FINAL POLICY BRIEF

BETRAYING THE COLLEGE DREAM:
How Disconnected K-12 and Postsecondary Education Systems Undermine Student Aspirations

BY ANDREA VENEZIA, MICHAEL W. KIRST, AND ANTHONY L. ANTONIO

STANFORD UNIVERSITY'S BRIDGE PROJECT
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America’s high school students have higher educational aspirations than ever before, yet these aspirations are being undermined by disconnected educational systems and other barriers, according to Betraying the College Dream, a report released by Stanford University’s Bridge Project after six years of research.

Eighty-eight percent of 8th graders expect to participate in some form of postsecondary education, and approximately 70 percent of high school graduates actually do go to college within two years of graduating. These educational aspirations cut across racial and ethnic lines; as with the national sample cited above, 88 percent of all students surveyed for this project intend to attend some form of postsecondary education. In each of the six states studied for this report (California, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Oregon, and Texas), over 80 percent of African American and Latino students surveyed plan to attend some form of postsecondary education.

Over the past few decades, parents, educators, policymakers, business leaders, community members, and researchers have told students that, in order to succeed in our society, they need to go to college. High school students have heard that message, and they are planning on attending college. But states have created unnecessary and detrimental barriers between high school and college, barriers that are undermining these student aspirations. The current fractured systems send students, their parents, and K-12 educators conflicting and vague messages about what students need to know and be able to do to enter and succeed in college.

For example, this research found that high school assessments often stress different knowledge and skills than do college entrance and placement requirements. Similarly, the coursework between high school and college is not connected; students graduate from high school under one set of standards and, three months later, are required to meet a whole new set of standards in college. Current data systems are not equipped to address issues across systems. Most states are not able to identify students’ needs as they transition from one education system to another, or assess outcomes from K-16 reforms, because they do not have K-16 data systems. Also, no one is held accountable for K-16 reform.

Inadequate and inequitable preparation for college affects remediation and persistence rates — major problems in postsecondary institutions throughout the country. For example, 40 percent of students in four-year institutions take some remedial education as compared with 63 percent at two-year institutions. Remediation problems are the greatest in “broad access postsecondary institutions,” or institutions that admit almost every student who applies. Broad access institutions comprise about 85 percent of all postsecondary schools and educate approximately 80 percent of the nation’s first-year college students. Most media and public attention, however, focuses upon the approximately 20 percent of students who attend the most selective four-year institutions that have the best prepared students, and have the most complicated methods to help sort and select applicants.
Findings:

Because of these kinds of problems,¹ many students and parents do not know what is expected of students when they enter college. These misconceptions can seriously undermine student preparation for college. For instance, we found that many students believe the following misconceptions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Many students believe that</th>
<th>In truth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I can’t afford college.</td>
<td>Students and parents regularly overestimate the cost of college.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have to be a stellar athlete or student to get financial aid.</td>
<td>Most students receive some form of financial aid.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting high school graduation requirements will prepare me for college.</td>
<td>Adequate preparation for college usually requires a more demanding curriculum than is reflected in minimum requirements for high school graduation, sometimes even if that curriculum is termed “college prep.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting into college is the hardest part.</td>
<td>For the majority of students, the hardest part is completing college.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community colleges don’t have academic standards.</td>
<td>Students usually must take placement tests at community colleges in order to qualify for college-level work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s better to take easier classes in high school and get better grades.</td>
<td>One of the best predictors of college success is taking rigorous high school classes. Getting good grades in lower-level classes will not prepare students for college-level work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My senior year in high school doesn’t matter.</td>
<td>The classes students take in their senior year will often determine the classes they are able to take in college and how well-prepared they are for those classes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t have to worry about my grades, or the kind of classes I take, until my sophomore year.</td>
<td>Many colleges look at sophomore year grades, and, in order to enroll in college-level courses, students need to prepare well for college. This means taking a well-thought out series of courses starting no later than 9th or 10th grade.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can’t start thinking about financial aid until I know where I’m going to college.</td>
<td>Students need to file a federal aid form prior to when most college send out their acceptance letters. This applies to students who attend community colleges, too, even though they can apply and enroll in the fall of the year they wish to attend.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can take whatever classes I want when I get to college.</td>
<td>Most colleges and universities require entering students to take placement exams in core subject areas. Those tests will determine the classes students can take.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ There are many issues that affect student preparation for college. This research focuses solely on the role of policies and programs related to high school graduation, college admission, and college placement. We did not address issues related to financial aid or affordability. In addition, teacher preparation and professional development programs and policies play a major role in helping students transition successfully between high school and college. These issues warrant a separate study and, therefore, were not addressed by this project.

“So I did my orientation, and they told me something about [placement] testing. I was like, what? You have to do a test?...Nobody told me about them when I graduated from high school.”
OREGON COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENT
Other major findings include:

- **Inequalities in education systems.** Since almost all students plan to attend college, and most do, it makes sense to help all students learn about their postsecondary options and prepare for college. There are, however, some deep inequalities throughout the systems in areas such as college counseling, college preparation course offerings, and connections with local postsecondary institutions. There is also an unequal distribution of such resources as college centers on high school campuses, opportunities to make college visits, and visits from college recruiters on high school campuses.

Students who are in accelerated curricular tracks in high school receive clearer signals about college preparation than do their peers in other tracks. Many students in middle and lower level high school courses are not reached by postsecondary education outreach efforts, or by college counseling staff in their high schools. Many economically disadvantaged parents often lack experience and information concerning college preparation.

- **Student knowledge of curricular requirements is sporadic and vague.** Less than 12 percent of the students surveyed knew all the course requirements for the institutions studied. This ranged from one percent in California to 11 percent in Maryland. Students do appear to have considerable partial knowledge of curricular requirements; slightly more than one-half of the students knew three or more course requirements.

### Chart A

**PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS WHO KNEW ALL CURRICULAR REQUIREMENTS FOR ADMISSION BY TYPE OF COLLEGE** (On a 20 Percent Scale)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>KNEW COURSE REQUIREMENTS AT SELECTIVE UNIVERSITY</th>
<th>KNEW COURSE REQUIREMENTS AT LESS-SELECTIVE UNIVERSITY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maryland</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oregon</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SOURCE:** Bridge Project data

*Across all states, less than 12 percent of students surveyed knew all the curricular requirements for admission to the studied postsecondary institutions.*
Teachers play a major role in helping students prepare for college, yet they do not have the resources they need to give students accurate information. Teachers often took a greater role in helping students prepare for college than did counselors, but teachers lack connections with postsecondary institutions and up-to-date admission and placement information. Also, the teachers who were most active in helping students prepare for college are usually teachers of honors and college prep courses.

Students are generally unaware of the content of postsecondary course placement exams. Across all the studied states, less than one-half of the sampled students knew the specific placement testing policies for the institutions in the study.

The distribution of college preparation information to parents is inequitable. Forty-two percent, 44 percent, and 47 percent of economically disadvantaged parents in Illinois, Maryland, and Oregon, respectively, stated that they had received college information, as compared with 74 percent, 71 percent, and 66 percent of their more economically well-off counterparts.

Recommendations:

Given these problems, what should we strive to change? Our research found that the following three actions are most promising for immediate reform:

- Provide all students, their parents, and educators with accurate, high quality, information about, and access to, courses that will help prepare students for college-level standards.

- Focus on the institutions that serve the majority of students. Shift media, policy, and research attention to include broad access colleges and universities attended by the vast majority of students (approximately 80 percent). Broad access colleges need the financial and policy attention of federal, state and other leaders. Increasing the rates of student success at these colleges is a sound public investment because it can have a tremendous impact on the civic and economic well-being of each state by improving people’s economic security, increasing their civic participation, and increasing college completion rates for economically disadvantaged students and students of color.

- Create an awareness that getting into college is not the hardest part. Expand the focus of local, state, and federal programs from access to college to include success in college. Access to college is only half the picture. True college opportunity includes having a real chance to succeed in college, and it is time to focus policy attention on improving college success rates. High school course content, academic counseling, college outreach, and other programming needs to reflect this so that students are clear about what it takes to succeed in college, including community college.

How can we achieve these ends? For a start, college stakeholders must be brought to the table when K-12 standards are developed. Likewise, K-12 educators must be engaged as postsecondary education admission and placement policies are under review. Reforms across the two education systems will be difficult if not impossible to implement without meaningful communication and policy-making between the levels.
There are several other important steps that states, K-12 schools and districts, postsecondary institutions and systems, and the federal government can take to improve the transition from high school to college for all students. These include:

· **Ensuring that college and universities state, and publicize, their academic standards so that students, their parents, and educators have accurate college preparation information.** This effort must go beyond targeted outreach, and fragmented categorical programs, to universal programs for all students. In addition, states should disseminate materials in languages other than English, depending on the language groups in their states.

· **Examining the relationship between the content of postsecondary education placement exams and K-12 exit-level standards and assessments to determine if more compatibility is necessary and possible.** K-12 standards and assessments that are aligned with postsecondary education standards and assessments can provide clear signals and incentives, if they are high quality standards and assessments. Assessments should be diagnostic in nature, and the results should include performance levels that indicate to students that their scores meet or exceed the level for college preparation and placement without remediation. Appropriate K-12 assessments could be used as an admission and placement factor by public postsecondary education institutions, although caution must be taken to ensure that 1) more than one measure of student preparation is used and 2) the stakes attached to K-12 assessments are not too high for students.

· **Reviewing postsecondary education placement exams for reliability, validity, efficacy, and the extent to which they promote teaching for understanding.** Data need to be maintained regarding the success of placement procedures.

· **Allowing students to take placement exams in high school so that they can prepare, academically, for college and understand college-level expectations.** These assessments should be diagnostic so that students, their parents, and teachers know how to improve students’ preparation for college.

· **Sequencing undergraduate general education requirements so that appropriate senior-year courses are linked to postsecondary general education courses.** For students who are not well-prepared for college, the senior year should be a time of intense academic preparation.

· **Expanding successful dual or concurrent enrollment programs between high schools and colleges so that they include all students, not just traditionally “college-bound” students.**

· **Collecting, and connecting, data from all education sectors.** This means that states and regions should create common identifier numbers for students and track teachers during preparation and professional development programs. Data should be tied to a K-16 accountability system. Postsecondary institutions and K-12 schools need assistance in learning how to use data to inform curricular and instruction policies and practices.

· **Providing technical support to states by having the federal government establish voluntary data collection standards.**
Expanding federal grants to stimulate more state-level K-16 policymaking. This could include funding activities such as: 1) collaborative discussions between K-12 and postsecondary education, with requirements for examining and improving particular issues (including the collection and use of data across the systems), and 2) joint development activities that enable students to transition successfully from one system to the next.

These recommendations will be easier to accomplish, and more effective in their implementation, if there is an overall organizational base within each state for K-16 policymaking and oversight. Having a K-16 entity within the state does not, however, ensure that innovative K-16 reforms will follow. Only a concerted effort by policymakers, educators, parents, and students will do the job. Implementing these recommendations will not magically eliminate the dozens of other reasons why students are not prepared adequately for college. But they are important steps toward developing a more equitable educational experience for all students, and providing all students with the preparation they need to succeed in college.

What is The Bridge Project? Stanford University’s Bridge Project, a six-year national study, sought to analyze high school exit-level policies and college entrance policies to learn if they had different standards—if they were asking students to know and do different concepts and skills between graduating from high school and entering college. Researchers wanted to understand what students, parents, and K-12 educators know about college admission and course placement policies, and if they had the resources they need to make informed decisions. Bridge Project researchers analyzed state and institutional policies in regions in six states—California, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Oregon and Texas. Researchers surveyed nearly 2,000 students and parents from 23 schools about students’ post-high school aspirations and their knowledge of issues related to student preparation for college, including tuition, admission criteria, and placement criteria. Researchers also talked with community college students about their college preparation activities, and academic experiences in college, including course placement.

Researchers gathered information on state-level high school graduation and college entrance policies, and on placement policies, admissions requirements, and outreach and communication strategies from 18 selective and less-selective colleges and universities. Researchers also interviewed high school administrators, counselors, and teachers about high school coursework and college counseling for students. Based on the field research and a comprehensive review of the literature, the Bridge Project’s larger policy report outlines major disconnects between K-12 and postsecondary education (in governance, assessment, curriculum development, data collection, data usage, and accountability), and provides information regarding what students, parents, and educators know about college preparation, admission, and placement policies and practices. To see the full report and other Bridge Project publications, please see our website at http://bridgeproject.stanford.edu. This project was supported by generous contributions from the Pew Charitable Trusts, and the U.S. Department of Education.

This research was conducted between 1997 and 2000, depending on the state. Many states, school districts, and postsecondary institutions have introduced significant reforms since then, but this report documents findings, and proposes policy options, based on the research and related literature—we did not update this report to reflect all current policies and practices. This is not intended to be a comparison between states.
Endnotes:


v For more information and recommendations about Latino parents’ knowledge of college preparation issues, see College Knowledge: What Latino Parents Need to Know and Why They Don’t Know It, by the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute (www.trpi.org).

vi For additional information and recommendations regarding the senior year of high school, see “Overcoming the High School Senior Slump,” by Michael W. Kirst at http://bridgeproject.stanford.edu.

**Additional Resources:**


For a more thorough analysis of Bridge Project data, please see Michael W. Kirst’s and Andrea Venezia’s forthcoming book to be published by Jossey-Bass in Spring 2004.

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