Improving Academic Preparation for College

What We Know and How State and Federal Policy Can Help

Robin Chait and Andrea Venezia January 2009

Introduction and Summary

Our society is moving toward a model of preparing all students for some kind of education and training after high school. That is what parents want for their children, what students say they want for themselves, and what analysts and policymakers at all levels believe is needed for success in a global economy. The benefits to the individual are clear—college graduates earn more money, have better career opportunities, engage in greater civic participation, and have a higher overall quality of life.[1] The average annual income for a high school degree in 2006 was $30,072, an associate's degree was $39,846, and a bachelor's degree $56,897.[2] Moreover, the advantages of college education compared to a high school degree have widened over the last 60 years, although they have leveled off more recently.[3]

We know that students are getting the message that college pays off. In 2003-04, about 69 percent of high school seniors expected to attain a bachelor's degree or higher, and another 18 percent expected to complete some postsecondary education.[4] College enrollment rates increased from 49 percent in 1972 to 69 percent in 2005.[5] Yet once students arrive in college, they are often not ready to take college-level classes. College remediation rates are high—estimates range from a little over a quarter to about a third for all freshmen, and from 42 percent to 60 percent for freshmen at two-year institutions.[6]

College completion rates are also stagnant and students are taking longer to complete their degrees. About 83 percent of high school graduates enroll in some form of postsecondary education, but only about 52 percent of students complete their degrees.[7] Further, a very small proportion of students complete a degree in four years—"among students starting at 'four-year' institutions, only 34 percent finish a B.A. in four years, 64 percent within six years, and 69 percent within eight and a half years."[8] Stagnant college completion rates and increasing time to complete college degrees are likely related, since students who are in school for long periods of time are less likely to graduate.[9]

High rates of remediation, stagnant rates of college completion, and more time to degree completion suggest that many students are not fully ready to succeed academically in college. And weak academic preparation is a growing concern in the research and policy communities.

Jay Greene of the Manhattan Institute has estimated that only 34 percent of all students who entered ninth grade in 2002 were prepared for college when they graduated high school.[10] He defines college readiness as graduating with a regular diploma, having completed a minimum set of course requirements (four years of English, three years of math, and two years each of natural science, social science, and a foreign language), and being able to read at the basic level or above on the National Assessment of Education Progress reading assessment.

Rates of academic preparation are even lower for low-income students. Susan Goldberger of Jobs for the Future found in an analysis of data from the National Education Longitudinal Study that "only 21 percent of high school graduates from the lowest economic quintile are adequately prepared for college-level work (somewhat, very, or highly prepared), compared to 54 percent of graduates from the middle and upper levels."[11] Moreover, students with better academic preparation have higher rates of degree completion. Approximately 78 percent of students who are highly prepared for college complete their degree, compared with 31 percent of students who are not prepared and 46 percent who are minimally prepared.[12]

While these numbers are of great concern, there is still a lack of consensus among researchers and policymakers about what it means to be prepared for college. Are strong academics enough? What role do financial and social capital play? How can federal and state policy help promote academic rigor and student preparation? In this report, we explore these questions in detail and look closely at what we know about postsecondary readiness and success; what is being done to prepare students for college at the federal, state, and local levels; and how well these efforts are working. This report draws on this analysis to outline a more expansive role for federal and state policy to improve preparation and readiness.

Federal policy could play an important role in communicating the need for all students to prepare for college and providing the public with information about what that means. It could also build states' capacity to develop and measure students' college readiness by supporting a pilot state program to develop and validate college readiness standards within the reauthorized NCLB/ESEA. Finally, the federal government should invest in research and development to support programs that align secondary and postsecondary education and improve students' preparation for college; provide funding to improve academic preparation in struggling high schools; and improve data collection and analysis and require public reporting.

States could undertake a range of initiatives to ensure that their policies are translated into changes in curricula and instruction and better outcomes for students. States should develop better student support policies and align them with policies to increase academic rigor, support the development and evaluation of high school models that prepare all students for college, improve data systems to better assess where students are and where they need to be, and monitor and evaluate the implementation of all of these state policies to identify inconsistencies, implementation concerns, and needs for technical assistance.

There are many ways to think about postsecondary readiness. We define it as a student's ability to complete a transfer-level course in core subject areas at a two- or four-year postsecondary institution with a C or better and move on to the next course in the sequence without remediation. We do not believe that one size fits all, but we do think that there are many academic pathways and instructional approaches that are compatible with postsecondary preparation, and that all students must have the opportunity to prepare for a two-year or four-year degree or credential. The terms postsecondary education, college, and higher education are used interchangeably in this paper to mean some kind of formal education or training after high school in a postsecondary institution that leads to a credential or degree.

This paper reviews the research and makes the case for a definition that includes academic rigor, grades, specific academic skills that students will need to be successful in a college-level course, and "college knowledge"—knowledge about how to apply, enroll, and succeed in a college environment. It may be difficult to come up with objective measures for all these aspects of college readiness, but it is important to consider them all in defining readiness and in helping students meet a threshold of it.

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