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Frankie Williams
Mississippi State University

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Promoting College Readiness and Access: Practices and Policy Implications

Frankie Williams
Mississippi State University

Abstract
Persisting social and economic inequalities exist in achieving a postsecondary education. These inequalities are attributable to economic, racial, and gender disparities that result in considerable gaps in college access, achievement, and college completion for minority groups. This article presents the current landscape for college readiness and access. Effective practices for promoting college readiness and access are discussed along with policy implications at the state level.

There is general recognition of the benefits and importance of successful P-12 transitions to college and college completion. Postsecondary education is associated with substantially higher wages, greater productivity in the workplace, better health, greater civic involvement, and greater job satisfaction (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2004). However, persisting social and economic inequalities exist in achieving a postsecondary education and are attributable to economic, racial, and gender disparities resulting in considerable gaps in college access, achievement, and completions for minority groups (Callan, Finey, Kirst, Usdan, & Venezia, 2006; Trent, Orr, Ranis, & Holdaway, 2007).

For example, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2004) reported that 48% of Hispanics age 25 and older do not hold a high school credential compared to 20% for the total population. Based on the 2000 census, the proportion of people aged 25 and over who had completed high school or more education ranged from 84% of those who reported they were White, 72% who reported they were Black or African American, and 52% who reported they were Hispanic or Latino (Bauman & Graf, 2003). Only 51% of the total population reported some college and 24% reported holding at least a bachelor’s degree.

The overall median Black family income in the United States is 63% of the median white family income (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Flint (1997) pointed out that parents and students with lower incomes are less likely to receive adequate information about college access and/or enroll in college.

Goldrick-Rab, Carter, and Wagner (2007) determined that a vast majority of research studies on college readiness and entry were concerned with examining inequities in academic and social participation. In examining these issues, this paper provides a description of the current landscape about college access and readiness, effective practices for promoting college readiness and access, and policy implications at the state level.
Current Landscape of College Readiness and Access

Historical data show that high school graduates entered college and found they were not prepared for college. Shults (2000) reported that an average of 36% of entering students in community college took at least one remedial course in the fall of 1998. Recent data suggest that as many as 40% of all students entering postsecondary education require at least one remedial course (American Diploma Project, 2006). Further, at community colleges, approximately 60% of all new entering students sometimes require remedial instruction. Moreover, according to the U.S. Department of Education (2008), only 17% of high school graduates who require at least one remedial reading course and only 27% who require a remedial math course earn a bachelor’s degree.

ACT, Inc. (2011) reported approximately 28% of all high school graduates who took the ACT test met no College Readiness Benchmarks, while 47% met between 1 and 3 Benchmarks. Only 24% of all 2010 ACT-testing high school graduates met all four College Readiness Benchmarks, meaning that less than 1 in 4 were academically ready for college coursework in all four subject areas.

Many individual, family, institutional, and system-wide factors affect a person’s ability to prepare and subsequently graduate from college (Deil-Amen & Turley, 2007). Accordingly, individual, institutional, and policy barriers to successful transition to and through postsecondary education were reported in the literature. Individual barriers include lacking a high school or General Educational Development (GED) diploma, adequate academic preparation, and knowledge of helpful resources (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Several researchers found significant mean differences between Blacks and Whites in college access and completion attributed to differences in high school preparation (Cabrera, Burkum, & Luna, 2003; Terenzini, Carrera, & Bernal, 2001). Other scholars (Carter, 1999; McDonough, 1997; Perna & Swail, 2001; Schneider & Stevenson, 1999) reported research focusing on the role of high school preparation in shaping students’ aspirations. Schmid (2001) noted that differences in aspirations, dropout rates, grade-point averages, and test scores are usually attributed to socioeconomic status. Other studies focused on sociological aspects linking college readiness with disadvantaged students (Deil-Amen & Turley, 2007).

Institutional barriers included inconvenient course schedules, lack of support and counseling services, and low persistence rates in remedial education (Calcano & Long, 2008). Policy barriers were characterized as limits on state-level postsecondary funding, financial aid, and lack of alignment among various levels within P-20 systems (Jenkins, 2008; McSwain & Davis, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Conley, Aspengren, Stout, and Veach (2006) found that many first-year students experienced their college courses were fundamentally different from their high school courses. Kirst and Venezia (2004) reported on issues relating to misunderstandings that contribute to inadequate preparation for college. Kirst and Venezia’s work highlighted such issues as inequalities throughout the P-20 educational systems in high school courses offerings, connections with local postsecondary institutions, information about college placement policies, and tuition costs.

Effective Practices for Promoting College Readiness and Access

A solid research base supports numerous practices for promoting college readiness and
Three major practices include (a) aligning high school exit standards and skills with college-level entry requirements; (b) students taking and completing a rigorous curriculum of courses while in high school; and (c) communicating accurate and timely information to students and families regarding expected knowledge, performance standards, attitudes, and behaviors that students need to prepare them for college.

Summaries of research conducted by ACT (2011) showed that the strongest predictors of college persistence and degree attainment were prior academic achievement and high school course-taking patterns (Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004). Similarly, Adelman (2006) used a large national data set that traced students from high school through college and found the most important predictor of bachelor’s degree attainment was the academic intensity of a student’s high school courses. ACT advocates that all high school students complete a recommended core curriculum consisting of the following: (a) at least four years of English; (b) at least three years of mathematics (typically Algebra I, Geometry, and Algebra II); (c) at least three years of social studies (typically U.S. History, World History, and U.S. Government); (d) at least three years of natural sciences (typically general science, biology, and chemistry). In addition, ACT added “courses for success” based on research demonstrating that students who successfully complete these courses will likely achieve college readiness and not need remediation. The advanced courses include mathematics courses (e.g., trigonometry, biology, chemistry, and physics).

The American Diploma Project Network (ADP), a network of 32 states, works with Achieve, Inc. to align high school graduation requirements to college-readiness standards. The common call for alignment between high school coursework completion and enrollment in credit-bearing college courses is the adoption of a single set of college-readiness standards for reading, writing, and mathematics, with an agreement on common assessment instruments for use across all segments (Bottoms & Young, 2008). As a foundation, programs should align entry/exit skills among levels and link course content to college level performance requirements (Center for Student Success, 2007). The Center for Student Success recommends clearly documenting and disseminating the performance standards representing the knowledge and skills students need to succeed in entry level courses in each discipline. Strong alignment and articulation of dual enrollment programs are essential with transparency for curricular pathway. Research findings indicate that dual enrollment programs are growing in size and scale. A statistical report for 2002-03 showed that 71% of U.S. public high schools offered some sort of dual enrollment program, with 57% of postsecondary institutions allowing high school students to enroll in college courses (Klekotka, 2005). Dual enrollment programs are reported to exist in all 50 states, even in the absence of state policy (Lerner & Brand, 2006). Practitioners should facilitate ongoing strong dialogue to explore the specifics of any content or assessment misalignment that exists as well as monitor proposed solutions.

**Policy Implications for College Readiness and Access**

Williams (2010) provided a review of state policy dimensions for improving college readiness opportunities for high school students. These dimensions included the alignment of coursework and assessments, financial incentives, and support to stimulate P-12 and postsecondary education to collaborate (Conley, 2003; Davies, 2006). Another dimensions included the capacity to track students across educational institutions statewide along with the
ability to publicly report on student progress and success from high school through postsecondary education. Conley (2007) suggested that state policies should require high school curriculum and instruction to align with college expectations. The content of each high school course should link to college readiness standards or benchmarks and state content or core standards.

Kirst and Venezia (2004) provided recommendations for promising reform by providing all students, their parents, and educators with accurate, high quality information about high school courses and access to colleges. Kirst and Venezia pointed out that college access and readiness information must be inclusive of materials on access to the resources to make informed decisions.

A number of states have taken concrete steps to improve college readiness and access. State-level initiatives promote college awareness. In response to the need to prepare students postsecondary education, several outreach and intervention programs have been implemented. Some states have initiatives aimed at assessing high school student readiness for college and providing mechanisms to assist student with setting appropriate expectations. Noteworthy, the Kentucky Department of Education and the Kentucky Community and Technical College system are working together to assess college readiness in the 10th grade and devising mechanisms to identify academically at-risk students, so that they can use their junior and senior year to become college-ready. Similarly, North Carolina has designed a specialized 12th grade mathematics course for students identified in the Early Math Placement testing program, which administers college placement tests in high school. The Montana University system encourages high school juniors to take its writing assessment, and provides a supplemental online course called Strategies for Improving High School Writing. Minnesota’s “Get Ready” program, established by its Higher Education Services Office, encourages college preparation starting as early as 4th grade and sponsors a comprehensive website of online advising tools, college preparation and selection resources, and information about financial aid. Two other notable informational projects are Indiana’s Career and Postsecondary Advancement Center (ICPAC) and Florida’s College Reach Out Program (CROP), both of which invested substantial resources in developing data and delivery systems to help students and parents access student records and information about college requirements.

ACT, Inc. (2009) recommended that states should adopt essential standards, and advocated the standards should be fewer – but essential – learning standards. To ensure that all students are ready for college or career, ACT, Inc. noted it is imperative that policymakers be guided by a real-world definition of “readiness” – that is, a definition that reflects those standards that have been validated as the most essential for success in college classrooms. Further, ACT, Inc. suggested that states should make sure that their state standards include the essential skills from ACT’s College Readiness Standards that are required for students to meet the College Readiness Benchmarks for the ACT.

Other recommendations included common expectations, clear performance standards, rigorous high school courses, early mentoring and interventions, and data-driven decision. States should adopt a rigorous core curriculum for all high school students. Several states support the core curriculum recommendations of A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform, specifically, that students take a core curriculum of at least four years of English and three years each of mathematics, science, and social studies. In addition to a consistent, rigorous set of essential
P-12 content standards, states must define performance standards on assessments aligned with college readiness learning standards, so that students, parents, and teachers know how well students must perform academically to have a reasonable chance of success at college. Based on decades of student performance data, ACT defines “college readiness” as students having approximately a 75% chance of earning a grade of C or higher or a 50% chance of earning a grade of B or higher in first-year colleges. Students who take a rigorous core curriculum should be ready for credit-bearing first-year college courses without remediation.

States should begin monitoring student academic performance early to make sure younger students are on target to be ready for college and career. Interventions are needed for students who are off target. Empirical data show that students who take challenging curricula are much better prepared to graduate high school ready for college and career. If students are to have a chance at college and career readiness, their progress must be monitored closely so that deficiencies in foundational skills can be identified and remediated early, in the upper elementary grades and middle school. In addition, age-appropriate career assessment, exploration, and planning activities encourage students to consider and focus on options so that they can plan their high school coursework accordingly.

States need to establish longitudinal P-16 data systems. If states are serious about ensuring that more of their students are prepared for college and work in the 21st century, they must closely monitor student performance at every stage of the learning pipeline, from preschool through the elementary, middle, and high school grades, all the way through college. Use of a longitudinal data system would enable educators to identify students who are in need of academic interventions at an early stage, thus giving teachers and students more time to strengthen these skills before graduation. Longitudinal data systems provide a tool to schools to ensure all their students take and complete the right number and kinds of courses before graduation. Using a longitudinal assessment system also permits schools to evaluate the value added by each core course in helping students to become ready for college. In addition, such systems allow colleges to offer feedback reports to high schools that examine how well prepared each high school’s graduates are for college. These reports can be used to strengthen and align high school curricula for college enrollment and success. The successful transition of students from high school to college is clearly a shared responsibility of secondary and postsecondary stakeholders.

Additional research is necessary to help advance conceptualization of the various dimensions of P-12 transitions taking place both into college and within college. The transitions from high school to college will require close attention to reforms that have taken place at both the P-12 and higher education systems. Scholars, practitioners, and policymakers must create data systems and data sets that link practice, policy, and research.
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