



**POLICY
MATTERS**

High School Coursework: Policy Trends and Implications for Higher Education

A new wave of national attention has been directed to beefing up the high school curriculum and statewide policy changes are taking place with or without the involvement of the postsecondary community. To assure that the changes move in the right direction, higher education leaders must be involved.

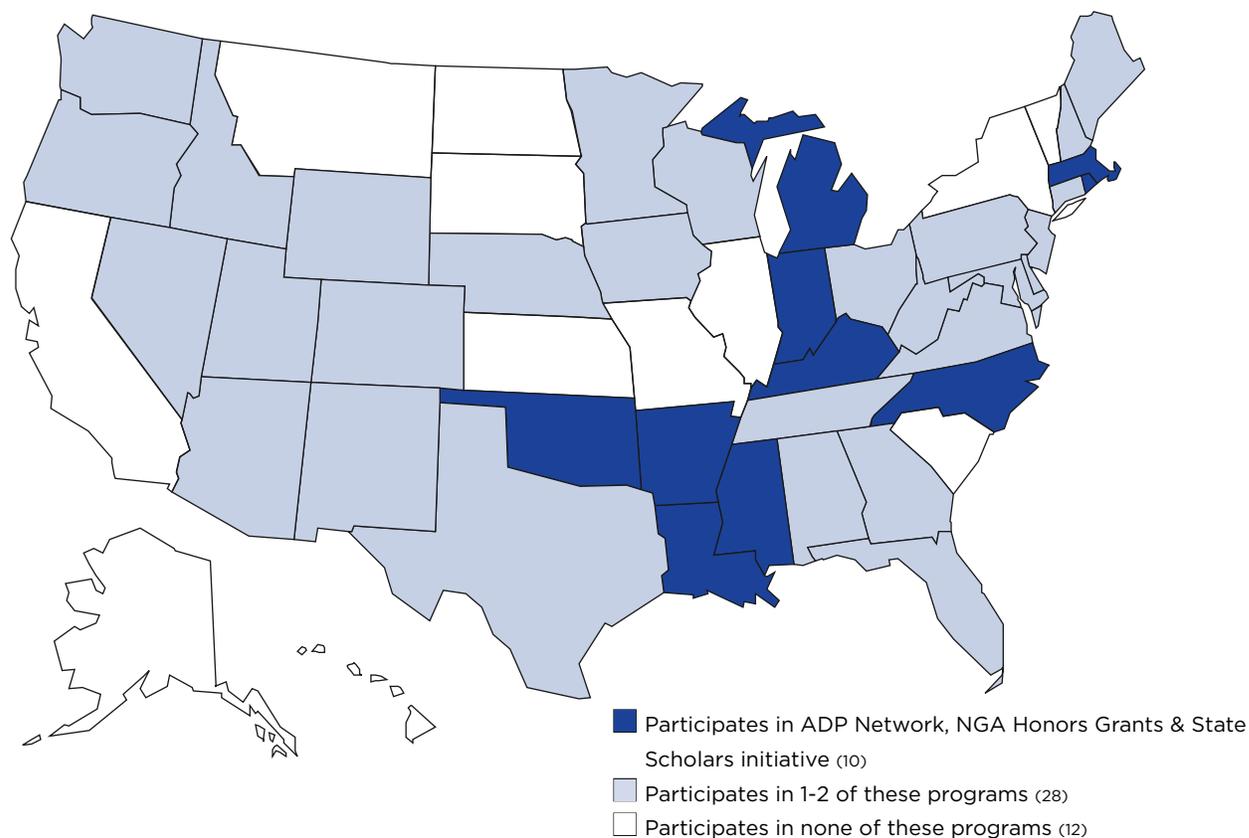
Context

It is common knowledge that quality high school coursework is critical to college and workplace success. *A Nation at Risk* pointed this out in 1983, arguing that high school students need to complete a more rigorous curriculum if the nation is to remain competitive in the global economy. Since then, research has confirmed the wisdom of this recommendation. Longitudinal studies by the U.S. Department of Education have found that the academic intensity of high school courses counts more than any other pre-collegiate factor in predicting college success, and that the highest level of mathematics is a key marker in “pre-collegiate momentum.” Research by ACT, Inc. has documented that students who take the ACT-recommended core curriculum, particularly Algebra 2 and beyond, as well as biology, chemistry, and physics, have a greater chance of enrolling in college, succeeding in first-year college courses, and persisting in college.

Over the years, policymakers have responded to the call, and 42 states have put into place statewide requirements for high school graduation. At the postsecondary level, approximately half the states have set statewide high school coursework requirements for college admission. These policy developments have had a measurable impact as increasing proportions of high school students take more advanced and rigorous coursework. Despite this progress, the nation has not eliminated the gap between high school graduation and college and workplace expectations. This is indicated by the continued need for remedial coursework in college as well as the student, faculty, and employer reports of under-prepared high school graduates.

Recently, a new wave of national attention has been directed to beefing up the high school curriculum. This is exemplified by the February 2005 National Education Summit on High Schools attended by governors from 45 states and business and education leaders. New

State Participation in National Initiatives to Increase College and Workplace Readiness



Source: Achieve, Inc. *Closing the Expectations Gap 2006* and Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education Website.

state policies are being adopted at the K-12 level that will impact higher education over the next several years. Whether these changes are moving in the right direction and whether they go far enough remain to be seen. More than ever, higher education leaders need to be at the table as these discussions take place.

Observations

States are continuing to ratchet up high school graduation requirements. They are increasing the number of units required and getting more detailed about specific courses and sequences. A recent survey by Achieve, Inc. found significant changes since the National Summit in the number of states moving toward requiring all students to complete “a college- and work-ready curriculum.” The curriculum is defined as four years of rigorous English coursework and mathematics through at least Algebra 2. Eight states in total have enacted such requirements as the default curriculum for all students—Arkansas and Texas before the Summit, and Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, New York, Oklahoma, and South Dakota since that time. (Parents not wanting

their children to take this course of study have a process for opting them out.) Twelve states have plans to put college- and work-ready standards in place for all students. Seven additional states have raised their graduation requirements since the Summit, though not to this level.

Another approach states have adopted is to offer an optional college-preparatory diploma. The goal is to encourage more and more students to choose this option. The Education Commission of the States (ECS) has found that 25 states now offer an optional college-preparatory diploma, up from 18 states in 2002.

Indiana provides an example of progress toward more rigorous coursework for all. In the late 1980s, Indiana began to develop a college- and workforce-ready curriculum with voluntary participation. When the curriculum was first offered in 1994, 13 percent of high school graduates earned the Academic Honors (Core 40) diploma; by 2003-04, this had risen to 65 percent. Building on successes to date, in 2005, the

legislature made the Core 40 the default curriculum for all students, effective for the high school graduating class of 2011. Also in 2011, it will become the admissions requirement for public four-year colleges in the state.

There is considerable discussion about aligning high school graduation requirements with college admissions requirements, but little alignment to date. Part of the problem is that half the states do not have statewide coursework requirements for college admissions. A recent ECS report compared detailed state high school graduation requirements with college admissions requirements and looked for “full alignment,” agreement on the number and the topics of courses, and “partial alignment,” agreement on the number of courses but not on the topics. ECS found that only three states are fully aligned on English requirements, two states on mathematics, one state on science, 14 states on social science, and none on foreign language requirements. Adding in partial alignment, there are 18 or fewer states with full or partial alignment in each subject area. This report found no indication of progress since 2002, based on a similar study conducted by the National Association of System Heads.

Even among the 25 states that offer a college-preparatory diploma, only four states align them with college admissions (California, Georgia, Kentucky, and Missouri), and three more (West Virginia, South Dakota, and Indiana) will do so in the next few years.

Concerns about “course credit inflation” have increased the attention being paid to high school course content, not just course titles. The National Center for Educational Accountability describes course credit inflation as substituting “orange drink” (a watered-down product) for “orange juice” (an advanced course where the content lives up to the title). This problem is greatest in schools attended by low-income and minority students where course titles may be changing to meet new requirements without sufficiently upgrading the content. Longitudinal studies from Texas provide some disturbing findings, including that 60 percent of low-income students who received course credit for Geometry and Algebra 2 failed a state exit exam covering Geometry and Algebra 1.

As more students are required to take advanced courses, many states are taking actions to assure that courses are not being watered down and that students are mastering the essential knowledge and skills. Twenty-six states have developed course-based standards and/or model course curricula, and five

additional states will be doing this in the future. Twelve states have taken another approach, developing end-of-course tests for at least some of the courses; eight more states plan to do so in the future.

ACT, Inc. and the Education Trust have collaborated on a project that identified the components of successful high-level college preparatory courses. They developed syllabi and course descriptions that can be used by districts as a starting point for evaluating present courses. The College Board has an initiative to review the content of Advanced Placement courses to make sure they meet the College Board-approved curriculum.

At the 2005 National Summit, the issue of aligning high school standards with real world expectations emerged as an important topic, and some progress is being made. The recent Achieve, Inc. survey found that to date, five states (California, Indiana, Nebraska, New York, and Wyoming) have completed the process of aligning their K-12 standards to postsecondary and business expectations, including validation by the business and higher education communities. Thirty more states have begun the process.

Several new national initiatives are focused on K-12 preparation, raising state-level discussion of the issues. As a result of the National Education Summit on High Schools, 22 states are working with Achieve, Inc. in the American Diploma Project Network. One focus area is the importance of raising graduation requirements to increase curricular rigor and improve preparation. Twenty-six states are participating in the National Governors Association’s (NGA) High School Honor States Grant Program to improve college-ready graduation rates. NGA is awarding grants to states to increase course rigor, expand participation in Advanced Placement Programs, and improve low-performing schools. Funded by the U.S. Department of Education, the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education is directing the State Scholars Initiative. This is a national program that uses business leaders to motivate students to complete a rigorous course of study in high school. Twenty-two states are participating. Finally, at the federal level, Academic Competitiveness Grants and SMART Grants go into effect this month. In order to qualify for these grants, students must have taken a recognized rigorous secondary curriculum, and 37 states to date have submitted plans to the U.S. Department of Education for defining a rigorous curriculum in their states.

Conclusion

Much action is occurring in the K-12 policy arena, with or without the involvement of the postsecondary community. To assure that the changes move in the right direction, higher education leaders must be proactive and involved. First and foremost, postsecondary education at the state and system level must provide essential information to K-12 leaders about (a) high school courses that are required for postsecondary admissions and (b) the nature of the knowledge and skills needed for postsecondary success—the standards and expectations that high school courses must address.

Higher education can and must do more. Colleges can offer advanced courses to high school students in locations where high schools do not offer a full academic curriculum, particularly in schools that serve low-income and minority students. They must prepare new teachers who can teach to the higher high school standards. They need to work with K-12 to provide early warning systems that identify high school students who are not on track for college-readiness, through programs such as California State University's Early Assessment Program. They need to coordinate data systems with K-12 and provide important feedback to high schools. All of these actions by higher education can provide a much-needed anchor to help guide the current wave of high school reform.

Resources

Achieve, Inc. Participating states in Achieve's American Diploma Project Network strive to assure that high school graduates are prepared for college and the workplace. *Closing the Expectations Gap* (2006) reports on progress states have made toward the goals of the National Education Summit on High Schools.
achieve.org

American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU). AASCU's 2005 report *Improving Alignment, Advancing Students: Demands and Opportunities for States, Systems, and Campuses* outlines issues and suggests some clear directions that higher education and state policy leaders can take to improve the success of students in the educational pipeline.
aascu.org/pdf/05_perspectives.pdf

Education Commission of the States. *Alignment of High School Graduation Requirements and State-Set College Admissions Requirements* (2006) presents detailed tables delineating statewide high school graduation requirements and college admissions requirements, alignment between the two, and alignment of honors/college-preparatory diploma requirements with college admissions requirements.
ecs.org/clearinghouse/68/60/6860.pdf

National Governors Association (NGA). NGA's High School Honor States Program is a governor-led initiative to improve college-ready graduation rates in participating states.
nga.org/portal/site/nga/menuitem.4096192acba1c8899cdcbbeb501010a0/

Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. The State Scholars Initiative brings business leaders into K-12 classrooms to motivate students to complete a rigorous course of study in high school.
wiche.edu/statescholars/