

Advancing College Readiness Through the American Diploma Project Network

By Michael Cohen and Jacqueline E. King

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In most states today, a student can complete all the courses required for high school graduation and college admissions, pass all required high school assessments, be admitted to a college or university—and still require remedial coursework to be ready for first-year college courses. In fact, nearly one-third of first-year college students are placed into remedial courses, a situation that substantially reduces their odds of earning a college degree.

In February 2005, Achieve and the National Governors Association sponsored a National Education Summit on High Schools, at which governors from 45 states, philanthropic and nonprofit organizations, corporate leaders, academics, policy experts, and leaders from both secondary and higher education agreed on a common policy goal: making the high school diploma a true indicator of readiness for both college and work. Participants concluded that, in today's economy, the old distinction between academic and career skills is obsolete. Young people need the same fundamental skills whether they pursue college or work immediately after high school, and most will eventually need at least some postsecondary education.

As a result of the summit, the governors and business and education leaders from 26 states have joined the American Diploma Project Network, a structured national initiative organized by Achieve to help states take concrete steps toward making the high school diploma a true indicator of college and work readiness (see map below). The American Council on Education (ACE), State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO), and the National Association of System Heads (NASHE) are working with Achieve to promote active higher education participation in this network. There is a high degree of consensus about the steps necessary to make this vision a reality. The challenge is that this work requires statewide buy-in and cooperation between secondary and higher education, with colleges and universities playing a major role. Higher education has a lot to gain: reduced remediation, better instruction at the high school and college levels, improved student performance, and higher college graduation rates, as well as recognition for contributing to a major public policy agenda. What then is required of higher education?

College and secondary education leaders in each state must work together to align high school graduation standards with expectations for success in entry-level college coursework. K–12 leaders in every state have established academic standards that have become the foundation for curriculum, testing, and accountability systems from elementary through high school. Unfortunately, few states carefully aligned those standards with the skills required for success in higher education. That is beginning to change.

With support from Achieve, college and high school faculty in 16 states have begun working together on new academic standards that define the knowledge and skills high school graduates must have in math, reading, and writing to succeed in college or the workplace, and more work will start this academic year. High school curriculum, course descriptions, and assessments, as well as college placement exams and first-year college course descriptions, can and should be aligned with these “Academic Standards for College and Work.” College faculty may initially resist the notion of a common set of entry-level standards across institutions, but once they begin to compare course syllabi, textbooks, and so forth, they typically find that 90 percent of the material is common to first-year math and English courses at all institutions and that the remaining 10 percent can be reconciled.

States must raise high school graduation requirements so that the courses students take

to earn a diploma are consistent with the prerequisite courses needed to attend college.

Based on its extensive research on college and work standards, Achieve recommends four years of rigorous English and math through Algebra II to be minimum requirements for a college- and work-ready high school diploma. Only 10 states currently mandate a set of college-preparatory courses for high school graduation, but another 10 states are working toward this goal (see “By the Numbers” on page 12). Public university systems can reinforce state efforts by working with K–12 officials to determine the right set of courses needed to succeed in higher education, and using these courses to establish course requirements for admission.

Statewide standards must drive not only coursework, but also assessment. The tests students take in high school must better measure the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in college. Proficiency on high school tests should mean that students are prepared for higher education. Leaders in a growing number of states are working to build more ambitious statewide high school assessments to better signal college readiness. Nine states in the American Diploma Project Network are entering into a compact to develop an Algebra II end-of-course assessment that will indicate readiness for college-level math. The California State University system and the California Department of Education worked together to add questions to the state’s 11th-grade English and math assessments so these tests also could be used as college placement exams. In each of these cases, students who don’t score well find out early that they aren’t ready for college-level work, and have the opportunity to fill in any gaps while still in high school. Higher education leaders have an important role to play in supporting test development efforts and adding credibility to the exams by using them for college placement decisions.

There must be an information feedback loop between postsecondary education and high schools that drives improvement in both sectors. In order for high schools to improve, they need information from colleges about how well students are performing, particularly in their first-year coursework. Likewise, by sharing their challenges and successes in implementing a college-ready curriculum, secondary educators can help higher education anticipate student needs for remediation, refine first-year courses, and improve teacher preparation and professional development.

Promising Practices

This is a challenging agenda, but some states have already made significant progress and can help others identify and overcome both political and practical issues. This special supplement to ACE’s *The Presidency* magazine features articles and resources to help higher education leaders advance this agenda in their states.

One pioneer in the effort to more seamlessly link higher education to elementary/secondary education—former University System of Georgia chancellor Stephen Portch—shares the lessons he has learned about leading a collaborative effort with K–12 (see page 4). Portch is joined by three current higher education leaders who have been in the vanguard of reform—Stan Jones, Charles Reed, and Mark Rosenberg share their insights about both the work that is required and the payoff of this work for higher education (see pages 6, 8, and 10). To help readers gauge progress in their states, “By the Numbers” (see page 12) features data on the status of efforts to implement the American Diploma Project agenda in the 26-state network. Finally, we include a variety of resources for further reflection, discussion, and action, including a wide variety of meetings and publications that ACE, SHEEO, NASH, and Achieve have planned for the next two years to help higher education leaders learn more about this reform agenda and implement needed changes in their states (see the back cover).

A high school diploma needs to mean more than it does today; it should signal that students are ready to succeed in both college and the modern workplace. There is a mandate for change, but states cannot make progress on the agenda we have outlined without the active support of higher education. David Spence, former provost of the California State University system and

an architect of reform efforts, sums up the situation best: “I don’t think the high schools can go any further without higher education being clear about their college-readiness standards. It’s time for higher education to step up to the plate and be absolutely clear what it means, across a whole state, to be college-ready.”¹

Note:

1. Callan, P. M., Finney, J. E., Kirst, M. W., Usdan, M. D., & Venezia, A. (2006). *Claiming common ground: State policymaking for improving college readiness and success*. San Jose, CA: Institute for Educational Leadership, National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, Stanford Institute for Higher Education Research.