



## School Education Group

McGraw-Hill Education  
Policy Paper: College and Career Readiness

### COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS:

### PREPARING ALL HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS FOR SUCCESS AT THE POSTSECONDARY LEVEL IS CRITICAL TO U.S. ECONOMIC GROWTH AND SECURITY

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#### Introduction

Improving college and career readiness for U.S. high school students is a topic of increasingly intense debate among education professionals and policymakers. The Obama Administration gave the issue even more prominence this year when it said that every U.S. high school student should be making plans to either attend college or pursue at least one year of career-specific job training.<sup>1</sup>

At McGraw-Hill Education we agree strongly, and believe that much more can and must be done to ensure our nation's high school students are equipped with the skills and abilities necessary to succeed at the postsecondary level.

Over the past three decades the gap between the earnings of workers with a bachelor's degree and those with only a high school diploma has grown to more than 60 percent,<sup>2</sup> and the U.S. Department of Labor notes that ninety percent of the fastest-growing jobs in the new and growing global "knowledge" economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century will require at least some education or training after high school.<sup>3</sup> A 2002 U.S. Census Bureau report projects that over the course of a lifetime a person with a bachelor's degree will earn nearly twice as much as someone with only a high school diploma.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/Education/>

<sup>2</sup> Speech by US Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson at Columbia Business School, August 1, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Internal analysis from the Bureau of Labor Statistics Monthly Labor Review (November 2005) by U.S. Department of Labor staff, August 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Day, Jennifer C. and Eric C. Newburger, *The Big Payoff: Educational Attainment and Synthetic Estimates of Work-Life Earnings*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau, 2002.

The good news is that more and more U.S. high school seniors do plan to go on to college after graduation; the bad news is that a large and growing number are not adequately prepared to perform at the college level when they arrive.

I know from my own experience how wide the gap can be between ideas of what college will be like for students once they get there and the reality.

Prior to joining McGraw-Hill Education I was co-founder and served as president and CEO of Achieva.com, the first comprehensive online college admissions and counseling service to offer personal guidance to parents and students. Achieva.com primarily served two groups from opposite ends of the economic scale: Students from affluent families, who elected to receive personal admissions guidance; and lower-income, mostly urban students, who took advantage of our online college prep, test prep and study skills tutoring programs. Both groups, I discovered, had deep misconceptions about college life and the academic requirements necessary for being accepted and achieving at the better-known institutions.

Among the lower-income students, many were the first in their families to attend college and had a profound lack of understanding of what dorm living or other aspects of college life would entail. In the upper-income brackets, a surprising number of students were unprepared for the high academic standards required for both admission and achievement at the nation's better-known colleges and universities. Even their parents, many of which had attended top institutions in the U.S. or abroad, had either outdated notions of college life or ideas based on the academic institutions in their native cultures.

These kinds of misconceptions persist today, leading to remediation and dropout rates at the nation's colleges and universities that are unacceptably high.

According to a 2005 report, 63 percent of students at two-year colleges and 40 percent of those at four-year institutions nationally must take at least some remedial instruction simply to function at the college level. Despite remediation efforts, the number of students dropping out during their first year of college has risen to deplorable levels. Half of all community college students do not come back for their second year, while as many as 25 percent of freshmen at four-year institutions do not return after their freshman year.<sup>5</sup>

College success depends upon more than academic performance, and some students fail to thrive in college because they are not prepared for the responsibility of making their own decisions after 18 years of either their parents or teachers telling them what to do. Suddenly they are being called upon to exhibit personal responsibility, budget their own time, navigate an entirely new social environment and cope with the stress and anxieties that can accompany any significant life change.

Many, too, have little experience handling their own finances and can find themselves sinking quickly into debt. Dropping out of college can leave them with both substantial

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<sup>5</sup> The Governance Divide: A Report on a Four-State Study on Improving College Readiness and Success, a report conducted and issued by: the Institute for Education Leadership, the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, and the Stanford Institute for Higher Education Research, 2005

loans to repay and reduced job prospects – a double-whammy that can have a negative impact on their lives for years.

The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education reports that up to 50 percent of all entering college freshman borrow funds, that 20 percent of those who borrow drop out, and that those who drop out are twice as likely to be unemployed and more than 10 times more likely to default on their loans.<sup>6</sup>

### **High Schools are Not the Problem**

Patrick Callan, president of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, has noted that when high schools have a high dropout rate people tend to hold the school responsible, but when colleges have the same dropout problem the response is often “What’s the matter with these students? We gave them a chance to go to college.”<sup>7</sup>

The fact is that high schools do their best with the resources at their disposal. My experience at Achieva.com made it clear to me that many teachers and guidance counselors work informally and well to prepare their students for success at the postsecondary level.

High school students can be divided into three main groups, two of which, by and large, receive adequate if not complete college preparation for their postsecondary lives.

The students who have been preparing for college since middle school or earlier, often from upper-middle-class families, tend to do well in college. These are the motivated and academically gifted kids who take Advanced Placement (AP) classes and tests, or who participate in the International Baccalaureate (IB) or other programs designed specifically to introduce high school students to college level work.

Many students from lower-income districts and the “dropout factory” schools in some urban areas also do very well after graduating from high school – whether they attend a four-year state school, a two-year community college or go in to a trade program. These students achieve at the postsecondary level, despite their unfamiliarity with college life, because they are highly motivated to get ahead. They understand that education and training are the primary means to an end. Consequently, they are extremely focused on obtaining the accreditation they need to get the jobs they desire in health care, technology and other professions requiring training and specialized knowledge.

It is the large middle group of students from regular classes (i.e., not vocational, AP or Honors), often from middle- or low-income working families, who are by and large not being prepared adequately for college level work or postsecondary training. These young people are capable but not as self-directed as students in the other two groups. Too often they have no notion of how much more demanding college will be – both

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<sup>6</sup> Young Money Magazine, August, 2006, from YMM website:  
<http://www.youngmoneytalks.com/blog/index.php?p=25>

<sup>7</sup> AP, U.S. college drop-out rate sparks concern, Nov. 15, 2005

academically and personally – when compared with high school. They also have no clear idea of why they are going to college other than that it seems expected of them and all of their friends are doing it.

Professor David T. Conley, founder and director of the Center for Educational Research at the University of Oregon and a strong proponent of college and career prep reform, has written that once these students get to college they are challenged in ways they do not expect and for which they have not been adequately prepared:

“They encounter instructors who move through the material more quickly [than their teachers did in high school], who expect them to spend more time on their own outside of class reading and reviewing ... When interpretation is required, they often assume that any kind of interpretation will be acceptable and are surprised and even offended when they are told that they must apply certain disciplinary rules of thinking and analysis ...”<sup>8</sup>

What can be done to help prepare these and all students for a successful and rewarding post-secondary education?

In theory, the best solution would be for high schools and colleges to work together to jointly establish standards and address the problem. That is easier said than done; there are long-standing and deeply rooted differences between the college and high school education systems in the U.S. that make that sort of collaboration difficult to effect.

To quote Professor Conley again:

“Understanding that the U.S. education system was designed consciously not to have strong linkages between high school and college is key to comprehending the nature of college preparation and the mismatches that can arise between what high schools think students need to know and what colleges expect them to be able to do.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Conley, David T., *College Knowledge: What It Really Takes to Succeed and What We Can Do to Get Them Ready*, Jossey-Bass (A Wiley Imprint), 2005, pps. xii and 75-76.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xii

## High School and College – Two Different Worlds

The oldest U.S. universities were founded in the 1600s, long before the United States existed as a country, and were attended exclusively by young men from wealthy families. These privileged few were considered destined to become the social, political and business leaders of their society and the purpose of college was to prepare them for that role. The forms and approaches to university academics were therefore in place and established in America for more than 200 years before the movement to establish what we now call “universal secondary education” (i.e., high school) came along.

The U.S. was a pioneer in developing and encouraging secondary education for everyone – male and female – and by 1910 the United States had pulled ahead of all other nations in terms of post-elementary enrollment rates.<sup>10</sup> As a result, by the 1940s the U.S. had the best educated workforce in the world and benefitted economically because of it.<sup>11</sup>

For the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, a high school diploma was considered sufficient for most people and the overriding goal of most U.S. high school students was simply to get through high school, graduate and get a decent job. The different approaches between high school and college were not an issue when most people did not continue on to college after high school graduation. Only about 10 percent of graduating high school students attended college until the mid-1940s,<sup>12</sup> when the GI bill of 1944 sent thousands of veterans off to pursue higher education.

It wasn't until the 1960s and the financial provisions of the Higher Education Act that large numbers of high school students began to view college as their natural next step. That prompted a shift in focus from just getting by in high school to excelling, earning the kind of grades necessary for acceptance at an accredited, degree-granting four-year college or university. The SATs and other college assessment tests were introduced around this time and became required for all college-bound high school students to predict which students would perform well at the college level.

By the 1970s a college degree was viewed as being the key to having – not just a decent job – but a career. There were more than eight million students enrolled in institutions of higher learning by 1969, a large jump from the little more than one million college students of 1943.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Goldin, Claudia, *The Human Capital Century and American Leadership: Virtues of the Past*, Department of Economics Harvard University and National Bureau of Economic Research, 2001, p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> Shawn Fremstad and Andy Van Kleunen, *Redefining Public Education for the 21st Century: Toward a Federal Guarantee of Education and Training for America's Workers*, Clearinghouse REVIEW Journal of Poverty Law and Policy, May–June 2006.

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2003.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2003.

In the '90s, as the pace of technological innovation accelerated and the global economy began to take shape, getting into college became the stated goal of up to 90 percent of all high school students.<sup>14</sup> Competition for college admission increased as the “baby boomlet” – the children of the college educated baby boomers – competed for admission to the better known institutions. Public school districts responded with AP courses and tests, the IB program, and other initiatives designed to make their most talented and industrious students appealing to college admissions offices.

By the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, however, it was becoming increasingly obvious that all of the programs designed to make high school students “college-eligible” were not necessarily making them “college-ready.” High school educators and state education officials began to coordinate their efforts to improve college and career readiness for graduating seniors.

### **The Current State of Career and College Readiness Reform**

In 2005 Achieve, an independent, non-profit and non-partisan group of state officials and business leaders dedicated to education reform joined with 13 states to create the American Diploma Project Network (ADP). Today, the network has expanded to include 34 states representing nearly 85 percent of all U.S. public school students.

ADP promotes the creation of a seamless transition from high school to college for all college-bound seniors and proposes that all 50 states and the District of Columbia join together to achieve that goal through:

- Aligning state high school standards and assessments with the demands of college and career success in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century;
- Requiring all high school graduates complete a curriculum designed specifically to help make them college- and career-ready;
- Building into every state’s assessments system a measurement of student readiness for college and career; and
- Encouraging the development of state-wide P-20 longitudinal data systems that can match K-12 data with postsecondary data and track the individual progress of students from Kindergarten through college graduation.

Every year since, ADP has surveyed all 50 states and D.C. to ascertain the status of their career and college readiness efforts. The latest survey, published in February, 2009, found that:

- Twenty-three states have aligned K-12 standards in English and/or mathematics with the demands of postsecondary education and careers, and an additional 14 anticipate having such alignment in place by 2010;

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<sup>14</sup> Education Trust *Ticket to Nowhere: The Gap Between Leaving High School and Entering College and High Performance Jobs*, published in *Thinking K-16* 3:2, (Washington, D.C., Fall 1999).

- Twenty states and the District of Columbia now require students to complete a college- and career-ready curriculum, up from only two (Texas and Arkansas) when the network began in 2005;
- Eight additional states report plans to require such a curriculum, with Florida and New Jersey anticipating action this year;
- Ten states have implemented or are in the process of implementing for this year a college- and career-ready assessment system, with 23 additional states in the planning stages; and
- Twenty-one states have either implemented or will have in place P-20 longitudinal data systems by 2010, and another 28 are in the planning stages.

It is important to keep in mind that college is not the only postsecondary destination for graduating high school seniors. In a recent issue devoted to college and career readiness, *Education Week* points out there is a debate about whether college readiness is the same thing as career or “work-readiness.” The magazine reports that 28 states have defined work-readiness, with seven more working toward creating a definition. When polled by the Editorial Projects in Education (EDE) Research Center, five states reported that their work-readiness expectations differed from their benchmarks for college preparation.<sup>15</sup>

Clearly, progress is being made, the most important being the crafting of benchmarks and the alignment of high school and college standards. But much more needs to be done to achieve the Obama Administration’s goals of ensuring that all U.S. students go on to successful postsecondary study.

### **How Can We Better Prepare Students for Life After High School?**

Professor Conley notes that the high schools doing the best job of preparing all their students for college share certain characteristics, the most important being: “an intellectually coherent program of study based on a curriculum that grows progressively more challenging ...”<sup>16</sup>

At McGraw-Hill Education, we believe high school students can be best prepared for whatever comes next with a rigorous curriculum that includes increasingly more challenging work, aligned with formal instruction on what life after high school is really going to be like, not just in college or trade school, but in the ongoing pursuit of a successful career in any field. Because in the knowledge economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, learning never stops.

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<sup>15</sup> Wittenstein, Rebecca, State of the States, *Education Week*, June 11, 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Conley, David T., *College Knowledge*, p. 73.

McGraw-Hill Education promotes college and career readiness at the high school level with products that combine an increased level of rigor with the development of the kind of skills necessary for success in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. For example, material we publish for a junior year History course might include a project requiring students to work together in solving problems so that they can learn both problem-solving and collaboration. These are skills that have been established as critical to success in the new Century, but which are not generally taught at the high school level.<sup>17</sup>

In the career and technical education side of our business, we are providing materials created specifically for students who are already focused on a particular career. We publish a program called Pre-Engineering, for example, that teaches high school students what they will need to know to be successful down the road as engineers.

We are also exploring the idea of offering online courses and materials that will support critical thinking and life choices, with information and advice on developing personal skills such as managing personal finance, time management and how to navigate the college application process.

More and more we are building resources into our high school products that will help start students on a long-term career and college-ready path – a path that will continue seamlessly as they attend college, pursue career training and even beyond – as they take up their careers and strive to stay current with developments in their fields.

## **Conclusion**

Ultimately the question when it comes to college and career readiness is: What is the primary purpose of a high school education?

At McGraw-Hill we believe the goal of high school should be to provide students with a foundation for learning that will support their education and career goals for the rest of their lives – whether they continue on after high school at a four-year university, a two-year community college or a one-year training program for a specific trade.

Particularly now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, when more students must complete some postsecondary education to have an economically secure life, the need for improved transitions from high school to college is urgent and extends beyond individual aspirations.

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<sup>17</sup> Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills literature.

In the knowledge economy, the most economically successful communities, states, and nations will be those that have provided their young people with a strong base for acquiring the knowledge and skills necessary to compete on a global scale.

Given the economic realities of the world we find ourselves living in – a world where a job seeker in Dallas is competing not just with other applicants in Denver or Seattle, but with educated and motivated workers from Dubai, Perth or Taipei – providing opportunities for success in postsecondary study is vital to the long-term economic health of our children, our communities, our states and our nation.

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