



# Strengthening Student Transitions

## An ECS Policy Analysis

Education Commission of the States

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## **Moving Forward: Policies supporting transitions from high school to postsecondary**

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Recent high school graduates continue to make up a significant number of postsecondary enrollees, begetting a clear focus by education leaders and state policymakers on strategies that support successful student transitions from high school to college. Of the nation's 3.3 million expected high school graduates for the 2014-15 academic year, a full 2.2 million are projected to enroll directly into postsecondary education.<sup>1</sup>

Ensuring that public policy supports successful transition for these students, while also creating pathways into postsecondary and workforce training programs for those students not currently enrolling directly out of high school, is a necessary focus for state policy leaders.

As part of the Education Commission of the States' (ECS) continuing [Blueprint for College Readiness](#) initiative, this brief looks at state policies aimed at advancing transitions from K-12 to postsecondary education and includes state-specific examples of various policies.

### ***Key takeaways:***

- Intentional and transparent alignment between K-12 and postsecondary education systems can reinforce and support student transitions, enhancing knowledge and skill acquisition among state residents.
- State policy at the K-12 and postsecondary system levels must be clear about what is required of students to successfully navigate from high school to college.
- Seven strategies, grounded in policy analysis and research, have been identified as options to increase the likelihood of successful transitions from K-12 to postsecondary education.

## A focus on student transitions

A key takeaway from ECS' analysis and research on state postsecondary education policy change is the importance of connecting and integrating policies among education systems so that students, families, employers, policymakers and institutional leaders have clear understandings of expected outcomes. Alignment of policy covering the K-12 to college transition period is especially critical. Intentional and transparent alignment between K-12 and postsecondary education systems can reinforce and support student transitions, enhancing knowledge and skill acquisition among state residents.

Advancing student transitions and education systems alignment necessitates that state policy at the K-12 and postsecondary system levels are clear about what is required of students to successfully navigate from high school to college. At a base level, a state's K-12 and postsecondary systems should align to signal exactly what students should know and be able to demonstrate cognitively and non-cognitively to succeed in higher education; students should be aware of course and assessment requirements necessary to be eligible for entry into public colleges.

Students need to have an understanding of the expectations required to enter credit-bearing coursework — and fully grasp what it means to be placed into remedial courses and receive direction on how to successfully matriculate from them. They should know steps to take to qualify for state-based financial aid. Knowledge and support for students within these key areas is a requisite for successful K-12 to college transitions.

### ***State policy strategies to support student transitions***

State education policy leaders play an important role in creating conditions that foster and support successful transitions from high school to higher education. Grounded in policy analysis and research conducted as part of ECS' Blueprint for College Readiness initiative, the following seven strategies offer examples of state policy actions designed to increase the likelihood of successful transitions from K-12 to postsecondary education for today's students:

- Uniform, statewide college- and career-ready definition.
- Consistent, predictable admission and remedial procedures.
- Early college programs.
- College advising.
- Predictive analytics systems.
- Competency-based admissions policies.
- Enhanced student profiles with performance data.

### **Uniform, statewide college and career ready definition**

Too often, state definitions of college and career readiness are unclear and overly general. They rarely are connected to postsecondary admission or placement practices. By adopting a uniform definition of college and career readiness in partnership with K-12 systems, it is easier to align what is taught and tested in high school with what is expected knowledge at the postsecondary level. A commonly used definition can clarify expectations and more actively engage students and parents as they explore college application options.

### ***State Example: Definition of college readiness***

The **Colorado** State Board of Education and the Colorado Commission on Higher Education have jointly adopted the following college readiness definition:

“The knowledge, skills and behaviors essential to high school graduates to be prepared to enter college and the workforce and compete in the global economy including content knowledge, learning and behavior skills.”<sup>2</sup>

Additionally, the definition articulates that high school students must demonstrate what specified content knowledge and behavioral skills have been achieved without the need for remedial instruction or training. This demonstration includes the completion of increasingly challenging, engaging and coherent academic work and experiences, and the achievement of proficiency demonstrated through scores on postsecondary and workforce readiness assessments.

### **Consistent, predictable admission and remedial procedures**

Consistent statewide admission and remedial placement policies create greater transparency about expectations for college readiness. These policies don’t need to be overly restrictive or inflexible, but should allow students to find the institution that best fits their qualifications and academic goals.

Findings from an ECS 50-state policy review show that 28 states have either statewide or systemwide admission policies. The statewide admissions section of ECS’ Blueprint for College Readiness [database](#) provides an in-depth survey of admissions criteria including GPA, assessments, course requirements, index scores and class rank. The Blueprint report also found that 27 states have statewide or systemwide policies for both remediation and course placement.<sup>3</sup>

#### ***State example: Statewide admission policy***

In 2010, the State Board of Education and the **Washington** Student Achievement Council established the College Academic Distribution Requirements (CADRs). The [CADRs](#) provide high school students with a guideline of what colleges will, at a minimum, require for students to be admitted to four-year public institutions. The CADRs provide an example of K-12 and postsecondary education collaborating to create greater access to postsecondary education through removal of informational barriers around admissions process and requirements.

#### ***State example: Common statewide course placement policy***

**Ohio** revised a state [statute](#) and required the Board of Regents to establish uniform statewide standards in math, reading, science and writing that students must meet to avoid placement into remedial coursework. A College Readiness Advisory Council [report](#) spelled out the academic standards for each subject required for college-level coursework. The report also established minimum cut-scores on exams for placement in credit-bearing courses. Exemplifying flexibility, institutions may use other measures to determine course placement, including high school GPA, if students score below defined thresholds.

### **Early college programs**

A number of states are adopting early college high school programs, which typically serve first-generation college-goers, those at-risk of dropping out or other historically underserved populations. Students who complete these programs graduate with a high school diploma as well as up to two years of transferable college credit — at no cost to their families.<sup>4</sup> The programs often include an aligned high school and postsecondary curriculum and expose all students to a college culture on a regular basis. Research suggests that early college students are outperforming their peers nationwide in high school graduation rates and postsecondary enrollment rates.<sup>5</sup>

### ***State example: Early college programs***

**North Carolina** is leading the nation in implementation of early college programs. [Enabling legislation](#) refers to these schools as “cooperative, innovative high school programs.”<sup>6</sup> North Carolina’s early college program was developed in partnership with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, North Carolina New Schools, the North Carolina Community College System and the University of North Carolina. Since 2005, the number of early college high schools in North Carolina has increased from 13 to 76.<sup>7</sup>

### **College advising**

Receiving straightforward, timely advice and assistance in navigating the K-12 to college transition is critical. However, nationally the student-to-adviser ratio is more than 450-to-1, a condition that leaves many K-12 students with only 20 minutes a year with a college adviser.<sup>8</sup> The lack of access to information about higher education, particularly financial aid, is a well-documented challenge among underserved student populations.<sup>9</sup>

A study of the [College Advising Corps](#) — a program to increase access to college advising for low-income students — shows that participating high schools have an 8 percent to 12 percent increase in college matriculation as compared to control-group institutions from the same area. Additionally, the program’s partner high schools reported observing an increase in new scholarship dollars per school for their college-going students.<sup>10</sup>

### ***State example: College Advising***

The **Wyoming** Hathaway Scholarship, created in 2005 [by statute](#), is a unique policy initiative that mandates college counseling for students beginning in eighth grade. The counseling curriculum is required to include course selection for postsecondary readiness, standardized test requirements, scholarship eligibility and the impact of education on earning potential. Each year after eighth grade, the counseling curriculum continues and expands to include other college- and career-readiness topics.

### **Predictive analytics systems**

In addition to the use of traditional college admissions criteria, states may consider supporting the creation of predictive analytics systems that include student information such as course rigor, academic performance and persistence to help determine if an individual is — or will be — college ready. Using data to predict student behavior would enable practitioners to target interventions to specific students who may be at risk. Predictive analytics and intrusive advising approaches — already gaining traction in the K-12 sector — could be used to improve students’ decisions and support their success in high school and on college campuses.

### ***State example: Early warning systems***

The Massachusetts Early Warning Indicators System (EWIS) is a tool to systematically identify students in grades 1-12 that may need additional attention and interventions to reach academic goals. The purpose of the [EWIS](#) is to provide information to districts on the likelihood that their students will reach key academic goals. For high schools, the academic goal is on-time graduation and includes behavioral, demographic and academic performance variables to predict whether students are at risk of not meeting this outcome.

### **Competency-based admission policies**

Although many college admission policies rely heavily on high school course requirements, several states and postsecondary systems are shifting toward a more comprehensive approach to include GPA,

class rank and assessments. At the same time, there are increasing efforts at the high school and postsecondary education levels to broaden the options for students to demonstrate mastery of subject context, from a near universal focus on course credits to an approach more receptive to competency or proficiency-based assessments. To capitalize on these reforms, states and systems may consider incorporating or expanding alternative measures, such as results from standardized, end-of-course or Advanced Placement (AP) exams, into admission policies and procedures.

### **State Example: Competency-based admission policy**

South Dakota's high school [graduation requirements policy](#) allows students to use course equivalency exams in lieu of course requirements to demonstrate competency. Similarly, the statewide higher education [admission policy](#) provides alternate means to meet the minimum course requirements beyond seat time. Within each subject area, students can receive credit by achieving a specific benchmark on the ACT exam or AP tests.

### **Design enhanced student profiles with performance data**

Student profiles can be a useful tool to provide information about cognitive and non-cognitive skills of individuals seeking postsecondary enrollment. Student profiles could include academic skills and performance, as well as students' learning techniques and non-cognitive attributes. This information is currently lacking in the overwhelming majority of public college admissions portfolios. A robust student profile with performance data at the course and assignment level would provide more diagnostic and complete information to colleges. Understanding more about students' strengths — in addition to any weaknesses — enables institutions to increase student success by offering tailored services and personalized advice.

Although this information is potentially available from K-12 schools today, it will require new methods of recording and automating information, scaling measures and creating buy-in across both the K-12 and postsecondary education systems. Student profiles are gaining traction as useful tools at individual K-12 and postsecondary institutions, however, broad adoption at the state or systems level, in such a format as to align across systems, remains an elusive goal. Policy and education leaders may consider ways in which expansion of student profiles can be supported by state policy action.

## **Using research and policy to support student transitions**

Ensuring successful transitions into postsecondary education for recent high school graduates is a pressing public policy issue. Through intentional policy actions, state leaders can support transitions by constructing transparent, consistent and clearly communicated pathways from high school to higher education. Adoption and implementation of the policy options discussed in this brief hold the promise of advancing student success and moving states and the nation closer to meeting the civic and economic needs of the 21st century.

## **Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. *Digest of Education Statistics (2013)*. [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/tables/dt13\\_302.30.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/tables/dt13_302.30.asp) (accessed October 28, 2014); U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. *Digest of Education Statistics (2013)*. [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/tables/dt13\\_219.10.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/tables/dt13_219.10.asp) (accessed October 28, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Colorado State Board of Education and the Colorado Commission on High Education. *Joint Adoption of Statement Postsecondary Workforce Readiness*. (2009). <http://www.cde.state.co.us/postsecondary#sthash.5mCZrQdK.dpuf> (accessed October 28, 2014).

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<sup>3</sup> Emmy Glancy, Mary Fulton, Lexi Anderson, Jennifer Dounay Zinth, Maria Millard and Brady Delander. *Blueprint for College Readiness*. (Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States, October 2014)

<http://www.ecs.org/docs/BlueprintforCollegeReadiness.pdf>. (accessed November 7, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Andrea Berger, Lori Turk-Bicakci, Michael Gare, Joel Kuudson, and Gur Hoshen. *Early College, Continued Success: Early College High School Initiative Impact Study*. American Institutes for Research. (2014).

[http://www.air.org/sites/default/files/AIR\\_ECHSI\\_Impact\\_Study\\_Report-\\_NSC\\_Update\\_01-14-14.pdf](http://www.air.org/sites/default/files/AIR_ECHSI_Impact_Study_Report-_NSC_Update_01-14-14.pdf) (accessed October 28, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.ncga.state.nc.us/EnactedLegislation/Statutes/PDF/ByArticle/Chapter\\_115C/Article\\_16.pdf](http://www.ncga.state.nc.us/EnactedLegislation/Statutes/PDF/ByArticle/Chapter_115C/Article_16.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Early College Designs. Jobs for the Future. [http://www.jff.org/initiatives/early-college-designs/schools#North\\_Carolina](http://www.jff.org/initiatives/early-college-designs/schools#North_Carolina) (accessed October 28, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> National College Advising Corps. *The Need*. <http://advisingcorps.org/our-work/the-need/> (accessed October 28, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Testimony of David Hawkins, National Association for College Admission Counseling, to Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee. August 4, 2010, Washington, DC <http://www.help.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Hawkins1.pdf> (accessed October 28, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> Eric Bettinger, Anthony Antonio, Brett Evans, Jesse Foster, Brian Holzman, Hoori Santikian, and Eileen Horng. *National College Advising Corps: 2010-2011 Evaluation Report*. (Palo Alto, CA: Evaluation and Assessment Solutions for Education, LLC, August 2010). <http://www.socialimpactexchange.org/sites/www.socialimpactexchange.org/files/Evaluation%20Report%2010-11%20%2804%2025%2012%29%20FINAL.pdf> (accessed October 28, 2014).

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