

Involving Higher Education in Raising Expectations and Achievement Levels

By Stanley G. Jones

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Access and opportunity have always been the hallmarks of higher education. Today, more students are enrolling in collegiate programs than ever before. Unfortunately, only 55 percent of full-time students seeking a bachelor's degree complete that degree within six years.¹ The reality is that many students may leave college before earning an educational credential.

Research reveals that a rigorous academic curriculum is the single most important factor in determining a student's success in college. Unfortunately, only a handful of states require high school students to pursue advanced courses in core academic subjects in order to graduate. In nearly every state, students may earn a high school diploma and be unprepared for success in college.

Success will be realized only if the state's entire education system is geared to prepare and enable all students to achieve at high levels. I would like to offer the following recommendations on how the higher education sector can help raise expectations and achievement levels:

Be active in efforts to align high school requirements with college expectations. A decade ago, Indiana K–12, higher education, and business leaders recognized that the state would face severe economic hardship unless more young people were ready for college and the demands of the global workplace. Low-skilled, high-paying jobs in the manufacturing sector were becoming extinct. The “new economy” jobs we wanted to bring to Indiana demanded a workforce with greater skills and knowledge. In response, Indiana began its Core 40 college-preparatory curriculum. Although the curriculum was voluntary, the percentage of Indiana students graduating from high school with the Core 40 diploma skyrocketed from 13 percent to 65 percent in 10 years. Over that same period, the state moved from 34th to 10th in the nation in the percentage of high school seniors going directly to college.

Advocate for the college-prep curriculum to be the default curriculum for all high school students. All students should be enrolled automatically into a challenging college-prep curriculum. This approach communicates a clear expectation for what courses students should take to be prepared for college. After 12 years of Core 40 as a voluntary curriculum, Indiana has legislated Core 40 to be the default curriculum. Rather than having students opt in to Core 40, they now will be assumed in and have to opt out.

Align college entrance standards with high school exit standards. College faculty members regularly complain about the lack of student preparation, but their institutions continue to accept unprepared students and enroll them in remedial courses. Core 40 as a minimum college admission standard first happened voluntarily and then by law for all of Indiana's public four-year colleges. Although the higher education community enthusiastically supported Core 40 as the high school exit requirement, it took time and persuasion for them to see the wisdom of adopting Core 40 as a minimum college entrance standard.

Assist in aligning high school standards to courses and assessing student performance. Alignment provides consistency, high quality, and rigor to the high school courses. Independent third-party organizations (Education Trust, Fordham Foundation, Achieve, ACT, and the College Board) and Indiana's college faculty have provided critical assistance to the alignment process. Their involvement has brought credibility to the dialogue.

Colleges also can assist in developing end-of-course assessments. Indiana's end-of-course tests in Algebra II and 11th-grade English have shown widely uneven proficiency levels throughout the state, as well as unacceptably poor performance. These early indicators for schools help identify and assist students who aren't yet ready for college.

Align financial aid with rigorous course taking. Indiana enhanced its need-based financial aid policy by awarding low-income students with additional financial aid if they graduated with Core 40. Not only

are Core 40 students enrolling and succeeding in college at higher rates, but also the combination of financial aid incentives and the required enrollment in Core 40 has allowed us to reach more and more first-generation students.

Create a deliberate and ongoing communications effort. Colleges must be clear and consistent about what it takes to succeed in higher education and communicate that message widely. Many educators and parents believed that some students did not have the skills to succeed in Core 40. We argued that students who were not part of this curriculum were inevitably on track to low-paying and dead-end jobs. We explained that young people would be more engaged in school and motivated to learn if high schools wiped out low-level courses that reinforced low expectations and contributed to behavioral problems. This effort has helped families better understand what is required for success and has empowered them to raise expectations for their children.

Publicly report progress and take greater responsibility for the performance of students. Higher education should report to high schools on how their graduates perform so the high schools can use that information to strengthen the academic experience of the next class of students. New efforts, such as Indiana's electronic high school transcript initiative, hold great promise in making cross-sector reporting possible.

Drastic changes must be made if the next generation of students is to be successful. Not surprisingly, the states moving the furthest and the fastest to close the expectations gap are those that have effectively overcome the traditional barriers between the K–12 and postsecondary worlds.

Note:

1. National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS). NCES, IPEDS Graduate Survey, 2005.