal is having more young people attain postsecondary credentials more quickly—with less waste of time and resources—attention should focus not only on better preparation at each level but also *on the connections between the K-12 and postsecondary education systems*. We must make the transition between these largely separate systems more seamless and easier than it is today, so that students are less likely to be lost as they progress through the pipeline. The goals would be to:

- *Increase* the numbers of students who complete postsecondary credentials;
- *Reduce* the time it takes them to do so, accelerating students' progress so that the overwhelming majority complete a first postsecondary credential by the age of 26; and
- *Eliminate* disparities by race and income.

## **Avenues for Action**

Given these goals, how could the United States reasonably explore ways to reconfigure the route to and through postsecondary credentials? What would a better system look like? How could it be tested and scaled?

In generating and evaluating strategies for change, several general principles should hold:

- All options created must be rigorous enough to prepare students for college-level work. Strategies that do not devote this attention to quality will perpetuate the tracks that American education needs to move away from.
- Any effective strategy should introduce more choice and competition into the system. The best way to challenge the status quo is to set up alternatives that demonstrate they can perform better.
- Effective strategies must bridge the silos between secondary and postsecondary educational institutions.
- To save money and time where possible, effective strategies should accelerate progress through grades 11 to 14. This means moving away from progression based on seat-time and Carnegie units and toward more competency-based models.
- The most powerful strategies will affect both institutional and individual behavior.



# Fast Track to College: A Proposal

This paper proposes restructuring the education pipeline to make grades 11 through 14 function as a more coherent, continuous unit that students can complete in less time, and therefore at lower cost. Such changes will make it more likely that most young people complete a credential beyond high school and do so sooner than is now the case.

The basic proposal is this: *The United States should develop several “Fast Track to College” alternatives to the traditional high school in order to ensure that all students complete a recognized postsecondary credential (including apprenticeships and industry certification) by the age of 26.* Each of the Fast Track alternatives should address the needs of students currently ill-served by the predominant “one-size-fits-all” American high school. Three such options are:

- *An Academic Head Start on College* would give academically motivated students the option of accelerating their progress through high school and college, perhaps earning an Associate’s degree at the same time as a high school diploma or within the next year.
- *An Accelerated Career/Technical College* would move secondary career/technical education to postsecondary institutions, giving career/technical students a head start on earning transferable college credits at the same time as they prepare for entry-level jobs.
- *A Gap Year/College in the Community* would give students a deliberately structured “gap year” *in place of*, rather than after, the traditional senior year. This option would include a combination of a half or full year of community service and a half or full year of work experience.

The traditional high school experience would remain open to anyone who chooses it. It serves many young people well, and it is also under constructive pressure to improve given No Child Left Behind, high school reform efforts, and the small schools movement. But the conventional college-

prep curriculum should not be the only route to postsecondary education and credentials.

To enhance their adoption, the Fast Track to College options would initially begin in the senior year of high school—which is widely acknowledged to be a largely wasted period (National Commission on the High School Senior Year 2001). Over the long term, the aim would be to move away from time-based progression toward progression based on demonstrated proficiency; students could enter Fast Track alternatives whenever they have passed the required high school exit standards.

The new alternatives, while very different from one another, would share several features designed to address the key reasons for the breakdowns in the education pipeline:

- All students would gain access to a more rigorous high school curriculum, in part through partnering with postsecondary institutions.
- Each option would give high school students early experience of college expectations and significant exposure to college environments, along with supports to help them succeed.
- High schools, community colleges, private proprietary schools, and accredited community partnerships would compete for students with one another and with four-year colleges.
- Students could accumulate significant college credit. Credits earned at any public postsecondary institution would be fully transferable to another.
- Each option would expand learning opportunities—after school and during the summers—to support students in their accelerated progress toward a college-level curriculum.
- Each would have a mechanism for assuring equitable access.

Over the long term, the aim would be to move away from time-based progression toward progression based on demonstrated proficiency; students could enter Fast Track alternatives whenever they have passed the required high school exit standards.

While the Fast Track to College ideas are radical in some ways, they build on a well-established body of thought and research that goes back over 50 years in American education.

As detailed below, the new options could be delivered in several ways. The most common would likely be through partnerships among existing institutions, such as high schools, postsecondary institutions, employers, and cultural institutions—building on existing structures and programs. A second route would be through what JFF calls “blended institutions”—schools or learning environments designed explicitly to cross the traditional boundaries between in-school and out-of-school learning, between school and work, or between secondary and postsecondary institutions (e.g., the growing numbers of schools organized to provide some kind of college experience in high school, such as middle and early college high schools, Diploma Plus, PCC Prep, Year Up, YouthBuild schools, Aspire, etc.).

Although entry to each alternative would assume that students have passed the tenth-grade proficiency test given by their states, there would be some formal way for students to *opt into* these options even if they had not passed the test. Similarly, students in low-performing schools or defined to be “at risk” of dropping out would automatically have access to these options, if desired, with full public funding following them to the option of their choice.<sup>4</sup>

While the Fast Track to College ideas are radical in some ways, they build on a well-established body of thought and research that goes back over 50 years in American education. In recent years, proponents of strategies for accelerating students’ progress from high school to postsecondary education have included Leon Botstein, president of Bard College; Marc Tucker, president of the National Center on Education and the Economy; and Robert Schwartz, former president of Achieve, Inc., and now on the faculty of the Harvard Graduate School of Education.<sup>5</sup>

Botstein has advanced proposals for broadening the choices available to young people after tenth grade. He argues for ending high school at age 16 and allowing youth a broad range of choices among postsecondary education, work, the military, and community service.

Tucker argues for a reconfiguration of the education system modeled on European/international practice. He envisions a system with lower-secondary years (the first ten years of schooling in which all students would take a core curriculum); upper-secondary years (one to three years of intensive technical study or academic study through International Baccalaureate, Advanced Placement, or advanced project-based learning), and subsequent higher education, which would be more like postgraduate professional education—thus improving outcomes and shaving the costs of one to three years off the current system. Rigorous gateway examinations would govern students’ passages from one part of the system to the next, and promotion would be based on performance on the exams, not seat-time or age. In the upper-secondary years, students could either stay in their high schools to take more advanced courses or leave their high schools for postsecondary settings. Thus, high schools and community colleges would compete for students in the upper-secondary years.

Schwartz proposes multiple pathways to college beginning at the high school level. A streamlined set of common expectations and state assessments in math and literacy would give schools the curricular flexibility to create distinctive identities. High schools could be organized by program majors, career academies, the Talent Development design, or portfolios of small, themed schools. High school exit exams would be linked to college entrance exams. Students could move into one of four pathways after high school—each leading to a postsecondary credential. A key aspect of this would be Individual Development Accounts—accounts which would receive deposits from various forms of federal, state, and local aid and would be self-directed by students and parents to maximize students’ learning experiences and choice of learning options.

The Fast Track to College proposal builds on these ideas. Each of the options described below is designed to create a smoother transition to postsecondary attainment for a group of students poorly served by the existing structure of our high schools: academically motivated students who

want to accelerate their progress into college; career-oriented students who desire to enter the workforce immediately after high school; students who are bored and disengaged by the traditional school structure; and students who have dropped out and do not now have routes back in to the system that prepare them for postsecondary options. Together, these groups account for a large number of students—potentially up to half of the 14,770,000 students projected to enroll in public school grades 9-12 in 2005. The sections below provide rough estimates of the numbers of students likely to be interested in each option, based on the National Center for Education Statistics projections of public school enrollment.

### **Option 1: Academic Head Start on College**

The assumption underlying this Fast Track option is that many young people have the ability and desire to accelerate their progress through high school and college, perhaps completing an Associate's degree at the same time as they finish high school or within the next year. Academically motivated students should have the option of earning significant credit before entering college.

The Academic Head Start on College would build on the existing ways that high school-age students can gain access to college-level courses, including Advanced Placement, the International Baccalaureate, dual enrollment arrangements in which qualified high school teachers teach college courses in the high school, dual enrollment arrangements in which high school students enroll in classes at local postsecondary institutions, and the rapidly growing numbers of early college high schools and middle colleges. The Fast Track proposal for “accelerated college credit” envisions the rapid and deliberate expansion of such options, with greater attention to the coherence of the student experience and a stronger effort to make these options available to students whose demographic profiles or academic performance now make college unlikely.

This option would likely appeal to academically motivated students who are not sufficiently challenged by the high school curriculum and who are

eager for a change of pace. Conservatively, this would probably include several million young people (at least 10 to 20 percent of the high school population in grades 9-12). But, as the experience with early college and middle colleges demonstrates, it would also appeal to academically underprepared students who aspire to college. From a public policy point of view, this is one of the most powerful aspects of the Academic Head Start on College.

Currently, options like dual enrollment and Advanced Placement are less effective than they could be at increasing the college success of underrepresented groups and promoting the more rapid completion of postsecondary credentials by larger numbers of students. For example, young people who can earn college credit while in high school still have to make sense of a confusing array of courses at both the high school and college levels. Most dual enrollment programs now function as what my colleague at Jobs for the Future Nancy Hoffman calls “single courses for the enterprising and affluent,” rather than as coherent, comprehensive courses of study. They are taken disproportionately by middle and upper-income students. Many states restrict participation by grade point averages, thus limiting their effectiveness as a magnet for under-prepared students.

Furthermore, dual enrollment does not necessarily accelerate *degree completion*. Credits earned at one postsecondary institution often do not transfer to another. Worse, courses that students take at the college level may or may not count toward fulfilling their high school course requirements in the same academic subject areas.

Advanced Placement, another popular alternative for earning early college credit, is also mainly accessible to well-prepared students in more affluent districts. Unlike dual enrollment, Advanced Placement students may or may not score high enough on AP tests to gain college credit. Thus, despite its popularity with policymakers, AP's likely efficacy in reducing the time and cost toward a degree is weaker than that of dual enrollment.

The Academic Head Start on College would build on the existing ways that high school-age students can gain access to college-level courses.





A number of states (notably Florida, Utah, Texas, and, to a lesser extent, Washington, Georgia, and Indiana) have begun to use dual enrollment policies as a more intentional strategy for increasing college-going rates. The early results are promising. A recent study by the Florida Department of Education, for example, found that “high school students who enroll in community college Dual Enrollment programs are enrolling in college and universities at rates significantly higher than students who do not enroll in these accelerated articulation programs. Moreover, Hispanic and African American students who took Dual Enrollment courses are enrolling in higher education at higher rates than whites or any other ethnic group” (Florida Department of Education 2004).

Similarly, many states and districts are making Advanced Placement available to lower-performing students. For example, AVID programs target underachieving young people with grades of C or below for participation in AP courses, while providing students with study skills, tutoring support, and role models. Over 92 percent of AVID students enroll in college.

The proposal here would build on these efforts and go beyond them, by providing significant financial incentives for high schools and postsecondary institutions to collaborate in creating coherent programs of study, instead of the fragmented courses that many students take now.<sup>6</sup>

Where possible, these incentives would encourage changing the *place* of schooling to let high school students experience real college settings, as do early college and middle college high schools. At these kinds of schools, there *is* no transition between high school and college. Students can earn the Associate’s degree within the same small institution in which they do high school work.

Early college high schools are designed so that all students have the opportunity to complete a high school diploma and an Associate’s degree (or two years of transferable college credit) within five years. As singular institutions with one budget, these schools are co-governed by secondary and postsecondary partners. To enable acceleration for students, college courses supplant, rather than supplement, high school courses—pushing the secondary and postsecondary partners to co-design and align their curricula.<sup>7</sup>

Middle colleges—high schools situated on community college campuses—target low-performing youth and offer, among other things, a combination of rigorous course work, extensive supports and personalization, and internships in the community. Interim findings from an evaluation of five middle colleges show that students achieved nearly a 100 percent pass rate in their college courses (Lieberman 2004). Another recent report found that students in two California middle colleges were outperforming peers in their respective districts on statewide assessments and standardized tests (Cavalluzzo, Corallo, and Jordan 2002).

Early college high school and middle college models have the added benefits of bringing college into the present lives of students who see it as far removed from their reality.

## Option 2: Accelerated Career/ Technical College

Not all students seek a traditional four-year college degree. The Accelerated Career/Technical College option would likely attract the many young people who want to enter the labor market directly, seeking jobs for which advancement depends on formal education or training beyond high school.

The Accelerated Career/Technical College option proposes to shift preparation for technical jobs *to* community colleges or other postsecondary providers, *from* comprehensive high schools and regional vocational schools, few of which can afford state-of-the-art equipment or faculty. Students would be able to earn a degree, enter work-based internships, and accrue general education credits that would transfer to four-year institutions if they later choose to pursue a baccalaureate. Programs could include a broad range of fields from auto mechanics to health occupations, culinary arts, software, and logistics management. They could also be designed to build on Tech Prep, 2+2 models, career academies, and career pathway ideas (Schwartz 2004).

The Career/Technical College alternative could include other strategies that accelerate young people's progression from high school into high-paying career jobs by blending school and work. Youth apprenticeships and programs like the Cisco Networking Academy and YouthBuild are among the best known examples of this. Others, like Year Up in Boston, essentially add a fifth year to high school, using the extra time to give students intensive training in information technology coupled with internships at high-tech firms and some college-level courses. Graduates move on to begin careers that offer good pay and possibilities for further education.

Students could enter an Accelerated Career/Technical College in eleventh or twelfth grade. During these transitional years, the programs in which they enroll would be designed to provide

younger students with the supports they need, such as the small learning communities and intensive academic supports embodied in current best-practice education models.<sup>8</sup> High school vocational faculty could play a primary role in these transitional years, but they would do so through attachment to a postsecondary institution and course of study, thus raising their status and expanding their own professional opportunities.

The best approach to this option would be for a state postsecondary education system to assume responsibility for the governance and delivery of secondary and postsecondary career/technical education. Whenever possible, career education would take place at a postsecondary institution; where not, communities would use a secondary school facility or regional vocational school. Full public funding would follow the students. While community colleges are the most likely delivery system for such an approach to career/technical education, states should encourage competition to serve these students—including private proprietary schools and other postsecondary institutions.

Moving in this direction could be controversial. In some states, it might be necessary to take a different, more incremental approach, such as the development of partnerships between community colleges and regional vocational schools for delivering career/technical education.

Regardless of how it evolves, an accelerated Career/Technical College option has several advantages. It would improve the quality and status of secondary vocational technical education programs, which are struggling to meet the new standards required by most states. Many vocational programs are under-enrolled despite the important benefits they provide for students, and they are under pressure from No Child Left Behind and state tests. The academic rigor of courses is often questionable, and many programs, especially in technical fields, cannot stay up to date with rapid changes in technology and work processes.

The Accelerated  
Career/Technical College  
option proposes to shift  
preparation for technical  
jobs *to* community  
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*from* comprehensive high  
schools and regional  
vocational schools,

A deliberately structured “gap year” in place of the senior year would include a half or full year of community service and a half or full year of work experience.

Most important, given the new bar for economic success, high school level vocational programs cannot provide postsecondary credits. The Accelerated Career/Technical College would give career/technical students a head start on transferable college credits at the same time as they prepare for entry-level jobs, thus providing higher status, broader flexibility, and more options than our current vocational preparation system does.

This option would help solve a practical issue for the many states struggling with the high expense and low return on investments in their secondary vocational systems—and with how best to reconcile updating career/technical education programs with efforts to strengthen the academic core taken by all high school students.<sup>9</sup> Having a strong career/technical option would also be important to the public—which is ambivalent about the notion of “college (commonly understood as a baccalaureate degree) for all.” It would help demonstrate that work and the pursuit of postsecondary education are compatible. Moreover, the Accelerated Career/Technical College would raise the profile of sub-baccalaureate technical degrees—many of which provide lifetime earnings equal to, if not higher than, a baccalaureate degree.

The Accelerated Career/Technical College option would likely appeal to a large segment of students—as much as 20 percent of today’s high school enrollment, or 3 million young people. (This estimate is based on the fact that, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, 25 percent of 1998 high school graduates were vocational concentrators—i.e., took three or more credits in a vocational program sequence—down from over 33 percent in 1982.)

### Option 3: Gap Year/College in the Community

There is a third group of students poorly served by traditional high schools. These students are bored and disengaged, uncertain about their future direction, and in need of additional time and broader experience to sort out what they want. A Fast Track to College would encourage the development of options that would serve these students better.

One such possibility would be a deliberately structured “gap year” *in place of*, rather than after, the traditional senior year. This option would include a combination of a half or full year of community service and a half or full year of work experience. It would build on the experience of City Year and other community service models, and on the infrastructure that exists as a result of AmeriCorps. It could be understood as “College in the Community.”

Building into the system a deliberate gap year for exploration and maturation would likely reduce some of the attrition that now occurs with students who start college and do not continue after their freshman year—currently over a third of all those who start college. It would appeal to many students who are disengaged, and it is likely to be particularly effective with dropouts—especially if designed with strong academic components in alternative settings that move disaffected students toward postsecondary credentials that count, rather than the GED alone, as is now the case. While it is difficult to predict the number of students who would be attracted by this option, it seems safe to assume that 10 to 20 percent of high school seniors might find this appealing.

The “gap year” might work as follows: students would have a limited number of choices between community-approved programs that provide a combination of academics, personalized support, and work experience or community service. As with the other two options, young people enrolled in a gap year College in the Community program could also earn some college credit—how much



would depend on the kind of program in which they enrolled and the policies of participating postsecondary institutions. Students could also earn money during their work internships, and they would be eligible for a contribution to a college fund as a result of their community service. This option could include a tax credit for employers who match contributions to a college fund for student interns.

Unions, employers, high schools, postsecondary institutions, civic and cultural institutions, and community-based organizations would collaborate/compete to design and deliver “accredited” programs (see below).

To enable students to reach the level of academic performance required by colleges and employers, College in the Community programs would likely require using after school and summers for expanded learning time. In other words, these opportunities would not be for exploration alone: the institutions that sponsor them would work together to ensure that they have serious educational value and academic rigor.

A number of cities are experimenting with ways to leverage the uncontested out-of-school time for older adolescents by linking together in-school and out-of-school resources and supports. In Chicago, for example, civic and community leaders have created After School Matters, an initiative to scale up out-of-school learning opportunities for older youth that aims to reach more than half of Chicago’s teenagers by 2005, offering them supports and opportunities in the out-of-school hours. To deliver this programming, clusters of schools, parks, and libraries are linked together to form neighborhood “campuses” throughout the city. Currently, eighteen clusters (up from six in 2000)

are home to four After-School Matters programs—focusing on the arts (visual and performing), sports (playing and coaching), technology (Web design and robotics), and literacy (through storytelling). Each program contains an element of paid employment, apprenticeship with skilled adults, opportunities to teach others, and intentional skill building (Steinberg et al. 2002).

Learning opportunities in community settings such as these would give young people the chance to test themselves in more adult roles, explore possible career options, and understand how academic subjects can be applied (Schwartz 2004). While there is some danger that students taking a year off would be less likely to continue on to postsecondary education later, the experience of school-to-work and other programs suggests that exposure to the “real world” actually increases young people’s motivation to pursue further learning. Exposure to college and college settings will be as important for these young people as for students in other Fast Track to College options or traditional high schools. To encourage strong connections to college, a postsecondary institution could be a required partner for all College in the Community programs.

Creating College in the Community on a large scale would require the development of long-term partnerships among postsecondary institutions, high schools, and community institutions, as well as an intermediary structure to organize and broker learning opportunities. One way to accomplish this would be through a Youth Board that would include community leaders and members of the school board and the boards of local postsecondary institutions. The Youth Board would approve educational programs and pool existing financial resources to support them (e.g., per pupil allocations for public schools, youth development resources under the Workforce Investment Act).<sup>10</sup> It could also sponsor community-based (rather than school-based) sports teams, such as those in Europe, so that students who pursue this option would not lose the opportunity to participate in competitive sports.

## Reconnecting Dropouts

Each of the Fast Track to College options should be designed with strong “on ramps” for dropouts.

The largest group in need of Fast Track to College options consists of the young people who drop out of high school—30 percent nationally (roughly 4.6 million students) and over 50 percent of students in many urban districts. These young people urgently need what does not now exist: a route back into formal education that connects them to the postsecondary learning opportunities that give access to family-supporting jobs.<sup>11</sup>

To encourage this, each of the Fast Track to College options should be designed with strong “on ramps” for dropouts—whether a young person chooses to reenter a traditional high school, join a technically oriented “college” to get a head start on a credential, go to a community college rather than GED program so that they move quickly into college-level work, or reenter the education system through College in the Community. The attractiveness of these options could be enhanced by providing financial incentives that encourage institutions to compete to reach “harder to serve” students (e.g., attaching a higher rate of public funding to these students).

Such options are urgently needed. Our current second-chance system—with the GED as its primary credential—provides neither a route to decent employment nor adequate preparation for college. Nationally, 50 percent of central-city black GED holders were unemployed in 2001 (Sum et al. 2001). Only 30 percent of GED recipients go on

to further study, and only 2 percent earn a four-year college degree. This is ironic given that the GED was originally intended as a way to help returning soldiers enter college in the 1940s. This changed in the 1950s, as New York, followed by other states, began to allow the GED to replace the high school diploma, rather than to serve as a qualifying test for entering postsecondary education.

To be effective, options to reconnect dropouts must recognize that young people who have experienced repeated school failure require multiple supports: stronger academic preparation, personalized support services, and help navigating life crises. There is a small but important body of programming on which to build, including community-based dropout recovery programs such as Diploma Plus, ISUS, and YouthBuild. In addition, a number of urban districts are developing more robust alternative education options as part of their regular high school systems. For example, Philadelphia, Boston, New York, and Chicago are creating alternative high schools for overage and under-achieving students, including students returning from the juvenile justice system. These schools provide a strong academic curriculum, smaller class sizes, wraparound services, and academic support. Still, too few such schools connect dropouts to postsecondary learning opportunities and credentials.

## Potential Challenges and Benefits

The premise of Fast Track to College is that this approach will work better than what we have now. This is because the Fast Track options address many of the reasons the pipeline breaks down and because they have the potential to rapidly increase the proportion of the population gaining postsecondary credentials.

This is not to minimize the challenges associated with these proposals, which would require significant changes in two enormously complex systems (secondary and postsecondary) responsible for the lives of millions of young people and billions of dollars of public investment. On the other hand, the failures of the education pipeline are major, suggesting that tinkering around the margins will not work.

It is important to be clear about the hypotheses underlying the Fast Track to College proposal and to be aggressive in collecting data to demonstrate whether or not experience proves them to be valid. Key hypotheses include:

***Fast Track to College partnerships will help alleviate shortages of qualified teachers at the secondary level.***

Currently, four out of ten high school teachers lack degrees in their fields, and over half are projected to retire during the next decade. Giving eleventh and twelfth graders access to college faculty would ease these problems.

***Fast Track to College options will increase the rigor of the high school curriculum.***

Fast Track to College will make college-level courses available to all high school students through partnerships with postsecondary institutions. This is important because the rigor of a student's high school program is the strongest predictor of college success. Too often, low-income and minority students are less likely to have the opportunity to enroll in challenging academic courses, and as a result, fewer low-income and minority high school graduates are academically ready for

college, as demonstrated by lower test scores, grades, and class rank. The effects of weak academic preparation are cumulative: students who enter high school reading significantly below grade level have trouble catching up.

While it is reasonable to question how many students who are academically behind grade level can possibly accelerate, the Fast Track proposal builds on the research of the Education Trust and others indicating that a challenging curriculum, with appropriate supports, raises the achievement of lower-performing students.<sup>12</sup> While many students may need extra time to build their skills, the early experience of early college high schools and middle colleges suggests that acceleration is possible with extra supports for students and a different curricular structure.

***Fast Track to College Options will increase students' motivation to do well.***

For many students, the high school environment seems disrespectful and the reasons to work hard are too abstract and delayed. An extremely large proportion of students just go through the motions. Between one-third and 40 percent of students say that, when they are in class, they are neither trying very hard nor paying attention (Steinberg 1998). School seems to be too little





about their development into young adults and all about tests (important but not the most powerful positive motivator for young people). The senior year is widely acknowledged to be a wasted year, and a new gap has been created when young people who pass their state exit exams in tenth or eleventh grade must stay in high school to complete required Carnegie units.

Fast Track to College options would help reduce student alienation, boredom, and disaffection from school by giving young people a clearer motivation to do well in school and visible pathways to postsecondary education. Having the option of a head start on college would also change young people's aspirations and sense of self.

***Stronger connections between high school and postsecondary will create a clearer signal about the standard of performance required for success at the postsecondary level.***

According to the American Diploma Project and other recent studies, the bar for high school exit standards is set too low to ensure student success in either college or careers. Students would benefit from knowing the requirements for college-level courses and careers earlier, in time to adjust their efforts accordingly. As it stands, duplication and

inefficiency now plague a system in which Advanced Placement and dual enrollment courses are the fastest-growing part of the last two years of high school, while “developmental” (remedial) education is the fastest growing part of the first two years of college.

***Fewer transitions and greater supports during transitions would reduce the numbers of students who fall out of the pipeline.***

Taking college courses while still in the supportive structure of high school would help students understand and experience the demands of college. As the research conducted for Jobs for the Future suggests, bringing college into view in this way, with the proper support provided by good teachers and a small school environment, is highly motivational, allowing students to acknowledge that they may have work to do before they are ready for college courses, but if they do that work, college is an achievable expectation.<sup>13</sup>

***Getting a head start on college will increase the affordability and availability of college.***

The Student Advisory Committee (2001) estimates that 1.2 million students who are college-ready do not go to college for financial reasons. In the United States today, high-performing students from low-income families are less likely to attend college than low-performing students from high-income families. In surveys of recent high school graduates, the majority of students not attending college cite qualification and affordability as key barriers.

***Ensuring that each Fast Track to College option gives students a head start on college will reduce the danger of tracking.***

Despite the fact that our current system tracks too many young people to nowhere, Americans believe that the U.S. education system is superior to that of other nations because it does not track. A critical question is whether the Fast Track to College options would become a new form of tracking. This is difficult to answer in the abstract.

The Fast Track to College options would greatly reduce some of the dangers of tracking historically associated with differing curricular pathways at the secondary level because each alternative would give students a significant head start on college. In addition, Fast Track to College would have the benefit of keeping a universal “public education” experience through grade 10 or 11. Students could then choose among several high-quality alternatives.

However, this will only be true if all the options are first class, and the financing to support them is equitable. Ensuring that Fast Track to College options do not create new tracks, or perpetuate old ones, will require careful documentation of outcomes.

***It will be possible to overcome resistance to Fast Track to College options by providing appropriate incentives to institutions and individuals.***

Both the education establishment and the public will have reservations about the kinds of changes proposed here.

On the institutional side, funding streams, union contracts, governance, and regulatory structures encourage separate silos in the U.S. secondary and postsecondary systems, and there is little pressure for change from within. The Fast Track proposal assumes that a combination of incentives and penalties could overcome this resistance. Key strategies might include financial and accountability systems that reward postsecondary institutions for: reaching and graduating under-represented students and for their success in partnering with high schools; eliminating remedial education at the postsecondary level; creating data and accountability systems that track student progress through the education pipeline; and setting goals to “double the numbers” of students (especially low-income and minority students) who complete postsecondary credentials.

Perhaps the more serious challenge will be the public’s reluctance to change high schools. Despite increasing anxiety about their children’s futures and the cost of higher education, Americans are largely satisfied with the familiar four years of high school—a cherished rite of passage in many communities. And the existing system does work well for a substantial number of young people and their families—the 30 percent who go straight through high school to college, completing an Associate’s or Bachelor’s degree within four to six years. These students come disproportionately from higher-income families, which are more likely to be politically active and influential. Would such families view Fast Track to College options as threats or opportunities? The hypothesis here is that these parents would be attracted to the possibility that their children could begin college-level work in high school and that they and the broader public would value educational options that make college more available at lower cost.

Fast Track to College would have the benefit of keeping a universal “public education” experience through grade 10 or 11. Students could then choose among several high-quality alternatives.

## How to Get There from Here

The Fast Track to College initiative would be structured to give several lead states significant resources to test their own approaches, with provision for a larger number of states to follow.

How can the Fast Track to College options realistically be tested and scaled? A number of states, as described below, are experimenting with aspects of these ideas, and individual states and foundations could continue or accelerate such efforts. But the federal government must step up to this challenge if the United States is to create better pathways to postsecondary success for all young people at the pace and scale that is needed.

This paper proposes a Fast Track to College Initiative that would give states the seed money and regulatory flexibility to develop and test their own versions of the alternatives proposed here. The initiative would be structured to give several lead states significant resources to test their own approaches, with provision for a larger number of states to follow. Such an effort would need to operate over an extended period of time—perhaps six to twelve years, long enough to allow several cohorts of students to move through the system and for evaluators to collect and analyze data about its effectiveness.<sup>14</sup>

The initiative would have four components:

- A state innovation fund;
- An evaluation and cost study;
- A congressionally mandated study to identify the implications of the Fast Track to College Initiative for the next reauthorizations of federal legislation related to education and training; and
- A public marketing campaign to convey the importance of education beyond high school.

*State Innovation Fund:* The fund would be comprised of a series of competitive grants to states. Up to ten states would be invited to participate in a planning year, for which they would receive resources and limited technical assistance. During this year, states would assess the particular nature and causes of the loss points in their K-16 pipelines; the resulting needs of their high school population; the geographic distribution of their two- and four-year institutions in relation to high school districts; and the relative strengths and weaknesses of their educational institutions. They would determine the relative mix of options to develop and might identify “fast tracks to college” other than the three suggested here.

Implementation grants of up to \$100 million each would be awarded to the two or three states that came back with the best plans. These states would disburse money to create new program options or expand existing ones. States would also gain the authority and flexibility to combine existing resources from current federal programs for these options, such as Title IV money from the Higher Education Act (HEA), Title 1 Funds from the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) for programs that have large concentrations (75 percent) of low-income participants, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) transition funds, the Carl Perkins Act, etc.

This cycle should run several times so that at the end of five years, at least 20 states would have been funded.

*An Evaluation and Cost Study:* Both participating states and the federal government would make provision for tracking and publicizing data on the performance of the various Fast Track to College options, and for making mid-course corrections according to findings from this data. The study would test the results of the different options, analyze the costs and/or savings, and shed light on long-term financing options.



*A Congressionally Mandated Study:* Congress should signal clearly that the federal government will use this experience over the long term to reconfigure the secondary/postsecondary system in ways that achieve the goal of increased postsecondary success for all. Relevant reauthorizations would include the Elementary and Secondary Education Act/No Child Left Behind, the Higher Education Act, the Carl Perkins Act, the Adult Education Act, the Workforce Investment Act, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

Indeed, it seems counterproductive to continue the separate reauthorizations of these pieces of legislation without asking the larger question of whether our structure for preparing young people for adult life is really the structure we need, given the importance to our national economy of a strong seamless learning system.

*A Public Marketing Campaign:* A national communications campaign to emphasize the important of completing education beyond high school would accompany these efforts. The campaign should define “college” more broadly than the current public conception of it solely as a Bachelor’s degree. It would make clear that not completing a postsecondary degree is the equivalent of a “million dollar mistake” in terms of lifetime earnings, and it would publicize the various Fast Track to College options.

## **Funding the Fast Track to College**

Congress could fund the Fast Track to College Initiative without creating a new, expensive entitlement program. For example, it could provide \$1.5 billion annually over six years by reallocating \$500 million a year for six years from each of three existing federal sources. Perkins money could be used to develop the kinds of career/technical options described here. Money from Title IV of the Higher Education Act could be used to support the Academic Head Start on College—building on current partnerships to expand access to higher education such as Gear Up and Trio.<sup>15</sup> Workforce Investment Act money could support the development of College in the Community options. Alternatively, Congress could change the mission of the Carl Perkins Act to support the design and implementation of Fast Track to College models (and no longer support vocational programs that terminate at the high school level).



## State Innovation

The Fast Track to College proposal does not impose a federally created solution on states.<sup>16</sup> This is important because states vary greatly in terms of where their education pipelines break down, and therefore in where the highest leverage interventions will be (see Chart 7).

Nevertheless, states participating in the initiative would agree to common program components or design principles:

- Establishing a mechanism for allowing money to follow students (see below);
- Encouraging competency-based progression (not seat-time, grade levels, or Carnegie units);
- Making credits earned at any public postsecondary institution fully transferable to another;
- Providing incentives for students and institutions to accelerate the completion of postsecondary credentials;

- Establishing a governance structure or a single state management system for the initiative that could serve as testing ground for longer-term changes in the governance of K-16 education that would foster more seamless transitions between secondary and postsecondary learning; and
- Refining state accountability systems to facilitate a more seamless transition between secondary and postsecondary education. Beneficial policy changes would include holding postsecondary institutions accountable for the retention and degree completion of their students; eliminating remediation at the postsecondary level; and focusing on the performance of the pipeline.

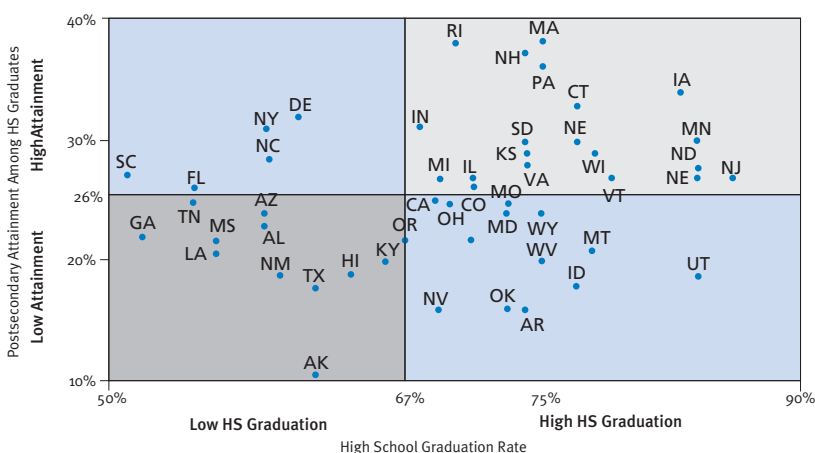
States would be allowed to use a portion of the federal grants both during the planning period and during implementation to work on these issues. In many ways, what states determine (and the variety of approaches they take) could be as important an outcome of the initiative as developing the academic options/pathways themselves.

It is important to note that states have already started down this road. In many, students who are on track in school can now achieve high school exit-level competence in the tenth grade, the year when most states first administer the assessments that determine high school graduation. Thus, some basis has been established for a different approach to the upper-division years of secondary school. There is a growing willingness to consider reconfiguring the years between the eleventh and fourteenth grades.

**CHART 7**

### There Is No Silver Bullet: States Require Tailored Solutions

Loss points vary across states, but all have room for improvement



Source: The Parthenon Group, based on data from the National Information Center for Higher Education Policymaking & Analysis



New York is perhaps the most comprehensive example of where state and local policies have combined in a systemic effort to improve postsecondary attainment. The state has made passing the rigorous Regents exams a prerequisite for earning a high school diploma. At the same time, City University of New York phased out remediation courses at all of its four-year colleges. These simultaneous policy decisions led CUNY leaders to look carefully at how the Regents exams might align with a no-remediation college placement standard. Based on an independent assessment of the Regents exam, the CUNY system has decided that any high school student who scores 75 or higher on the math or English exam can directly enter credit-bearing courses at the postsecondary level.

In addition, CUNY and the New York public school system created the College Now Program—a partnership in which the CUNY system gives its placement exams for credit-bearing courses to eleventh graders. Students who pass those exams can immediately enroll in a dual enrollment program and start to take credit-bearing courses in any CUNY institution. As a result, they leave high school much further along, reducing the time and money they will spend getting a postsecondary degree. Conversely, eleventh graders who fail know this at the beginning of eleventh grade and can immediately start taking developmental, or remedial, courses—not just in their high schools, but also at the college level through the CUNY system. All 17 CUNY campuses and all 161 high schools in the city are participating in College Now, which now reaches 13,000 students, of whom over 10,000 are registered for dual-credit courses. New York City is also deliberately fostering new forms of high school, like the New Vision schools, middle colleges like LaGuardia, Bard Early College high school, and others. In New York City, the *system* is making connections between high school and postsecondary education on behalf of students and creating a range of high-quality learning environments in which young people can excel.

A number of other states are adopting strategies to improve their rates of postsecondary attainment. Georgia and Maryland, for example, are redefining their education policies to encourage every student to complete 14 years of school. New York, Washington, and Utah have extensive “postsecondary option” programs. Utah’s New Century scholarship program offers a 75 percent scholarship to a four-year state college or university to students who graduate from high school with an Associate’s degree.

Especially relevant for the arguments here is Virginia Governor Mark Warner’s initiative to allow any high school senior who is ready for college to earn a semester of fully transferable college credit while still in high school through Advanced Placement, dual enrollment, or virtual enrollment. In addition, students seeking technical training will be able to enroll in industry-recognized certification programs at community colleges. As an incentive, the state will pay for certification programs completed within six months after high school graduation. The governor estimates that families of students who accelerate in either of these ways will save the equivalent of \$5,000 (Warner 2004).

In many ways, what states determine (and the variety of approaches they take) could be as important an outcome of the initiative as developing the academic options/pathways themselves.

# The Biggest Implementation Challenges: Quality and Financing

The biggest design and implementation challenges for states will be how to ensure quality within and among Fast Track to College options and how to pay for them. These issues will be analyzed more deeply in subsequent papers, but some key issues and strategies are outlined here.

## Ensuring Quality

Key variables in ensuring quality will include:

- 1) providing an adequate level of rigor/academic preparation in each Fast Track to College option so that students can meet the entry requirements for credit-bearing college courses or careers;
- 2) providing adequate academic, developmental, and personal supports;
- 3) determining how to set academic standards, where to set the bar for student assessment, and how to handle the awarding of credit for college-level work; and
- 4) improving the quality of teaching and school leadership.

The American Diploma Project's recommendations can help with some aspects of this challenge, through encouraging states to align secondary exit requirements with postsecondary requirements for entrance into credit-granting degree programs and/or to give college placement tests early. Some states, such as Oregon, have been working toward this goal for about a decade. Others are also pursuing this agenda.

In addition, implementing Fast Track to College alternatives well will require stronger capacity in teaching and leadership at the secondary and postsecondary levels—the same, if not more, capacity as other education reform approaches. Simply creating new alternatives won't magically create that capacity, but early experience shows that partnerships with postsecondary institutions benefit high schools in many ways. Technology may also offer

some help. Distance learning and other technology-based strategies lend themselves well to accelerated work on college-level classes. The extensive technology-based systems of many institutions of higher education would allow them to deliver course content, provide feedback to students, and give students remote access to top-quality professors and courses.<sup>17</sup>

## Financing

The challenge here is how to create a financing system that puts Fast Track to College options on an equal, sustainable footing with traditional high schools.

States will need to cover two kinds of costs: for start-up and for ongoing operations. Short-term start-up costs associated with developing the “Fast Track to College” options include school or program design, the hiring and training of faculty, and curriculum development. These costs should be covered by the federal grant and could be supplemented by private philanthropic dollars.

In the long term, ongoing operational costs must be covered by existing public expenditures.<sup>18</sup> This can largely be accomplished through the reallocation of existing dollars rather than additional investments, but doing so will require changing mindsets and blending secondary and postsecondary funding streams. Over the long term, this implies that states will need to pursue a dual course of continued, aggressive new school development coupled with the continued improvement/conversion of existing high schools.

One possibility would be to develop the “Fast Track to College” options primarily through a grant-based approach. A state would set up some kind of fund to finance the newly developed options. Institutions, or partnerships, could apply to this fund for financing. This would have the advantage of providing predictable resources to

institutions starting up new pathways to college. The fund would pool the federal grant with a state-determined allocation generated by student choices. It could be constructed either so that traditional high schools lose those resources if students choose an alternative or in a more incremental way.

The more incremental route appears preferable: start by giving institutions an incentive to participate. In other words, there would be a period during which both high schools and the partners for the new alternatives are “held harmless” for extra expenditures—i.e., neither loses money in the short term—under the rationale that you don’t want institutional resistance to overwhelm chances for adoption. This intentional “double dipping” would end after a period of experimentation and evaluation. Longer-range financial decisions to phase out this double dipping would be made on the basis of early experience and results.

Another possibility would be to encourage direct, immediate competition between high schools and other providers, such as postsecondary institutions, private-sector proprietary providers, and community partnerships. This is the kind of approach recommended by advocates for vouchers. For example, Joe Nathan (2004) of the University of Minnesota argues for a pure “money follows the students” financing mechanism in order to drive school districts to compete for revenue by creating additional postsecondary options for their high school students. Under such a scenario, the entire public funding could follow a student to the new option (or some modification—for example, the traditional school keeps a quarter to a third of the public allocation; the new option gets two-thirds to three-quarters of it).

Another variation on the voucher option would be to let money follow the student by putting resources in the hands of individual students or their families. This approach would use a mechanism like an Individual Development Account. Individuals would receive the amount of public dollars that would have been spent had they stayed in a traditional high school (e.g., the average daily

expenditure for senior year, plus some equivalent amount for their time in postsecondary classes, or some other amount determined by the state). They could use these resources to enroll in Fast Track to College options of their choice.<sup>19</sup>

States also could finance the options through their postsecondary systems. When a student enrolled in a postsecondary institution, the college would receive state funds based on the proportion of time he or she is enrolled. Low-income students could also be eligible for Pell grants to cover postsecondary education.

Regardless, any school designed from the start as a “blended institution” would receive full funding for all the years in which a student attended. This would include, for example, early college high schools and middle colleges. It would not include a partnership arrangement between a high school and some other institution without the creation of a new, blended school.

*Other financial incentives:* Acceptance/expansion of the “Fast Track to College” options could be further enhanced through additional financial incentives for individuals and institutions. For example, the alternatives could be linked to state scholarship programs that reward students for taking a college-preparatory curriculum, such as the Texas Scholars Program, or for students who meet standards, such as the Michigan Merit Award. These incentives could apply to students in any of the three options described here.

There could be additional incentives at the institutional level. For example, students with greater needs/higher risk could be assigned an added value, encouraging competition among schools to serve them well. Institutions could be rewarded financially for doing a better job in helping underrepresented students to succeed and to achieve postsecondary credentials.

Many states are moving in this direction: they are looking for alternatives that improve results for low-performing students, in particular, and for high school students in general. Texas, for example, is encouraging experimentation with charters

Short-term start-up costs associated with developing the “Fast Track to College” options include school or program design, the hiring and training of faculty, and curriculum development. These costs should be covered by the federal grant and could be supplemented by private philanthropic dollars.

for under-served youth and dropouts. Wisconsin and Minnesota allow state money to follow vulnerable youth through “children at-risk” statutes that enable public schools districts to contract with private, nonprofit, nonsectarian agencies to educate children who meet the statute’s criteria. Enacted in the mid-1980s, these statutes create relatively stable funding streams for private, nonprofit agencies and community-based alternative schools. Districts with large numbers of dropouts and other youth who meet the specified criteria are required to let students choose alternative

education environments. In Wisconsin, contracted providers are considered Milwaukee Public Schools “partnership schools” and receive per pupil funding at 80 percent of the average per pupil expenditure. Currently, Milwaukee’s alternative education programs are responsible for 20 percent of the high school graduates. Similarly, about 30 community-based alternative schools operate within the Minneapolis Public Schools system under this legislation, also reported to be responsible for 20 percent of high school graduates (Smith and Thomas 2001).

## Return on Investment

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In the short term, Fast Track to College is unlikely to save money for federal or state governments. First, they would be underwriting the start-up costs of these options. Second, if Fast Track to College options succeed, more students would complete high school and postsecondary education. On the other hand, Fast Track to College would save money for students and their families by decreasing the number of years and tuition payments to a degree.<sup>20</sup>

In the long term, it is possible that Fast Track to College would yield both cost savings and benefits for state and federal governments. More work needs to be done to determine the answers to a variety of questions, such as:

- What savings would come from the decreased cost of remediation at postsecondary level and decreased costs of turnover (replacing students who leave prior to completing a degree)?
- Would postsecondary institutions come out even financially, if not ahead, because of greater numbers of students matriculating and lower turnover/improved retention?
- What would be the returns to state and federal governments in terms of earlier and higher tax contributions due to higher earnings, lessened social costs, etc.?
- How many more students would be likely to complete postsecondary credentials, and to complete them sooner, under this system? Would it be reasonable to expect a 20 percent increase? At what cost or benefit?

## Conclusion

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Our education system was designed to meet the needs of the 20th century industrial economy, a dramatically different world than the one we inhabit today. It is hard to see how we will meet the needs of the 21st century knowledge economy without improving the effectiveness of our pipeline from high school through college. To do so, we must address the use of time and money across the K-16 system. The cost of expanding access to meet the increased demand for postsecondary education without such changes would be prohibitive.

This is not as far-fetched as it might seem. The small school and choice movements have created a growing number of secondary school options compatible with directions advocated here. Programs that enable young people to get a head start on college-level learning and credit while in high school are also growing in number and popularity. High-quality models for each of the Fast Track to College options exist throughout in the nation. Thus, while the Fast Track to College initiative envisions a radically different future, it does not require doing things that have never been done. But nowhere are we building the full system that is needed, with adequate speed and intentionality.

The long-term fiscal and civic health of our nation will be affected by how well we address the postsecondary attainment and achievement gaps that challenge America (Kazis 2004). According to



Anthony Carnevale, equalizing college attainment among blacks, Hispanics, and non-Hispanic whites could add as much as \$230 billion to the gross domestic product and generate \$80 billion in new tax revenues, giving states the ability to choose between improving valued services and reducing marginal tax rates. Similarly, doubling the numbers of minority and low-income students who complete college credentials could greatly reduce the shortage of qualified workers projected for a decade from now.

As the experience of 1950 and other times in our history shows, significant change is not only necessary but possible. During the last century, the United States succeeded in creating a universal secondary school system that increased the number of individuals 18 years or older who had completed high school from 5 percent in the early 1900s to 75 percent by the 1960s. We have doubled the numbers of the numbers of college students every 20 years or sooner for the last half century. The GI Bill and Pell grants stand among the great achievements of the last 50 years. It is time for the next breakthrough.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Orrill writes that the committee, representing faculty from Andover, Exeter, and Lawrenceville and Harvard, Princeton, and Yale, and funded by the Ford Foundation, was part of a much more ambitious attempt “to plan the last two years of secondary school and the first two years of college as a continuous process, applicable to all or most students, not just a few “high achievers.” For them, the problem “was to be found in the underlying curricular structure of American education—in the passage students must make from the 11th through the 14th grades.” For practical purposes, they wrote, “The last two years of secondary school and the first two years of college have a certain natural unity for the American student.” Structurally, however, the nation’s educational system had evolved in such a way that the student must make this passage partly in the late years of high school and partly in the early years of college—that is, in two separate education jurisdictions that did not necessarily “view their jobs as parts of a continuous process, two halves of a common enterprise.” What happened in the K-16 curriculum, they said, was that most students in effect worked at acquiring basic skills and information up to and through the early years of high school and then lapsed into something like a long, drawn-out lull before electing a “major” or “concentration” at or near the end of grade 14” (pp. 2-4).
- <sup>2</sup> See Kazis (2004).
- <sup>3</sup> The Education Trust and a handful of states have focused on K-16 as more powerful framework for education reform.
- <sup>4</sup> In other words, students, their families, and the students’ traditional high schools would be able to select one of these alternatives as a better option for that student. Theoretically, the availability of more attractive options for the upper-division years of high school would increase students’ motivation for passing the tenth-grade proficiency test on time.
- <sup>5</sup> For more on these different visions of educational pathways, see Botstein (1997), Pennington (2003), and Tucker (2004).
- <sup>6</sup> An interesting question to be worked out is what a coherent course of study would look like: Would it be modular? What status would it have within a traditional degree program?
- <sup>7</sup> Early college high schools are small schools from which students leave with not only a high school diploma but also an Associate’s degree or two years of college credit toward a Bachelor’s degree. By changing the structure of the high school years and compressing the number of years to a college degree, early college high schools have the potential to improve graduation rates and better prepare students for entry into high-skill careers. This approach helps young people to progress toward the education and experience they need to succeed in life and a family-supporting career. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, along with Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Ford Foundation, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, is funding the Early College High School Initiative. By 2008, the partner organizations will create or redesign more than 150 pioneering small high schools. Jobs for the Future coordinates the Early College High School Initiative.
- <sup>8</sup> Diploma Plus, PCC Prep, middle college, and early college high school all provide extended academic supports for students, such as intensive assistance with math and literacy, and college preparation seminars. They also enroll high school students as cohorts and provide them with counselors or advocates to help them navigate the postsecondary institution.
- <sup>9</sup> The United States has much to learn from Europe in this regard. A number of countries—most notably Denmark and Germany—have undertaken a concerted effort over the last decade to increase the rigor of their vocational offerings so that none preclude higher education. Vocational, or applied, high schools do as good a job preparing students for entry into postsecondary courses of study as the traditional gymnasium. Denmark has also developed what they call “production schools”—schools in which students can go to be productive for a year. The notion of a Gap Year is also well-established in Europe.
- <sup>10</sup> Because of its emphasis on academic preparation and credentialing, this Youth Board would be different from the current Youth Boards under WIA, although theoretically there is no reason a community could not build on this existing structure.
- <sup>11</sup> Jobs for the Future has made addressing the nation’s dropout crisis a major part of its work. JFF’s efforts to bring out-of-school youth into the mainstream of the education system take two

forms: *R&D* on the tools, strategies, and policy guidelines that states need to help the large numbers of young people who are overage for grade and not on track to achieve a high school diploma; and *peer learning and strategic consultation* through partnerships with high school reform networks to spread the lessons of front-runner communities. See Steinberg and Almeida (2002).

<sup>12</sup> One of the surprising things reformers are learning is that part of the problem, particularly with youth who are seriously alienated from school, may be that we *underchallenge* them. The American Youth Policy Forum conducted an extensive review of a number of programs that have succeeded in closing the achievement gap between races. Three of the most common characteristics of successful programs are that they: provide students with small, personal learning communities; demand rigorous, high-quality work; and give students extensive supports. Programs like High Schools That Work and Talent Development High School, with its emphasis on accelerated literacy acquisition, are designed around these premises.

<sup>13</sup> This information comes from “Early College High School: Igniting and Sustaining Educational Identity Development,” a draft report prepared for Jobs for the Future in December 2004 by Karen C. Foster and Michael Nakkula of the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

<sup>14</sup> This suggested timeframe is consistent with what is known about scaling/tipping points in various social policies and other fields. It takes five to fifteen years for an innovation to reach an early majority; twenty-five years or more to become the norm. It is also consistent with the reauthorization cycle of major pieces of federal legislation.

<sup>15</sup> These programs aim to increase access to college for under-represented students. The options supported here would go a step further to focus on student success in earning postsecondary credits/credentials.

<sup>16</sup> There have been a number of federal initiatives over the past several decades from which to learn, including the State Systemic Initiative, the School to Work Opportunities Act, and Comprehensive School Design.

<sup>17</sup> All over the country, distance learning is playing an increasing role in giving students access to courses from new on-line universities. According to the Futures Project at Brown University, as of the year 2000, there were about 1,500 virtual universities, including collaborations between community colleges and four-year colleges. Coming on top of the 3,400 higher education institutions in the country today, that represents a huge increase in capacity—and its impact is only beginning to be felt, let alone addressed by public policy.

<sup>18</sup> Because of the extra academic and developmental supports provided to students, as well as the accelerated curriculum, the ongoing operational costs of the three options proposed here may be somewhat higher than the traditional public high school model. A reasonable estimate, based on the early college high school experience, would be an average cost of 10 percent higher than the normal ADA—a small increment for a potentially large gain in the numbers of students who complete a postsecondary credential. This estimate does not include provision for building new school facilities, a challenge in all new school development.

<sup>19</sup> This would build on experiments with asset-based approaches indicating that the effects of families having asset accounts are more powerful than previously thought. The evidence suggests the earlier the better: the sooner the money is in the hands of the student/family, the greater return. Fast Track to College could adapt the Children’s Savings Account approach—starting the account in high school years.

<sup>20</sup> A pilot study of early college high school costs has found that, within certain data limitations, “Average costs for early college high schools nationwide are within the range of average per pupil allocations.” As that study notes, if further study and experience bear this out, “Investments in early college high school actually buy much more, providing students with opportunities to earn significant college credit while in high school” (Webb 2004).



## About the Author

**HILARY PENNINGTON** is a co-founder and vice-chairman of Jobs for the Future, widely recognized as one of the leading research and policy development organizations in the country regarding issues of workforce development and future work requirements. As CEO for 20 years, she oversaw an extensive research, consulting and policy agenda. Hers is a nationally recognized voice which has been instrumental in the School to Work movement, as a member of the Clinton Presidential Transition Team and co-chair of the Presidential Advisory Committee on Expanding Training Opportunities, and as a frequent speaker and writer advocating for a more comprehensive approach to workforce development and youth transitions from high school to postsecondary education and careers. She is a graduate of the Yale School of Management and Yale College and holds a graduate degree in social anthropology from Oxford University.



**JOBS FOR THE FUTURE** seeks to accelerate the educational and economic advancement of youth and adults struggling in today's economy. JFF partners with leaders in education, business, government, and communities around the nation to: strengthen opportunities for youth to succeed in postsecondary learning and high-skill careers; increase opportunities for low-income individuals to move into family-supporting careers; and meet the growing economic demand for knowledgeable and skilled workers.



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