



**Pathways
to College
Network**

DIRECTED BY
THE INSTITUTE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY

Aligning P-12 and Postsecondary Education

Toward a Seamless P-16 Education System

A College Readiness Issue Brief from the Pathways to College Network
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What Is P-16 Alignment and Why Is It Important?

The United States has two separate education systems that for generations have operated in relative isolation from one another. Our P-12 and postsecondary systems have different cultures, governance, finance, and accountability. Academic standards, expectations, and ways of measuring student progress vary widely between the two sectors.

Due partly to this lack of alignment, too many young people—especially low-income, minority, and other underserved students—fall between the cracks at different stages along the educational pipeline. Nationally, 30 percent of high school students fail to graduate. Of those who do finish high school only about half go directly on to college, and of those just over one-third earn a degree.¹

Surveys show that the overwhelming majority of youngsters in this country—regardless of race, income, or ethnic background—want to go to college. As rewarding 21st century jobs increasingly require postsecondary education, these ambitions have never been more important. We must align the nation’s divergent educational systems so that postsecondary aspirations can become a realistic, attainable goal for all students.

P-16 alignment seeks to bridge the P-12 and postsecondary educational sectors in three critical areas:

- Academic standards and curriculum expectations
- Testing and assessment
- Early College opportunities

A Framework for Action



The Pathways to College Network developed this comprehensive conceptual *Framework for Action* to inform and support states, districts, schools, and programs in their efforts to prepare all students for success in college and the workplace. This series of issue briefs illuminates and provides resources on each of the five interrelated areas of the Framework: High Expectations, Academic Rigor & Support, Social Support, Data Use, and P-16 Alignment.

Academic Standards and Skills Alignment

The economic and social costs of poor P-12 and postsecondary alignment are staggering. Fully half of the nation's college-bound high school graduates do not meet placement standards for college-level work: 60 percent of students enrolling in two-year colleges require remedial coursework, as do 40 percent of students entering four-year colleges. Not only does remedial work increase the amount of time and money needed to earn a college degree, but research shows that 70 percent of students who took one or more remedial reading courses do not attain a college degree or certificate within eight years of enrollment.² Clearly, those who must take remedial courses are at greater risk of not earning a postsecondary credential.

A critical first step toward academic alignment is to ground high school standards in college requirements and workplace expectations. Increasingly, readiness for college and readiness for competitive jobs require the same academic preparation and skills. Academic alignment will help ensure that high school graduates have the content knowledge and skills mastery they need to be successful in college coursework or in high-performance jobs. Some progress is being made. According to Achieve, Inc.—co-sponsor of the American Diploma Project (ADP) and the ADP Network—some 35 states are currently taking concrete action to align academic standards.³ But much remains to be accomplished in closing the “expectations gap” between the competencies demanded by employers and colleges and the demonstrated knowledge and skills of many high school graduates.

Testing and Assessment

A key corollary to academic alignment is the development of more coordinated assessment processes to measure both secondary school achievement and college-readiness. Today, most

students face a battery of unrelated assessments, including “high stakes” state tests, tests in schools, districts, and individual courses. They must also take college admission exams (SAT, ACT, AP) as well as college placement tests to determine appropriate course levels. This testing gauntlet is especially daunting for underserved students who are at greater risk of falling behind or dropping out. Alignment of high school and college assessments is a much-needed strategy to improve college-readiness and enhance postsecondary success for all students.

State-mandated assessments should support students' transition from high school to postsecondary education. Too often, however, high school exit assessments do not measure the knowledge and skills that colleges expect of incoming students. At key intervals throughout their high school experience, all students should receive informed feedback from diagnostic assessment to keep them on track to be college-ready. Testing and assessment alignment is a goal endorsed by the National Governors Association, but currently only a handful of states administer high school assessments that postsecondary institutions can use for course placement.⁴

Early College Opportunities

The alignment of academic standards in secondary school with the requirements of college and the workplace is further supported by “early college” options. A range of programs allow students to engage in college-level work while still enrolled in high school, including dual enrollment, Tech Prep, middle and early college high schools, and AP courses. Some of these take place in high school classrooms, others on college campuses or through distance learning. All strengthen student transitions from high school to college.

Low-income, first-generation, and other underserved students particularly benefit from early exposure to college-level work and acculturation to college

through dual enrollment opportunities. An early college experience while still in a supportive high school environment can allay anxiety over plunging into unknown territory. Those who are the first in their family to go to college will obtain a realistic preview of college coursework and campus life. Postsecondary education also becomes more affordable for families when early college credits are transferable toward a college degree.⁵ States, districts, schools, and colleges need to develop strong linkages that better align and enable early college opportunities as an effective strategy to increase postsecondary access and success.

What Actions Can We Take Now?

Those of us who are policymakers, business and higher education leaders, superintendents, principals, counselors, and teachers can all play important roles in creating a far more aligned, seamless P-16 educational system. We must each work within our own sector and collaboratively across the P-16 continuum to align academic standards, assessment, and special programs in order to increase postsecondary success for all students. Specific actions each of us can take include:

State Policymakers

- Create P-16 councils/commissions to drive change around cross-sector alignment issues including governance, finance, data systems, standards, accountability, teacher preparation, and credit transfer.
- Enable seamless transfer of course credits from early college high school to college and from community college to four-year institutions to make students' time to degree completion more efficient and less costly.
- Ensure that low-income students are not excluded from early college enrollment programs, especially where school districts lack financial means to support this option.

Postsecondary Leaders and High School Principals

- Align high school curricula outcomes with college admissions requirements to assure that students have the content knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in first year college courses.
- Align entry assessment testing in reading, writing, and math to eliminate unnecessary high stakes testing.
- Provide underserved high school students with opportunities and support to enroll in early college programs.
- Develop mechanisms to share responsibility for students in dual enrollment programs.

Middle and High School Principals, Counselors, and Teachers

- Create teacher teams to align middle and high school learning standards, develop curricular coherence, and reach agreements on the competencies students need to succeed in college-preparatory and college-level courses.
- Provide students with early diagnostic information at regular intervals about their college-readiness to ensure appropriate course selection and skills attainment.
- Obtain and use student performance feedback on postsecondary entry tests to better align curricula.
- Track students' college entry, persistence, and graduation rates to inform teaching, learning, and support services programs.

Aligning P-12 and Postsecondary Education

Learn More:

To find these and other resources, search the online PCN Library at

<http://www.pathwaystocollege.net/PCNLibrary/ListTopics.aspx>

- Betraying the College Dream: How Disconnected K-12 and Postsecondary Education Systems Undermine Student Aspirations
(<http://www.pathwaystocollege.net/PCNLibrary/ViewBiblio.aspx?aid=205>)
- The College Ladder: Linking Secondary and Postsecondary Education for Success for All Students
(<http://www.pathwaystocollege.net/PCNLibrary/ViewBiblio.aspx?aid=1314>)
- National Inventory of Academic Pathways
(<http://www.pathwaystocollege.net/PCNLibrary/ViewBiblio.aspx?aid=684>)
- P-16 Collaboration in the States | Progress of P-16 Collaboration in the States
(<http://www.pathwaystocollege.net/PCNLibrary/ViewBiblio.aspx?aid=1702>) |
(<http://www.pathwaystocollege.net/PCNLibrary/ViewBiblio.aspx?aid=1704>)
- Ready for Tomorrow: Helping All Students Achieve Secondary and Postsecondary Success –A Guide for Governors
(<http://www.pathwaystocollege.net/PCNLibrary/ViewBiblio.aspx?aid=200>)
- Student Success: Statewide P-16 Systems
 - Curriculum and Assessment Systems (<http://www.pathwaystocollege.net/PCNLibrary/ViewBiblio.aspx?aid=1330>)
 - Data and Accountability Systems (<http://www.pathwaystocollege.net/PCNLibrary/ViewBiblio.aspx?aid=1332>)
 - Early Outreach (<http://www.pathwaystocollege.net/PCNLibrary/ViewBiblio.aspx?aid=1333>)
 - High Quality Teaching (<http://www.pathwaystocollege.net/PCNLibrary/ViewBiblio.aspx?aid=1334>)
 - Student Financial Assistance (<http://www.pathwaystocollege.net/PCNLibrary/ViewBiblio.aspx?aid=128>)
- Ticket to Nowhere: The Gap between Leaving High School and Entering College and High Performance Jobs
(<http://www.pathwaystocollege.net/PCNLibrary/ViewBiblio.aspx?aid=382>)

References

¹ Mortenson, T. (2004-2006). Projections of High School Graduates by Race/Ethnicity and State to 2018. *Postsecondary Education Opportunity*, 146. College Continuation Rates for Recent High School Graduates 1955 to 2005. *Postsecondary Education Opportunity*, 166. College Graduation Rates, 1947 to 2006. *Postsecondary Education Opportunity*, 173.

² Adelman, C. (2004). *Principal Indicators of Student Academic Histories in Postsecondary Education, 1972-2000*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences.

³ Achieve, Inc. (2006). *Closing the Expectations Gap 2006: An Annual 50-State Progress Report on the Alignment of High School Policies with the Demands of College and Work*. Washington, DC: Author.

⁴ National Governors Association. (2003). *Ready for Tomorrow: Helping All Students Achieve Secondary and Postsecondary Success*. Washington, DC: Author.

⁵ Hoffman, N. (2005). *Add and Subtract: Dual Enrollment as a State Strategy to Increase Postsecondary Success for Underrepresented Students*. Boston: Jobs for the Future.



The Pathways to College Network advances college opportunity for underserved students by raising public awareness, supporting innovative research, and promoting evidence-based policies and practices across the K-12 and postsecondary sectors.

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