



**Pathways  
to College  
Network**

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# High Expectations

## A Key to Success for All

A College Readiness Issue Brief from the Pathways to College Network  
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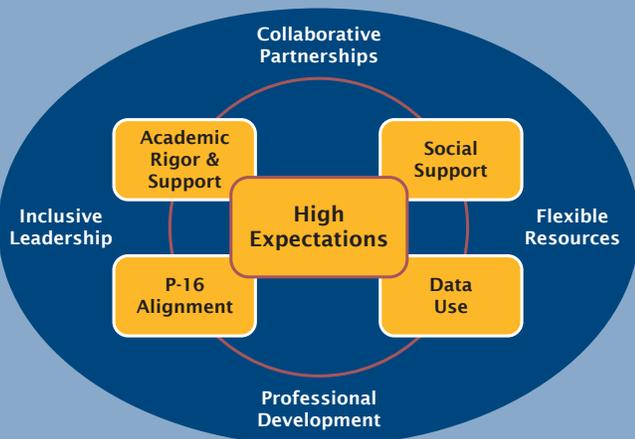
### Why Are High Expectations of All Students Essential?

The vast majority of American high school students say they want to attend college in order to pursue rewarding careers. Of students responding to the 2005 High School Survey of Student Engagement, 83 percent indicated that they expected to go to college.<sup>1</sup> Despite high student aspirations, however, large achievement gaps persist among students by income and race/ethnicity. Only about 52 percent of African-American and 56 percent of Hispanic students graduate from high school on time, as compared to 76 percent of their white peers.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, just 47 percent of recent high school graduates from the bottom income quartile (up to \$36,174) go to college, compared to 85 percent of students from the top income quartile (more than \$96,000).<sup>3</sup>

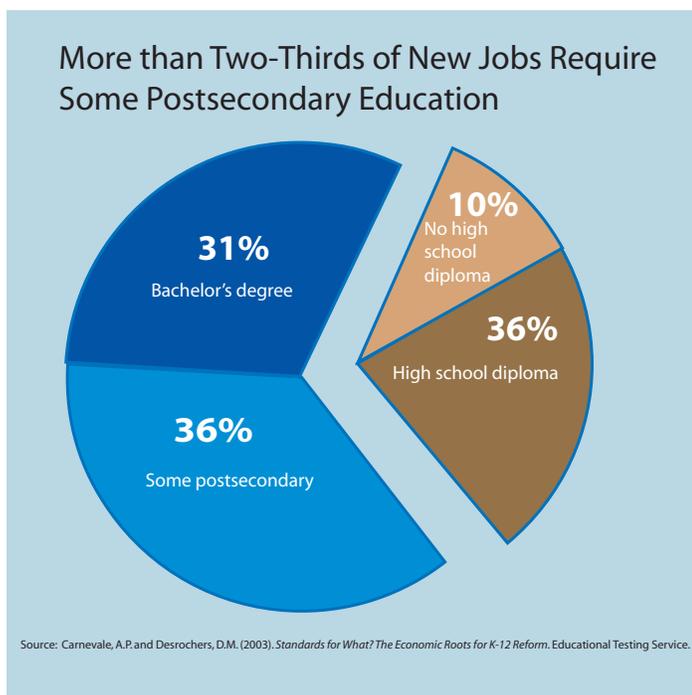
Chronic achievement gaps arise in part from the differing academic expectations that many public schools traditionally held for more affluent populations and white students, as compared to low-income and minority students. Just as some students were routinely placed on a college-prep track, others were shunted into a less demanding, “general” curriculum. This latter group has expected to earn a diploma and enter the workforce right after high school.

While there once was a time when a high school diploma was sufficient for obtaining a skilled job and earning a livable wage, increasingly that is no longer the case. Today, about 67% of new jobs require at least some postsecondary education—and that percentage will continue to rise.<sup>4</sup> In order to compete in today’s knowledge-based workplace, all students

### A Framework for Action



The Pathways to College Network developed this comprehensive conceptual *Framework for Action* to inform and support states, districts, schools, and programs in their efforts to prepare all students for success in college and the workplace. This series of issue briefs illuminates and provides resources on each of the five interrelated areas of the Framework: High Expectations, Academic Rigor & Support, Social Support, Data Use, and P-16 Alignment.



must have the option to pursue postsecondary education. It is sobering to note that the United States has the greatest income disparity of all economically-advanced countries.<sup>5</sup> This great divide between haves and have-nots will only be narrowed by ensuring that the education necessary to participate in a 21st century global economy is attained by all Americans.

### **Toward a Culture of High Expectations**

Education leaders must champion a compelling vision of high expectations within their states, districts, schools, and communities. Teachers, counselors, parents, and community stakeholders alike must believe that all students are capable of achieving at high levels and that all must be prepared to succeed in postsecondary education and work.

On the front line of implementing high expectations for all students are classroom teachers and guidance

staff who share this vision and are committed to achieving equitable learning outcomes for every student, especially those from underserved populations. It is critical that all school staff embrace students' cultural differences and diverse learning styles as assets to the learning process, not impediments to rigorous preparation.

Research provides compelling evidence that when children of color are given a challenging academic curriculum and supported by high expectations, they can and do achieve at high levels.<sup>6</sup> Students who take more rigorous academic programs enroll and persist in higher education at higher rates than students who take less challenging programs of study: this effect is especially significant for African-American and Latino students.<sup>7</sup>

To help narrow achievement gaps, states and school districts should adopt informed policies that require a rigorous college-preparatory curriculum as the "default option" for all students. In Texas and Indiana, for example, all high school students are automatically enrolled in a college-prep curriculum unless they formally opt out with parental consent. This demonstration of high expectations, tangibly embedded in policy and practice, will motivate students to achieve academically and help create a culture of college-going within schools.

An important corollary to high expectations and rigorous preparation is the provision of academic and social support systems for students who begin high school poorly prepared for rigorous academic work. Underpinning each of these is systematic use of student performance data, disaggregated by race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, and disability status—in order to continuously improve student outcomes.

## What Actions Can We Take Now?

### States/District Policymakers

- Make the completion of a rigorous college-preparatory curriculum a high school graduation requirement for all students.
- Hold schools publicly accountable for closing achievement gaps by income and race/ethnicity.
- Provide schools which have large underserved student populations the resources and support required to address achievement gaps.
- Ensure that underserved students are taught by highly qualified, experienced teachers.

### Principals/Teachers/Counselors

- Expect that all students are capable of being prepared to enroll and succeed in college.
- Provide all students with rigorous coursework along with the academic and social support they need to succeed.
- Collect and disaggregate student data by race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, and disability status to identify achievement gaps.
- Provide staff with professional development opportunities that address value and belief systems that perpetuate lower expectations for underserved students.

## Learn More:

To find these and other resources, search the online PCN Library at <http://www.pathwaystocollege.net/PCNLibrary/ListTopics.aspx>

- Adolescence: Are Parents Relevant to Students' High School Achievement and Postsecondary Attainment (<http://www.pathwaystocollege.net/PCNLibrary/ViewBiblio.aspx?aid=1158>)
- Challenging the Myths: Rethinking the Role of School Counselors (<http://www.pathwaystocollege.net/PCNLibrary/ViewBiblio.aspx?aid=249>)
- Creating Helping Environments for College-Going: The CHEPA CHEC-List for Counselors (<http://www.pathwaystocollege.net/PCNLibrary/ViewBiblio.aspx?aid=1296>)
- How Do Educators' Cultural Belief Systems Affect Underserved Students' Pursuit of Postsecondary Education? (<http://www.pathwaystocollege.net/PCNLibrary/ViewBiblio.aspx?aid=19>)
- Swimming against the Tide: The Poor in American Higher Education (<http://www.pathwaystocollege.net/PCNLibrary/ViewBiblio.aspx?aid=671>)

## References

- <sup>1</sup> High School Survey of Student Engagement. (2005). What We Can Learn from Students. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University.
- <sup>2</sup> Editorial Projects in Education (EPE). (2006). Diplomas Count: An Essential Guide to Graduation Policy and Rates. Education Week, 25(41S)6.
- <sup>3</sup> Mortenson, T. (2006, June). College Continuation Rates by Family Income for Recent High School Graduates 1987 to 2004. Postsecondary Education Opportunity, 168.
- <sup>4</sup> Carnevale, A.P. & Desrochers, D.M. (2003). Standards for What: The Economics Roots of K-16 Reform. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service.
- <sup>5</sup> Carnevale, A.P. & Desrochers, D.M. (2003). *ibid.*
- <sup>6</sup> Education Trust. (2006). Yes We Can: Telling Truths and Dispelling Myths about Race and Education in America. Washington, DC: Author.
- <sup>7</sup> Martinez, M. & Klopott, S. (2005). The Link between High School Reform and College Access and Success for Low-Income and Minority Youth.



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

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