

Levers for Change

Steps States Can Take to Improve College Readiness

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America's current fractured systems of K–12 and higher education are based on the outdated view that only an elite group of students attends college. Now, in fact, the majority of students attend some form of postsecondary education after high school, but they encounter a host of problems. Many do not complete their programs of study, almost half the students in higher education require remediation, and college-going and completion rates are highly inequitable in terms of income level, race and ethnicity. As student demographics shift in the coming years, and students who have been traditionally underrepresented in postsecondary education become the majority in the population, the United States could face an education crisis.

To reverse this course, we should connect high school and postsecondary education standards, policies and practices. Much of this should occur at the state level and it must particularly affect the “broad-access” institutions, which admit almost every applicant and educate more than 80 percent of America's college students. While much media attention focuses on elite institutions, the institutions that educate most of the nation's students—and most underrepresented students—are not in the Ivy League. As Ross Douthat wrote recently in *The Atlantic Monthly*, “In America, access ultimately rests on what happens in the vast middle rank of college and universities, where most undergraduates are educated—in particular, in state schools.”

State policies send important signals to students about what they need to know and be able to do, to educators about what is important to teach and to researchers and policymakers about what students need. States have created disjointed systems with separate standards, governing entities and policies. As a result, they have also created unnecessary and detrimental barriers between high school and college that undermine students' aspirations and their abilities to succeed.

Currently, K–12 and postsecondary education exist in separate worlds. Policies for each system of education are typically created in isolation from each other. Students in K–12 rarely know what to expect when they enter college, nor do they have a clear sense of how to prepare for that next step.

Most students—with help from their parents, guidance counselors, teachers and others—try to negotiate the divide between high school and college. But they often face unexpected hurdles, such as graduating under one set of expectations in high school and, several months later, entering into a whole new set of standards in college.

Many must contend with poor quality high school courses, inequities in high school achievement and college preparation opportunities, a confusing array of state and institutional exams within and between the education sectors, high postsecondary remediation rates and insufficient college persistence and completion.

These problems disproportionately affect students who are underserved throughout the entire U.S. education pipeline. More than 90 percent of U.S. high school seniors say they plan to attend a two- or four-year college, and about 70 percent of high school graduates actually do go to college within two years of graduating, according to The Education Trust, the Washington, D.C.-based K–12 reform group.

Measuring Up 2004, the annual report card published by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, demonstrated that students' aspirations are rising, but college opportunity has not increased, particularly for traditionally underrepresented student groups, whose numbers are growing. These educational aspirations extend across income, racial and ethnic groups and are grounded in economic reality. In 2000, the median annual earnings for workers age 25 and over with a high school diploma were \$24,267, compared to \$26,693 for those with an associate degree and \$40,314 for those with a bachelor's degree.

Though students of all races and ethnicities may aspire to the same levels of education, the roadblocks along the way have different impacts on different groups of students, according to data from Stanford University's Bride Project and The Education Trust. Of every 100 white, non-Latino students, 93 graduate from high school, 62 complete some college, and 29 obtain a bachelor's degree. For African-American students, the numbers are lower: 86 graduate from high school, 48 complete some college, and 15 obtain a bachelor's degree. For Latino students, the numbers are lower still: 61 graduate from high school, 31 complete some college, and 10 obtain a bachelor's degree.

Not only are African-American and Latino students earning college certificates and degrees at a much lower rate than their white, non-Latino counterparts—they are also not graduating from high school with the same level of academic skills. Across the country, African-American and Latino 12th graders read and do math at about the same levels as white, non-Latino 8th graders, according to The Education Trust.

Thus, many students are not well-prepared for college, and too few complete their college programs. The U.S. Department of Education found that nationally, 63 percent

of students in two-year colleges and 40 percent of those in four-year institutions take some remedial education. About half of first-year students at community colleges do not continue on for a second year. About one quarter of first-year students at four-year colleges do not stay for their second year.

Reforms cannot be effective if they are simply grafted onto existing policies that divide education systems by level.

To understand these issues more deeply, the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education and its partners analyzed state-level policies that facilitate, or undermine, student transitions from high school to college in four states: Florida, Georgia, New York and Oregon. The research revealed that four policy levers are particularly promising for states interested in creating sustained K–16 reform. These policy levers center on assessments and curricula, finance, data systems and accountability.

Alignment of courses and assessments. States should align the content of high school and college courses and assessments. While most states have some kind of high school graduation standards, they are usually not aligned with college entrance and placement standards. As an example, college instructors believe grammar and usage are the most important writing skills needed by incoming students, but high school teachers consider these skills least important, according to a recent ACT study. Just 69 percent of high school teachers reported they even teach grammar and usage. Most states' high school assessment programs end with 10th grade exams that are not linked to what students need to know and be able to do to place into college-level courses. Students are often left believing that their 10th grade assessments and curricular standards are what they need in order to succeed in college, but that's not enough.

Finance. State education finance and budget decisions should provide incentives for increasing the proportion of students who complete high school and enroll in and complete postsecondary education and training programs. State finance structures have not kept up with innovations in K–16 reform. By spanning different education systems, education finance could pull systems of education together and drive change.

For example, the Oregon Business Council (OBC) is developing a unified and transparent budget model. A first step in that process was to analyze state and local funds as though they were all in one budget. The OBC found that the level of state investment varied across grade and degree, with community colleges receiving the least state aid and special education in K–12 receiving the most. Consequently, the OBC recommended to the governor that the budget be based on per-student costs per service and outcomes be established for every education level and service. Moreover, the OBC

recommended that how schools spend money and how students perform become transparent.

Data systems. States should create high-quality data systems that span the education systems. K–16 data systems should identify good practices, diagnose problems, provide information about all education levels, provide students with diagnostic information to help them prepare better, assess and improve achievement and track individual students over time and across levels. Without such systems, it is impossible to understand where problems are or to get traction for change and evaluate reforms. In many states, existing data systems were created to provide reports and audit expenditures, not to meet accountability and assessment demands associated with K–16 reforms, such as documenting student achievement across the education systems and identifying systemic barriers.

Accountability. States should connect their accountability systems to span K–12 and postsecondary education. Currently, accountability systems are usually designed for either K–12 or postsecondary education without much attention to the interface between the two. Accountability systems need to better reflect the reality of students' educational paths. Across the country, accountability for high schools is generally geared toward graduation rates and proficiency on state assessments. Very few accountability systems are in place for postsecondary education, and even fewer connect K–12 and higher education. Historically, states and localities have been viewed as the entities responsible for establishing goals for, and overseeing the performance of, K–12 schools. At the postsecondary level, however, students have been viewed as responsible for their own success or failure in completing their educational programs. Given inequities and systemic problems regarding persistence and completion rates in colleges and universities, it makes sense to establish and monitor performance based on measurable goals for higher education, and to require K–12 and higher education to work together toward common objectives.

Establishing and empowering organizational structures that transcend the barriers between education sectors is essential in promoting K–16 reforms. These bodies should be charged with specific responsibilities, provided with the requisite resources, empowered with enough influence and authority to make real change and held accountable for performance.

State agency collaboration—both in terms of the content of work and the organizational structures supporting that work—is essential, and having components of K–16 reform in statute appears to be useful but not sufficient for creating change. Leadership at the state level is of crucial importance in establishing a vision and sustaining long-term change.

We caution state education leaders, however, that convening a commission and holding cross-system discussions may be helpful, but these steps alone will not

create meaningful and lasting K–16 reform. To be lasting and effective, the deliberations must be anchored in policy and finance reform and must reflect each state’s culture and history. Policies like the ones noted above must drive the type of governance structure that is needed, not vice versa.

The responsibility for reform cannot be carried by one sector, but must be shared across systems to reach common ground, focusing on improving K–12 and post-secondary education for all students. Moreover, these reforms cannot be effective if they are simply grafted onto existing policies that divide education systems by level. Traditionally, states, systems, schools and colleges responded to student needs by adding new policies and programs while maintaining existing policy structures. In order for these reforms to affect all students, states

must move beyond limited approaches and adopt more lasting and ambitious changes to their underlying policy structures.

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What Does It Mean to Be “College-Ready”?

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Many young people see the chief benefit of a college education as preparation for a career or perhaps increased earning power. But being “college-ready” means looking beyond the dollar signs and experiencing learning beyond required readings, papers and exams.

To really learn in college, students must be prepared to interact with professors and peers who continually challenge their present understanding of the world. Instead of thinking about college as a place where professors are responsible for “teaching” them new information, students should see themselves as partners in the learning process. True learning will involve more than mere collection and absorption—and more than doing the minimum amount of work.

Openness to change is a critical component of college preparedness. For students making the transition to college, this means rethinking attitudes toward learning. If they have the motivation and the humility to reflect upon their attitudes, they will be able to function more effectively in their new environment, adapting and affecting change where appropriate.

Once students are immersed in their new environment, they can be guided effectively by the many people at every institution of higher education who are interested in student success. Most campuses offer a range of programs to help students make necessary adjustments. These include first-year experience programs connecting students to one another and familiarizing them with the college, academic

success centers offering tutoring or learning skills assistance, and academic advising programs.

The majority of colleges and universities offer some type of first-year success course. Too often, the focus is aimed at teaching students “how to” manage their time, keep up on their reading, and prepare for exams. Effective courses must go beyond the “how to” approach. Instead, the course should be intentionally designed to help students to think about how they think, including their understanding of the role and responsibilities of a college student. These courses must convince students that an open mind and willingness to change is as necessary as hard work. Pedagogy should consist of strategies designed to help students reflect on their thoughts and feelings about their role as students and how those may either negatively or positively influence their ability to meet the new demands of college life.

Developing the ability to adapt in the face of new roles and responsibilities, and understanding the importance of change and self-reflection are habits of mind that will serve students not only during their first year of college, but also well into their careers.

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