

FACT SHEET: WHAT IS THE EXPECTATIONS GAP?

What is the expectations gap? The “expectations gap” is the disconnect between what the K-12 and postsecondary education sectors each expect from high school graduates. This disconnect hinders many students’ smooth transitions from high school into credit-bearing college work, and decreases their chances of being adequately prepared for the rigor of higher education and attaining a postsecondary degree (ACT, 2004; Venezia and Kirst 2003).

Why is there an expectations gap? Historically, the K-12 system in virtually every state uses a variety of policy levers to define expectations for student learning, including academic standards, curriculum, course-taking requirements and high school accountability indicators. The policies governing high school expectations were often set by states without much attention to the requirements for success in postsecondary education. As a result, many students who take all of the courses required to earn a high school diploma and pass graduation exams, discover shortly after they graduate that they are not adequately prepared for college level work or for the 21st century workplace. Further, because academic standards for high school students often do not reflect college admissions and placement requirements, students get conflicting signals from high schools and colleges about what constitutes adequate preparation. Thus, the nation’s high school system and higher education institutions are dramatically, but equally impacted by this disconnect.

What are the results of the expectations gap? This expectations gap between high school preparation and college success has led to startling outcomes:

- Only one-half of students graduate from high school having taken a college preparatory curriculum (NCES, 2007).
- Approximately 28 percent of high school graduates who enroll in a postsecondary institution require at least one remedial course in their first-year. This rate varies widely by institution type and selectivity, with remediation rates in some community colleges averaging 70 percent (NCES, 2003; Willet, 2007).
- Students who need remediation are much less likely to graduate with a postsecondary credential or degree (Adelman, 2006).

What is the bottom line? A key step in improving preparation for postsecondary education is aligning expectations for what high school students must know when they graduate from high school with the knowledge and skills students need to enter and succeed in credit-bearing courses. K-12 and postsecondary faculty coordination, commitment, and effort will help prepare more students for success in postsecondary education and beyond, helping the United States remain competitive in the global economy.