



# Barriers to College Success

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. This project was supported by generous contributions from the Pew Charitable Trusts, and the U.S. Department of Education.

Eighty-eight percent of 8th graders expect to participate in some form of postsecondary education,<sup>1</sup> and approximately 70 percent of high

school graduates actually do go to college within two years of graduating.<sup>2</sup> 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.

## BETRAYING THE COLLEGE DREAM:

### How Disconnected K-12 and Postsecondary Education Systems Undermine Student Aspirations

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#### 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

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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.<sup>3</sup> 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>.

## CURRENT POLICIES PERPETUATE DISJUNCTURES BETWEEN K-12 AND POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

### FINDINGS

**M**ULTIPLE AND CONFUSING ASSESSMENTS. State K-12 standards have swept across the country with scant participation by postsecondary education institutions or systems. In high school, most students take state-mandated assessments, district tests, and exams in their individual courses. Students preparing for college often take a number of other tests, including the SAT and ACT. Once students are admitted to a college or university, they typically have to take one or more placement exams to determine whether they are ready for college-level work. Community colleges do not require entrance examinations for most programs, but, in most cases, degree-seeking students cannot enroll and register at a community college without taking a placement exam.

All this testing creates a difficult situation for students. On each exam, many of which have different formats, they are tested on different content and on a range of standards. Differences in the content and format between assessments used at the K-12 exit and college entrance levels point to variances in expectations regarding what students need to know and be able to do to graduate from high school and enter college. Many of those differences evolved in an era when only a small fraction of the student-age population attended college. But the differences in expectations are outdated, and the current situation can damage student preparation for a large number of students. Different standards can create confusion and can hinder students’ abilities to prepare well for tests, and for college-level work.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Examine 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 that 2) the stakes attached to K-12 assessments are not too high for students.

Review postsecondary education placement exams for reliability, validity, efficacy, and the extent to which they promote teaching for understanding. This includes scrutiny of assessments developed by individual campuses, departments, and faculty. Data need to be maintained regarding the efficacy of placement procedures. Consider using K-12 assessment data for postsecondary course placement purposes.

<sup>1</sup> National Center for Education Statistics. 1996. National Education Longitudinal Study: 1988-1994; Descriptive Summary Report, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

<sup>2</sup> The Education Trust. Fall 1999. “Ticket to Nowhere. The Gap Between Leaving High School and Entering College and High Performance Jobs,” in Thinking K-16, Vol. 3, Issue 2, Washington, DC: The Education Trust.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

## FINDINGS

**D**ISCONNECTED CURRICULA. Most states require that teachers teach, and students learn, a certain set of knowledge and skills by the time students graduate from high school. Yet, many high school graduation standards do not meet the demands required by college entrance or placement requirements, but that is not usually publicized by high schools or colleges. Of the six states studied for this report, only Texas has legislated curricular alignment across the systems; the legislature has specified that the college preparation graduation plan will be the default curriculum for all public high schools by 2005. Most states have large gaps between the two sets of standards.

A particularly troubling issue arises with regard to community college standards. Community colleges admit any adult who can benefit from the college's courses; this policy seems to suggest to students that there are no curricular standards. That, however, is not the case. One set of community college standards is embodied in placement tests, which are usually set at a higher level than high school graduation requirements.

**L**ACK OF LONGITUDINAL K-16 DATA. 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. If states are to determine students' needs across the K-16 continuum, they must collect and use longitudinal data—for example, the percent of the students of color in a state who graduate from high school, attend college, and graduate from college—from across the K-16 levels. In Illinois, Texas, Oregon, and Maryland, data from postsecondary institutions were shared with high schools. Of the K-12 educators who knew about those data, none reported using them for any purpose.

### **F**EW K-16 ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS AND INSUFFICIENT K-16 GOVERNANCE MECHANISMS.

No state has implemented a comprehensive K-16 accountability system that includes incentives and sanctions for postsecondary institutions, or mechanisms that connect the levels. K-12 entities face a variety of accountability measures, but postsecondary education has remained untouched. In traditional state education systems, no one is held responsible for K-16 reform, and the education sectors often act without regard to each other's reforms or needs. Also, when states do consider policy options to connect K-12 and postsecondary education, community colleges are sometimes not included in the policy discussions. Few states have K-16 governing boards or councils, and when they do, they often have no legislated authority to develop and implement policies.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

College-level 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.

Sequence undergraduate general education requirements so that appropriate senior-year courses are linked to postsecondary general education courses.<sup>4</sup>

Expand successful dual or concurrent enrollment programs between high schools and colleges so that they include all students, not just traditionally "college-bound" students. Many students are not comfortable socially or emotionally in high school environments, while others complete their schools' highest level courses as sophomores and juniors. These programs are especially valuable for high schools that do not have the resources to provide college-level work on their own campuses.

Collect and connect data from all education sectors. These systems can include, for example, data on the relationship between student coursetaking patterns in high school and the need for remedial work, and longitudinal trends on what happens to students after they complete remedial-level coursework. They also should be tied to a K-16 accountability system. Texas has made progress in this arena by working to develop a K-16 data system. Major issues to address when creating such a system include student privacy rights and student mobility. Also, postsecondary institutions and K-12 schools need assistance in learning how to use data to inform curricular and instruction policies and practices.

Provide technical support to states by having the federal government establish voluntary data collection standards that are tied to federal funds.

In order to create coherent, aligned, policies that span the K-16 continuum, states and regions need to have mechanisms in place to develop and oversee appropriate policies.<sup>5</sup> But these groups must have authority, and a mandate to create change.

Expand federal grants which could be used to stimulate more K-16 policymaking. Specifically, federal competitive grants should be available for 1) collaborative discussions between K-12 and postsecondary education, with requirements for examining and improving particular issues (such as data collection); and 2) joint development activities that enable students to transition successfully from one system to the next.

# STUDENT, PARENT, AND K-12 EDUCATOR UNDERSTANDINGS—AND MISUNDERSTANDINGS—ABOUT COLLEGE

## FINDINGS

**STUDENT COLLEGE KNOWLEDGE 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. Students also overestimated tuition, 22 percent of them estimating costs at between twice to five times as much as actual costs.

Across all the states, less than one-half of the sampled students knew the specific placement testing policy for the institutions in the study. Students in the community college focus groups reported being unaware upon their enrollment that they were required to take placement tests.

**INEQUITABLE COLLEGE PREPARATORY OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL STUDENTS.** While most students need better information about college preparation, students who are in accelerated curricular tracks in high school receive clearer signals about college preparation than do their peers in other tracks. Students in high-level courses often receive the information from a variety of sources, including the challenging content of their courses, university recruitment efforts, their parents, counselors, other students, and teachers who are knowledgeable about college-level standards. But many students in middle and lower level high school courses are not reached by higher education outreach efforts, or by college counseling staff in their high schools. Many economically disadvantaged parents often lack experience and information concerning college preparation for their children.

On average, the honors students said they enrolled in the most difficult classes in the hopes of gaining admission to a selective institution. The nonhonors students assumed that they could gain admission to some postsecondary institution if they graduated from high school, even if they had not taken rigorous courses. Although students perceived correctly that there would be postsecondary opportunities at the community college level, they did not receive the important message that they would still be expected to perform at a level beyond the general education graduation requirements.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Ensure that colleges and universities state, and publicize, their academic standards so that students, their parents, and educators have accurate college preparation information. Since almost all students are planning to attend college, all students should receive college preparation information and resources. This effort must go beyond targeted outreach, and fragmented categorical programs, to universal programs for all students. In addition, states should disseminate materials in several languages, depending on the language groups in their states.xliii

Allow 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.

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.

Expand the focus of local, state, and federal programs from access to college to include access to success in college. For the past 50 years, it has made sense for the U.S. to concentrate its postsecondary education policies on opening the doors to college—and by and large these policies have a major positive impact. There remain significant gaps in enrollment and completion among ethnic groups, and between low- and high-income families. Also, college access varies greatly depending on where students live, and the level of their parents' education. These gaps suggest show that the nation's work, as effective as it has been, is not complete.

Shift media, policy, and research attention to include broad access colleges and universities attended by the vast majority of students (approximately 80 percent). Unfortunately, media and much public policy attention is focused on those highly selective colleges and universities where persistence and completion rates are not as problematic.xli Broad access colleges need the financial and policy attention of federal, state and other leaders.



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