



# The Promise of Proficiency

How College Proficiency Information Can Help  
High Schools Drive Student Success

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J.B. Schramm and E. Kinney Zalesne   December 2009





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# Executive summary

Given the 21st century workforce's demands, educators and policymakers agree that high school's purpose has changed. Whereas the goal of high school used to be graduation, now it strives to launch students to college and career success.

Unfortunately, high schools' tools have not caught up with their mission. While schools have spent decades learning to measure and manage toward graduation, they now need the data and measurement tools that will demonstrate their college proficiency rate—or how well their students are doing the year after high school. Without this information they must rely on anecdotes at best and guesswork at worst.

And that seems risky, given education's importance to people's lives and to the economy. Indeed, asking schools to deliver postsecondary success without enabling them to measure postsecondary performance is to demand the impossible. After all, we wouldn't ask air traffic controllers to land planes with radars that shut down at 10,000 feet. We wouldn't let surgeons operate if they could only guess at how previous patients had done. And yet at the moment we are asking high schools to deliver students who can perform in college without giving schools the tools to know whether or how their current efforts are paying off.

Throughout America, districts, schools, and nonprofits are starting to see postsecondary data's value, and they are improving their offerings based on whether, where, and how successfully their graduates are enrolled the year after high school. The federal government, too, has begun to see the value of this data and is moving the needle forward, especially with the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act's call for better data systems and college proficiency reporting.

But the urgency of getting more American students to and through college means the federal government should use the significant opportunity it has to ground certain Recovery Act principles into lasting education policy. With three targeted steps, the federal government can help 21st century high schools meet their 21st century mission. Specifically, the federal government should:

- Support the gathering of college proficiency data by school, so that each school can see how their students are doing in “Year 13,” or the first year after college

- Disseminate the data and empower educators to interpret the information and lead relevant programmatic change
- Support and reward high schools for progress in college proficiency, thus encouraging the visibility of and activity toward this success outcome

This paper is about helping every high school in America learn in a systematic, methodical way how its graduates are doing, whether in four-year colleges, two-year colleges, vocational programs, or apprenticeships. And it's about making sure high schools can use that information every day to make sound, strategic decisions to launch their students to postsecondary success.

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## About the Center for American Progress

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## About College Summit

College Summit is a national nonprofit founded in 1993. It partners with school districts and states to increase their college-going rates by fostering a high school culture where going to college is the expectation, not the exception.

College Summit is the largest provider of college-going culture support in the United States, currently reaching 28,000 students at 170 schools in 12 states and the District of Columbia.



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