

Research on New College Students

Achieve.org

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Over the past decade, states have led the national movement to raise standards, improve teaching and learning, and hold schools more accountable for student success. Standards are in place in every state, but our work is not done. As the demands of the economy continue to increase, we must ensure that standards keep pace with them. Currently, far too many young people leave our schools without the skills they need to compete in college or the workplace.

Part of the problem is that, until recently, state officials rarely worked with college and business leaders to define exactly what skills and information actually signify college and work readiness. As a result, there is no consistency among college and university admissions, course placement, and job-hiring policies. Young people don't know what courses to take to ensure they are ready.

To close the expectations gap and increase the odds for student success after high school, states need to create better data management tools to track student performance over time, develop and communicate high school graduation and college-entrance requirements that meet the demands of the real world, and encourage shared accountability for student success.

Specifically, states need to commit to four policy actions:

- Align high school standards and assessments with the knowledge and skills required for success after high school.
- Require all high school graduates to take challenging courses that actually prepare them for life after high school.
- Streamline the assessment system so that the tests students take in high school also can serve as admissions and placement tests for college and hiring for work.
- Hold high schools accountable for graduating students who are ready for college or careers, and hold postsecondary institutions accountable for students' success once enrolled.

New college students say they weren't prepared to do college-level work.

College students tend to be disappointed in their high school education once they start classes and find out they are not prepared for the level of work expected of them. Those who took higher-level courses in high school did feel more prepared for college.

College students often feel unprepared for college-level work:

- Only 14 percent of college students feel that they are generally able to do what is expected of them in college. (Achieve)
- Well over half (56 percent) of all college students say that high school left them unprepared for the work and study habits expected in college. (Achieve)

- 38 percent of those with a degree say their high school teachers and classes should have done a lot more to prepare them for college-level work. In fact, 47 percent say high school teachers made it easy to do just enough to get by. (Public Agenda)

Students who faced higher expectations and took more challenging courses in high school are much more likely to feel prepared:

- College students who took Algebra II or higher-level math courses in high school are more than twice as likely to feel prepared for the math they are expected to do in college (60 percent feel well prepared). (Achieve)
- College students, who had to write a lot in high school, including term papers and research reports, feel more prepared for college-level writing (79 percent). (Achieve)
- Students who faced high expectations in high school are much more likely to feel well prepared for the expectations of college (80 percent) than are college students who faced moderate (58 percent) or low expectations (37 percent). (Achieve)
- Students who faced high expectations are much less likely to take remedial classes in college (only 27 percent have taken a remedial class) than those who faced low expectations (50 percent have taken a remedial class). (Achieve)

Students leave college early because the work is too difficult:

- Nearly half (48 percent) of those who left college early say they had gaps in their preparation for college courses when they were taking them. More than one-third (35 percent) of those who withdraw from college identify the challenge of the academic work as the reason they left school. (Achieve)

If high school expectations were raised, students would have worked harder to better prepare themselves for college:

- Knowing what they know today about the expectations of college, 65 percent of respondents would have worked harder and applied themselves more. (Achieve)
- Knowing what they know today, if college students could do high school over again, 62 percent would take harder courses. (Achieve)
- If high schools raised standards, graduates say they would be able to meet them. Four out of five college students (82 percent) say that they would have worked harder if their schools had demanded more of students, set higher academic standards and raised expectations of how much coursework and studying would be necessary to earn a diploma. (Achieve)

High schools should offer more challenging courses:

- 94 percent of college students believe that providing opportunities to take more challenging courses, such as honors, Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate classes, would improve their preparation for life after graduation, including 75 percent who say that this would improve things a great deal. (Achieve)

For additional information on the surveys cited in this study, please visit <http://www.achieve.org/node/576>

Achieve, Inc., is a bipartisan, non-profit organization that helps states raise academic standards, improve assessments and strengthen accountability to prepare all young people for postsecondary education, work and citizenship.