WHAT GETS MEASURED GETS DONE

ADDING COLLEGE-COURSE COMPLETION TO K-12 ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS

A POLICY BRIEF
BY DIANE WARD AND JOEL VARGAS

OCTOBER 2011
States have embraced college and career readiness as a goal, as exemplified by the widespread adoption of the Common Core State Standards and other rigorous state-level standards, assessments, and graduation requirements that better align secondary and postsecondary expectations. In so doing, states have laid a foundation for ensuring that more students start college prepared for college-level work. However, this is no guarantee that they will reach the finish line: a postsecondary degree or credential, which is crucial to entering a career that provides family-sustaining wages. Upwards of 22 percent of the most highly prepared high school graduates who enroll in college still do not obtain a degree. The rate of not obtaining a degree is far higher—44 percent—for the most highly prepared low-income students (Goldberger 2007). What more can states do to build an educational pipeline that ensures all students—especially low-income, minority, and first-generation college students—are primed for postsecondary success?

This brief proposes that including college-course completion as a measure in K-12 accountability frameworks is a robust strategy for driving educational improvement. An increasing number of states are including this predictive indicator of college success in their accounting of high school performance. 

College and career readiness for all high school graduates: This is the new consensus standard for educational excellence, and more and more states are revising their accountability systems to include metrics that advance this goal of high performance. The federal government’s recent invitation to states to request waivers from provisions of the No Child Left Behind Law may further provide states with an opportunity to redesign their accountability systems and encourage district and school initiatives to help ensure that high school graduates are prepared to succeed in postsecondary education and careers.

This policy brief draws on Jobs for the Future’s extensive work helping states develop and promote sound policies and practice that create stronger pathways from high school to and through college for low-income, minority, and first-generation students.

Diane Ward directs state education policy at JFF. 
Joel Vargas is vice president, High School Through College at JFF.
As a growing body of research shows, education pathways that blend high school and college, such as early college high schools and comprehensive dual enrollment programs, are a promising college-readiness strategy. Such pathways address multiple competencies needed for success in college—not only academic preparation but also other types of “college knowledge” skills that are honed most authentically in actual college courses. These skills include, for example: self-management of study routines and preparation for assessments; handling the pace and expectations of college courses; the strategic use of resources such as professors’ office hours and peer-to-peer study groups; and the understanding of discipline-specific norms for creating and communicating knowledge (Conley 2010).

However, low-income students, racial and ethnic minorities, and youth from families with no previous college-going history often lack the information and guidance needed to access and navigate college. College in the high school can help prepare these students to become truly college and career ready.

**COLLEGE-COURSE COMPLETION IS AN EFFECTIVE COLLEGE-READINESS STRATEGY**

College courses coupled with sustained supports motivate students, especially low-income students, to accelerate their learning. The successful completion of meaningful college courses is a strong signal of college readiness. Research suggests that dual enrollment participants show more signs of college success than non-participants from otherwise similar backgrounds, and the benefits appear to be greater for students typically underrepresented in college (Karp et al. 2007). These indicators include:

- Higher college enrollment;
- Higher college persistence through the second year; and
- Higher college grade point averages through the second year.

In early college schools, which build on dual enrollment by providing an on ramp to college for underserved young people, students often earn one to two years of transferable college credit along with their high school diploma. Nearly 25 percent of early college students earn an Associate’s degree by high school graduation (Webb & Mayka 2011). In effect, these young people are already “college students” by the time they graduate from high school. As one researcher found in interviews with graduates from early college schools, students graduated high school not merely believing they were prepared for college but knowing they were prepared, having completed rigorous college courses (Nakkula 2011).

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACCOUNTABILITY FRAMEWORK**

Integrated, longitudinal K-16 data systems enable states to track the performance of students as never before. However, drawing on information from JFF’s 50-state database of dual enrollment programs, as well as additional data from Achieve, Inc. and the College Board, we found that:

- Most states provide opportunities for high school students to take college courses for credit through dual enrollment, Advanced Placement, or International Baccalaureate; but
- Few states have instituted reporting requirements on the progress of students who take advantage of these options.

Including such reporting in state accountability systems would encourage schools to prepare more students for success in college. It also would signal the importance not just of getting to the “water’s edge” of college readiness but also of gaining the academic and non-academic momentum that increases the likelihood of college success. Schools would have incentives to create supportive pathways that embed college knowledge in the K-12 curriculum by integrating college courses into the high school course of study.

Several states are adapting their accountability frameworks to incorporate measures of college-level course completion...
by high school students. These states are taking a variety
of approaches to accounting and providing incentives for
higher performance (see page 4 for examples from six
states). Although relatively new, few in number, and still
developing, these policies offer building blocks that can
lend guidance to other states and reveal ways to enhance
this kind of accountability policy.

Based on the work of pioneering states in this area, we
recommend the following:

**Performance Goals**
States that set goals for raising college-course completion
by high school students send a signal to school leaders
about public priorities for improving college and career
readiness.

**IT IS PARTICULARLY IMPORTANT TO EMPHASIZE AMBITIOUS
GOALS FOR LOW-INCOME AND OTHER STUDENT GROUPS
UNDERREPRESENTED IN HIGHER EDUCATION.** These groups
particularly benefit from strategies that increase their
college-course taking in high school (Karp et al. 2007; AIR
& SRI 2009). Setting high goals for schools serving these
students makes it clear that such pathways are not just a
reward for “gifted” and already “accelerated” students but
also a route to college readiness for a broad segment of the
high school population.

**Tracking and Reporting**
States should require that districts track the participation
and success of students who earn college credit in high
school. It is essential that these systems:

- **REQUIRE HIGH SCHOOLS AND POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTIONS
to disaggregate data by income and race/ethnicity.**
  This highlights the performance of typically underserved
  students and the schools serving them. It also makes it
easier to assess the impact of college-course taking on
high school completion, college enrollment, and college
perseverance.

- **COUNT ALL COLLEGE-LEVEL COURSES COMPLETED
satisfactorily in high school—dual enrollment,
advanced placement, international baccalaureate—but

**DISTINGUISH AMONG THOSE OPTIONS IN THE REPORTING.**
Dual enrollment, AP, and IB courses are complementary
college-course options that can improve college readiness,
but each takes different approaches (e.g., on crediting,
exams). It is important to monitor the effects of each
option separately.

**Recognition for Schools and Districts**
Although data tracking and reporting acknowledge
improved performance, states may want to offer additional
incentives to schools and districts through special
recognition or other rewards for meeting goals or showing
improvement on measures of college-course completion.

**ENHANCED INCENTIVES SHOULD BE ESTABLISHED FOR SCHOOLS
THAT SHOW SUCCESS IN HELPING UNDERSERVED STUDENTS TO
COMPLETE COLLEGE COURSES.** This can raise the visibility of
successful strategies and encourage their adoption more
widely. For example, recognition should be given to schools
that create strong pathways to college courses for low-
income students or pathways that show success at putting
over-aged, under-credited students back on track to high
school graduation and college success.

**THE POTENTIAL OF SHARED ACCOUNTABILITY AND
RESPONSIBILITY**
What gets measured is what gets done. In an era when
college and career readiness is becoming the prime
directive for high schools, college-course completion is an
indicator that should be integral to state accountability
systems and other policies—especially because of the
college knowledge that such courses provide to low-
income and underrepresented students. A number of states
have instituted policies and can lead the way. However,
existing state policies could be improved as well—in
particular, by paying more explicit attention to tracking and
rewarding college-course completion in schools serving
underrepresented groups.
That said, this paper addresses only one side of a two-sided coin: the role of K-12 accountability policy in encouraging secondary schools to increase the college readiness and success of their graduates. Yet higher education institutions and postsecondary policies have an equally important role to play in creating and encouraging pathways that put their future students on a path to success. Thus, we also urge states to develop mechanisms that reward colleges for the first-year college performance of low-income students and other underrepresented groups, including their performance as indicated by the completion of key first-year college courses while they are in high school.

Early college schools and dual enrollment pathways not only promote first-year college success; they also create school-college partnerships that provide a model for promoting shared responsibility and tighter linkages between the K-12 and postsecondary systems. These grounded, focused partnerships are proving to be effective vehicles for enhancing the college readiness and success of students who are often lost in the transition between the two systems. Rewarding institutions in both systems would encourage the creation of more of these pathways, which would increase the number of students who enroll and succeed in college.

**STATE POLICIES FOR REPORTING AND REWARDING COLLEGE-COURSE TAKING IN HIGH SCHOOL**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Policy Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>FLORIDA</strong></td>
<td>One component for grading high schools is accelerated coursework participation for students in grades 9-12, based on exams taken for AP, IB, The Cambridge Advanced International Certificate of Education Diploma (AICE), and industry certification, as well as earning a grade of C or higher in dual enrollment courses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>GEORGIA</strong></td>
<td>Education leaders seek to move beyond standardized test scores as the sole measurement of student success. In an interview with the <em>Atlanta Journal-Constitution</em>, State School Superintendent John Barge said Georgia is seeking a waiver from federal No Child Left Behind Act requirements that would permit the state to include indicators of college and career readiness such as student performance in dual enrollment classes, where students earn high school and college credit, in its accountability formula.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>INDIANA</strong></td>
<td>A proposed high school accountability framework to be voted on by the State Board of Education in October 2011 would include college/career attainment as measured by AP/IB exam scores, attainment of college credit, and industry certification.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NEW MEXICO</strong></td>
<td>A new school-rating system assigns a letter grade to each school based on several academic indicators, including participation in Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate courses, and dual enrollment courses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>OKLAHOMA</strong></td>
<td>The Academic Performance Index, which Oklahoma uses to measure student and school performance, includes an indicator on student participation in AP courses. If available, these data are disaggregated by socioeconomic status and ethnic group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TEXAS</strong></td>
<td>The Gold Performance Acknowledgment (GPA) system recognizes districts and campuses that perform well on indicators other than those used to determine accountability ratings. These indicators recognize AP/IB results and the completion of dual enrollment courses.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ENDNOTES

1 The Common Core State Standards Initiative is a state-led effort coordinated by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers. Forty-four states and the District of Columbia have signed on to the standards. See: http://www.corestandards.org.

2 Based on analysis by Goldberger (2007) of the National Education Longitudinal Study.

3 Dual enrollment enables students to enroll in and earn credit for college-level coursework while still in high school.

4 See also Swanson (2008); Klopfenstein (2010); and Michalowski (2007).


REFERENCES


Swanson, Joni L. 2008. *An Analysis of the Impact of High School Dual Enrollment Course Participation on Post-Secondary Academic Success, Persistence and Degree Completion*. Iowa City, IA: Graduate College of the University of Iowa.