



## From High School to College: Improving Opportunities for Success in Postsecondary Education

reviewed by [Alan Schoenfeld](#) — 2005

**Title:** From High School to College: Improving Opportunities for Success in Postsecondary Education

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The public discourse on access to higher education is singularly dedicated to the ever-popular debate on affirmative action. Likewise, the discourse on secondary education is dominated by concerns about high-stakes testing and the meaning of the diploma. Despite the clear overlaps in pedagogical and policy concerns that ought to unite these two independent strains in American education talk, rarely do the twain meet in a constructive dialogue about the relationship between secondary school preparedness and access to higher education.

Jumping in to fill this yawning gap is a thoughtful, well-researched, and readable volume from the Stanford Bridge Project, the intellectual leader in the kindergarten-through-college (K–16) movement. Edited by project directors Michael W. Kirst and Andrea Venezia, *From High School to College: Improving Opportunities for Success in Postsecondary Education* comprises an introduction and conclusion by the editors, as well as six case studies assessing states' efforts at articulating streamlined pathways between the different levels of education. In addition, the book includes an important chapter on the role that community colleges play in easing the transition between secondary and postsecondary education.

The introduction, written by Kirst and Kathy Reeves Bracco, neatly lays out both the problem and the theoretical framework that undergirds the case studies. The

problem, as Kirst and Bracco see it, is that the “causes of remediation, noncompletion, and inadequate secondary preparation lie in part in the historical split between levels of our educational system and the subsequent lack of communication and connection between them” (p. 2). In order to address the high rates of remediation and noncompletion among students, Kirst and Bracco suggest a more integrated K–16 system that accommodates not only the educational needs of students, but the needs of those students and their parents with respect to the knowledge necessary to pursue and successfully complete postsecondary education.

To this end, Kirst and Bracco introduce a useful theoretical framework—that of the signal—for assessing the quality of a state’s K–16 system. These authors, along with the authors of the individual case studies, riff off the metaphor of the signal, a broad concept that includes “admissions and placement standards and institutional arrangements . . . that communicate signals, meaning, and expected behavior to students and secondary schools” (p. 19). By deploying the signal as the primary index of a school system’s utility in furthering K–16 education goals, the authors lucidly elaborate the networks of policies and practices that impede and enable students’ educational progress. These networks include those “admissions and placement-related standards and policies promulgated by states and postsecondary education institutions” and how these are “understood, acted on, and interpreted by parents, students, and secondary school personnel” (p. 19). Because this sort of information is an inequitably distributed good in a flush market, the networks that the authors expose reach unequally into communities of differing socioeconomic status. The authors of the case studies are admirably attentive to this differential effect and offer uniformly nuanced accounts of contemporary practices to compensate for these deficiencies.

Each case study focuses on a state that has innovated in K–16 education—California, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Oregon, and Texas—and is intended to

query the overarching thesis that “clear, consistent, and reinforced signals will enhance the college knowledge of prospective students in secondary schools. If the signals are embedded within incentives that provide extrinsic motivation to students, they will be more effective” (p. 19). Each case study begins with a thorough overview of postsecondary policy in the state and a more in-depth assessment of admissions and related policies at a handful of colleges or universities in the state. The study then moves on to an analysis of student and parent knowledge of the information crucial to mastering transitions in the system. Student knowledge is assessed through data collection, focus groups, and case studies of representative high schools throughout the state. This multifaceted data collection process is conducive to the disaggregated analysis that the case study authors perform, exposing the differential knowledge of students of different socioeconomic backgrounds and the consequences of these differentials. Finally, each case study ends with a modest array of policy recommendations that are closely tethered to the policy and practice framework that the authors elaborate.

The case studies are uniformly intelligent and well-executed. Using the signal metaphor as a basis for framing their analysis, the authors focus on the important formal and informal mechanisms that transfer information and expectations to students and their parents: articulation pathways between high school course preparation and college placement, test alignment, exposure of resources necessary to convey college cost and placement information, longitudinal data on student transitions, etc. The studies reveal uniformly high student aspirations with respect to the pursuit of higher education and persuasively demonstrate that the lack of coherence between secondary and postsecondary institutions is a major impediment to that pursuit. Although the authors treat the pedagogical and policy concerns central to K–16 coherence with acuity, they give somewhat short shrift to broader political and legal considerations that affect student perceptions of college access. For example, in the chapter on Texas, there is only a brief

mention of the epoch-making *Hopwood* decision and the introduction of the ten-percent plan, both of which demand fuller analysis, since they fundamentally remapped the terrain on which the battle for access to higher education would be fought in Texas and elsewhere.

The conclusion capitalizes on the revelation manifest in each of the case studies: that students have high expectations for college-going, but state policies and practices send them mixed signals and are therefore ill-equipped to superintend the difficult transition that students must undergo to enter into postsecondary education. The conclusion's authors, Kirst, Venezia, and Anthony Lising Antonio, outline a number of current policies that perpetuate the disjuncture between K–12 and postsecondary education, including multiple and confusing assessments, disconnected curricula, and a lack of longitudinal K–16 data, accountability mechanisms, and governance structures. They also parse the data from the high school case studies to reveal the deficiencies in student, teacher, and counselor knowledge. Ultimately, they offer an array of useful suggestions for reform that run the gamut from school-based initiatives to an increased role for the federal government in managing a nationwide K–16 system.

*From High School to College* represents an important first step in opening up a national dialogue on college access and the ways in which school organization and path-dependent practices have impeded the postsecondary aspirations of students and their parents. Eschewing the politically more popular debates on affirmative action and higher education, Kirst, Venezia, and their coauthors have broadened an unnecessarily truncated discourse on what will undoubtedly be one of the great education and civil rights struggles of the 21st century.

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