



## **Undermining Student Aspirations**

**The frayed connections between K-12 and postsecondary education set students up for failure**

*By Michael W. Kirst and Andrea Venezia*

It is common knowledge that in the United States, the K-12 school systems and the postsecondary education systems move in completely separate orbits. At least since the mid-1980s, when Harold Hodgkinson wrote *All One System*, many people have understood that it is primarily the students who connect the systems, as they attempt to leap from high schools directly to four-year colleges and universities, or to jump from high schools to community colleges and then to four-year institutions.

What is not common knowledge-but what we now understand-is that the wide gap between K-12 schools and postsecondary education is undermining student aspirations.

Over the past few decades, parents, educators and community leaders have told students that in order to succeed in our society, they need to go to college. And students in middle schools and high schools have heard that message: Eighty-eight percent of eighth graders say they intend to go to college, according to the U.S. Department of Education. Over 90 percent of high school seniors say they plan to attend college, and about 70 percent of high school graduates actually do go to college within two years of graduating, according to the Education Trust.

These educational aspirations cut across racial and ethnic lines. According to recent findings by the Bridge Project at Stanford University, 88 percent of all high school students surveyed-and over 80 percent of African American and Hispanic high school students-said they plan to attend some form of postsecondary education.

But while parents, educators and others have been successful in motivating more students to attend college, the K-12 and postsecondary systems have not been as successful in promoting student success in college. For instance, rates of remediation and attrition in college are startling. According to the U.S. Department of Education:

- More than half of students entering college are required to take remedial courses, many in several subjects.
- About half of first-year students at community colleges do not continue on for a second year.
- About a quarter of first-year students at four-year colleges do not stay for their second year.
- More than 40 percent of college students who earn more than ten credits never complete a two-year or a four-year degree.

Remediation and attrition rates are most troubling at broad-access colleges and universities, which have low admissions requirements. These institutions enroll about 80 percent of the nation's college students. Yet the primary policy debates and media attention concerning postsecondary education are devoted to the more highly selective colleges and universities-witness the current attention to affirmative action issues. Increasing the rates of student success at broad-access institutions is a sound public investment because it can have a tremendous impact on the economic and civic well-being of each state. It is also the best way to improve educational attainment levels among economically disadvantaged students and students of color.

We have known for some time that factors such as teacher quality and rigorous course-taking in high school are important in promoting effective student preparation for college. Likewise, studies have shown that financial and other issues-as well as poor preparation-are important factors in contributing to high attrition rates once students are enrolled in college.

What we now can add to this body of knowledge, as a result of six years of research by the Bridge Project at Stanford University, is evidence that the wide chasm between K-12 and higher education is also a major contributor to poor student preparation for college, which in turn contributes to high remediation rates and low completion rates in college. Moreover, we now know that this breakdown between the systems of education is particularly disastrous for students of color and students from low-income families. These and other findings can be found

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in "Betraying the College Dream," available at [www.stanford.edu/group/bridgeproject](http://www.stanford.edu/group/bridgeproject).

With funding from the Pew Charitable Trusts and the U.S. Department of Education, the Bridge Project analyzed consistencies and discrepancies between high school coursework, high school exit policies, college outreach and communications strategies, college entrance policies, college placement policies, and a wide range of data collection and accountability issues. The research focused on a geographic region in each of six states: California, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Oregon and Texas. Each region included at least two four-year institutions, as well as community colleges in California, Maryland and Oregon.

Researchers surveyed nearly 2,000 students and parents from 23 high schools in these states, asking about students' educational aspirations and their knowledge of issues related to student preparation for college, including tuition, admissions criteria, and placement criteria at the colleges and universities in their geographic area. Researchers talked with groups of community college students about their college preparation activities and academic experiences in college. Researchers also interviewed high school administrators, counselors and teachers about such issues as their knowledge of college admissions and placement policies, the relationship between high school coursework and college expectations, and college counseling at their schools.

The Bridge Project found that the current fractured systems create unnecessary and detrimental barriers between high school and college. Some of the primary barriers include:

- **Multiple and Confusing Assessments.** State K-12 standards have swept across the nation with scant participation by postsecondary education institutions. Meanwhile, college entrance and placement exams remain uninformed by changes in K-12 standards. As a result, students face a bewildering set of high school assessments, college entrance exams, and college placement tests. In California, for instance, students in middle and high schools have taken up to 14 exams outside of their regular classroom tests, and those going on to college could end up taking upward of 15 additional exams during high school and upon entrance to college.

Not surprisingly, these various assessments have different formats and stress different skills. For instance, college admissions and placement tests generally contain logic items and are likely to assess intermediate algebra and trigonometry-skills that are generally not needed to pass high school assessments.

- **Disconnected Curricula.** The coursework between high school and college is not connected; students graduate from high school under one set of standards and, three months later, are required to meet a whole new set of standards in college.
- **Inequalities Throughout the Systems.** Since almost all students plan to attend college, and most do, it makes sense to help all students learn about their postsecondary options and prepare for college. There are, however, deep inequalities in areas such as counseling, high school connections with local postsecondary institutions, and college preparatory course offerings. For example, students of color are overrepresented in non-honors and general education graduation plans. There is also an unequal distribution of college centers on high school campuses, opportunities to make college visits, and visits from college recruiters.

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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 middle- and lower-level high school courses do not participate in as many postsecondary education outreach efforts, and do not have as great an access to college counseling staff. Many economically disadvantaged parents lack experience and information concerning college preparation.

- **Lack of Data and Accountability.** Current data systems are not equipped to address issues across systems. 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. Also, no one is held accountable for K-16 reform.

The Bridge Project also found that the disconnected educational systems send students, their parents and K-12 educators a confusing morass of messages about what students need to know and be able to do to enter and succeed in college. Many students and parents have significant misunderstandings about preparation for college. For example:

- Many students think that community colleges do not have academic standards; in fact, students at community colleges must take placement exams in order to qualify for college-level work.

- Many students think it is better to take easier classes in high school and get better grades; in fact, one of the best predictors of college success is taking rigorous high school classes.
- Many students believe that getting into college is the hardest part; in fact, for the majority of students, it is more difficult to complete a degree.

Other misunderstandings about college include:

- Students are generally unaware of the content of placement exams. Less than half of the sampled students in the study knew the placement testing policies for the local colleges near them.

Here's what a community college student in Oregon said about placement tests: "So I did my orientation, and they told me something about (placement) testing. I was like, what? You have to do a test?...Nobody told me about them when I graduated from high school."

A California high school student said, "I think they should prepare us better for the placement tests so that we don't get stuck in basic classes. I think we should have the opportunity to know, not necessarily what's on the test, but have a good idea of it so that we know what to expect."

- Teachers play a major role in helping students prepare for college, yet they do not have the resources to give students accurate information. Teachers often play a greater role than counselors in helping students prepare for college, but teachers lack connections with postsecondary institutions and up-to-date admission and placement information. Also, it is the teachers of honors and college prep courses who are most active in helping students prepare for college-which leaves many students out of the loop.

The distribution of college preparation information to parents is inequitable. Forty-two percent, 44 percent and 47 percent of economically disadvantaged parents in Illinois, Maryland and Oregon, respectively, stated that they had received college information, as compared with 74 percent, 71 percent and 66 percent of their more economically well-off counterparts.

In "Betraying the College Dream," the Bridge Project presents three overall action areas that are most promising for immediate reform:

1) Provide all students, their parents and educators-not just those at the top high schools-with accurate, high-quality information about, and

access to, courses that will prepare students for college-level standards. A first step is to ensure that colleges and universities articulate and publicize their academic standards so that students, their parents and K-12 educators have accurate information. K-12 and postsecondary institutions should then examine the relationship between the content of K-12 exit standards and assessments, and postsecondary admission and placement standards and assessments to seek greater compatibility.

2) Shift media, policy and research attention to include the broad-access institutions that serve the majority of students. Unfortunately, much media and public policy attention has been focused on highly selective colleges and universities where persistence and completion rates are not as problematic as at broad-access institutions.

3) Expand the focus of local, state and federal programs from access to college to include success in college. Access to college is only half the picture. True college opportunity includes having a real chance to succeed in college-and it is time to focus policy attention on improving college success rates. High school course content, academic counseling, college outreach and other programming needs to reflect this so that students are clear about what it takes to succeed in college, including community college.

"Betraying the College Dream" also provides a host of more specific recommendations. These and other reforms will be easier to accomplish, and more effective in their implementation, if there is an overall organizational base within each state for K-16 policymaking and oversight.

A century ago, when a small minority of high school graduates went on to postsecondary education, perhaps it made sense to create and maintain a sharp divide between K-12 and postsecondary education. In the 1940s, however, the G.I. Bill transformed postsecondary education by sending the sons of farmers and plumbers to college for the first time. In the 1960s, the building of community colleges significantly broadened college access again. And most recently, the market for high-paying jobs has made postsecondary education a requirement for all Americans who realistically hope to achieve economic stability.

Today, we can no longer afford to maintain the fractured systems of K-12 and postsecondary education that we have inherited. Considering how many of our high school students go on to college-and how many are unprepared once they get there-it is time to develop a more equitable educational experience for all students, and to provide all students with the preparation they need to succeed in college.

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