

Issue Brief

10 Ideas to Ensure College Readiness in the No Child Left Behind & Higher Education Acts

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It is a stark, indisputable fact that many of America's high school graduates are not ready for the rigors of college. Fewer than half of the high school juniors and seniors who took the ACT national college admissions test in 2008 met its college readiness benchmark in mathematics.^[1] Of the 40,000 freshmen admitted into the California State University system in 2007, more than 60 percent needed remediation in English or math.^[2] Nationwide, nearly a third of all incoming freshmen—42 percent of first-year students at public two-year colleges—require remediation.^[3]



But the issue is more than a matter of poorly performing secondary schools. Low college readiness rates are a massive failure of the pre-kindergarten through college (Pk-16) system as a whole. High schools, colleges, and universities have not worked together to establish expectations or common standards as to what graduating high school seniors should know and be able to do in order to successfully enter college or the workforce, and students who arrive on campus in need of academic assistance are not able to access remediation of sufficient quality.

While policymakers have made some progress in improving the secondary to postsecondary pipeline, more needs to be done. Despite good intentions, current initiatives are often weak and disconnected. Too many students are getting lost amid the competing demands and misaligned policies of a patchwork Pk-16 system.

Clearly, the nation needs a new approach to Pk-16 reform, with the federal government providing the leverage to promote change. The No Child Left Behind Act and the Higher Education Act provide opportunities for federal policymakers to promote college readiness and high-quality remediation pre- and post-college admission. Leveraging limited federal resources in both the short and long term will create conditions for deep and lasting reform. To accomplish this, we recommend ten ways to incorporate college readiness proposals into federal legislation.

1. Create incentives for national college readiness standards. To create an efficient and effective Pk-16 education system, policymakers must set clear and attainable standards and place all students on a path to meet those standards. Currently, there are at least 50 different sets of math, science, and language arts standards in place across the country. As a result, our highly mobile student-aged population progresses through the nation's schools without consistent expectations for knowledge, skills, and preparedness. Ultimately, the quality of a child's education depends on where he or she resides. To ensure that we adequately prepare all students for the competitive global marketplace, the federal government should create an incentive program within Title I of the No Child Left Behind Act that encourages state education chiefs to come together with institutions of higher education, business representatives, and the wider education community to create and adopt a core of national college- and work-readiness standards in math, science, and the language arts. States that choose to adopt such standards would be granted funds to align their current education, teacher licensure, and professional development standards with this core. Upon adoption and alignment, the federal government would grant participating states additional funds to strengthen or revamp their existing NCLB data systems. Ultimately, national standards would enable parents, educators, policymakers, employers, and higher education officials to meaningfully compare students' academic achievement across states, and ensure that high school graduates are academically qualified to enter college or the workforce. A high school diploma earned by completing coursework tied to these national standards would, by definition, signal college readiness.

2. Create national assessments. States that successfully adopt the core national college readiness standards should be given the option to administer federally designed NCLB assessments. As with the core national standards, the assessments would be developed in partnership with states, institutions of higher education, and representatives of the business and education communities. The federal government would bear the entire cost of

developing, administering, and reporting the results from the assessment, as well as the cost of accommodations for students with disabilities and English Language Learners. A national assessment would eliminate the need for states to develop costly exams and accommodations on their own and ensure a level of quality for accommodations for special education students and English Language Learners that is not currently available. States that participate in the national assessment would be allowed to divert the \$400 million they are currently using to pay for state assessments under No Child Left Behind to build the capacity of state and local data systems or to support activities designed to turn around low-performing schools.

3. Require a high school graduation plan for every student. Most students who enter high school believe that they will go to college, but few know exactly what it takes to do college-level work. Students who wait until their senior year to check into admissions requirements may discover too late that they are ineligible for admission into the college of their choice because they have not taken the requisite coursework. Those who choose to forgo college for the workforce also find that they are ill-prepared to meet the needs of their potential employers. To resolve this disconnect, the federal government should provide states and districts with resources to ensure that every student has a high school graduation plan in place by the ninth grade. Students would develop their graduation plans with their guidance counselors, teachers, and parents or guardians. These plans would set out the types of classes and programs students must take to be prepared for the workforce and admission to a two-year or four-year college or university by the time they graduate high school. Plans would be updated annually with the help of the students and their families, guidance counselors, and teachers, and would provide detailed evidence of academic progress from year to year.

Because providing every student with a high school graduation plan will require significant support from educators at the local level, states and school districts should be allowed to use Title I funds to cover the cost of creating the infrastructure needed to implement the plans. To facilitate this, the federal government should amend No Child Left Behind to require school districts to allocate an equitable share of Title I resources to high schools, and then increase overall Title I funding so resources to elementary and middle schools are not reduced. In addition, secondary schools should be permitted to use a portion of Title II funds to pay for credentialed guidance counselors, or to provide increased compensation for teachers who serve in counselor roles. Added staff would allow for closer monitoring of students' academic progress.

4. Incent states to partner with institutions of higher education to develop and replicate models that successfully link Pk-12 with higher education. To help ensure that a high school diploma reflects a student's readiness for the academic challenges of higher education, the federal government should offer a small number of competitive grants to states, school districts, and institutions of higher education to collaborate on implementing innovative models that bridge the academic divide between high school and college. While efforts to strengthen the link between Pk-12 and higher education are currently under way, the enormity of the problem requires additional innovation and resources to take successful models "full-scale." Rather than fund one model, the federal government should work through the Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) or the Office of Innovation and Improvement to support multiple promising strategies that form partnerships across sectors.^[4] Partnership grants could help recipients work with state and local reform groups to benchmark current standards to college readiness, raise the overall rigor of the high school curriculum, or create data systems that allow states to track students' progression from high school through college graduation.

5. Refocus federal college readiness efforts. The federal government should significantly restructure its approach to early-intervention college readiness programs. First, current overlap in federal college readiness and remediation efforts authorized under the Higher Education Act should be eliminated. The more promising early-intervention college readiness programs include a whole-school approach to serving students in middle and high school, rigorous academic support, and assistance in considering higher education options. In addition, successful models are generally integrated into the regular school day, do not require students to stay after school or work over the weekend, require partnerships between schools and colleges, and match grants from community organizations or foundations.^[5] While the federal GEAR UP program does have deficiencies, it currently incorporates most of these attributes and existing research suggests that it is the most promising of all federal programming in this area.

To provide a unified and less redundant effort, create a community of shared practice within and among institutions, and free up dollars to expand GEAR UP's current reach, the federal government should consider folding other Higher Education Act Title IV college readiness efforts with similar missions into GEAR UP. Additional GEAR UP dollars realized through consolidation should then be directed to efforts that ensure students are serviced school-wide, throughout their entire secondary school experience, and into college.

6. Collect better data at the postsecondary level. For the most part, neither states nor the federal government collect substantive data on college remediation, and policymakers are not always able to trace college success and persistence back to individual high schools. This leaves no way to systematically address the sources of, and

solutions to, the remediation problem on a broader scale. In fact, many experts believe that current estimates of remediation vastly understate the problem because many institutions of higher education title their remedial coursework, commonly referred to as developmental coursework, as "intermediate."^[6]

We recommend that the federal government require institutions of higher education to fully report the rate at which their incoming students require developmental coursework, the level of developmental coursework required (how far below college level students are), and the rate at which these developmental education students later graduate or successfully transfer to other institutions. Reporting could be required within section 485 of the Higher Education Act. To ensure that institutions aren't gaming the system, successful completion of classes should be tied to a common, transparent, and objective measure designed by the institution. Expectations for course passage should be clear to students when they enroll. Gains in knowledge should be clear to the students, the institution, policymakers, and the public upon completion of the course.

7. Collect better data at the secondary level. To ensure transparency across the entire educational pipeline, colleges and universities should also be required to report the number of their students required to take developmental coursework to the high schools from which these students graduated. Simply put, high schools across America should be told how many of their college-going graduates were required to take developmental coursework upon college enrollment. Local education agencies (LEAs) should then be required to report the total percentage of their graduates required to take developmental coursework in college on their annual NCLB school accountability report cards. These provisions within the Higher Education Act and the No Child Left Behind Act, combined with the additional postsecondary reporting requirements recommended above, would help educators and policymakers better understand college readiness, remediation, and success. At the same time, it would hold high schools accountable for producing graduates who are not prepared for college-level work and institutions of higher education accountable for not graduating their developmental education students.

Institutions at every level should take steps to ensure that data collected at the secondary and postsecondary levels are public, transparent, and consistent with procedures currently set in law to ensure adequate protections for student privacy. NCLB and stimulus funds, along with dollars obtained from the K-16 partnership grants suggested above, should be sufficient to bolster data systems to facilitate the collection and distribution of the new required data.

8. Research what works in developmental education. While researchers have yet to definitively map out what works in postsecondary developmental education, there are a number of practices and programs that have shown results. The federal government can assist remediation efforts by conducting research on the types of programming that work, presenting states and colleges with best practices information, and providing technical assistance to help ensure that such programs succeed. Once promising models are identified, the Department should leverage existing dollars within the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) to seed the launch of these efforts on a broader scale nationwide.

9. Seed state based low-cost/no-cost college readiness systems. States and institutions of higher education, in partnership with the federal government, should establish a system that provides high-quality remediation at little or no cost to students. To save time and money, states and school districts should work with institutions of higher education to provide developmental education online prior to a student's freshman year. A state-based online college readiness and developmental coursework system—developed in conjunction with public colleges and universities—would allow students to complete their coursework on their own time in a variety of venues (such as their homes or public libraries) prior to postsecondary enrollment. The federal government could partner with states to cover the system's start-up and development costs. Final exams for these readiness and developmental courses should be offered on-site at the student's graduating high school, or at local community colleges, at no charge to the student.

Authorized as a competitive grant program under the No Child Left Behind Act, participation in such a college readiness and developmental coursework system would require clear articulations between a SEAs, LEAs, and public institutions of higher education (IHE) within a state, with the SEA taking the lead on application. Federal dollars would cover start-up and development costs while SEAs, LEAs and IHEs would administer the program. SEAs and LEAs would provide the majority of funding, with IHEs contributing in cash or in kind (personnel and facilities support). Adults returning to college after several years in the workforce would also be allowed to access the college readiness system at low to moderate cost, depending on arrangements made between individual states, their institutions of higher education, and state labor departments. The federal government could facilitate these types of partnerships by explicitly allowing Workforce Investment Act (WIA) dollars to subsidize the use of such a system by workers who require skills retraining.

10. Ensure the quality of developmental education on campus. Quality controls for developmental education should be woven into the accreditation system as articulated within Title IV, part H of the Higher Education Act.

When remediation is provided on campus, colleges and universities should be able to demonstrate that they have hired qualified instructors and support staff, and made the programs as rigorous as every other academic department in the institution. Classes should be based on research in developmental education and should cover study skills and work habits, in addition to reading comprehension, writing, and math. When assessing the quality of developmental education courses on campus, the pass rate for these classes should be considered.

Notes

^[1] *College Readiness: Benchmarks Met* (Iowa City: ACT, 2008), <http://www.act.org/news/data/08/benchmarks.html>.

^[2] National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, *Mixed Signals in California: A Mismatch Between High Schools and Community Colleges*, March 2008, http://www.highereducation.org/reports/pa_mixed_signals/mis.pdf.

^[3] National Center for Education Statistics, *the Condition of Education 2004* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2004), http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2004/pdf/31_2004.pdf.

^[4] See Sara Mead and Andrew Rotherham, *Changing the Game in Education: a Federal Role in Supporting 21st Century Education Innovation* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2008) for an example of what an Office of Innovation might look like. This type of work would fit well within Mead and Rotherham's proposals for rethinking that organization's mission.

^[5] Alberto F. Cabrera and Steven M. La Nasa, *Understanding the College Choice of Disadvantaged Students: New Directions for Institutional Research* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000). See also Laura W. Perna, "Pre-college Outreach Programs: Characteristics of Programs Serving Historically Underrepresented Groups of Students," *Journal of College Student Development* 43 (January/February 2002): 64-83; Sharon J. Camblin, "The Middle Grades: Putting All Students on Track for College," Pacific Resources for Education and Learning Briefing Paper, April 2003, 2; and Nadia L. Ward, "Improving Equity and Access for Low-Income and Minority Youth Into Institutions of Higher Education," *Urban Education* 41 (January 2006): 61.

^[6] Michael Kirst, "Who Needs It? Identifying the Proportion of Students Who Require Postsecondary Remediation Education Is Virtually Impossible," *National CrossTalk* 15 (Winter 2007).

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