

The College Ladder: Linking Secondary and Postsecondary Education for  
Success for All Students

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American Youth Policy Forum

September 2006

<http://www.aypf.org/publications/The%20College%20Ladder/TheCollegeLadderlinkingsecondaryandpostsecondaryeducation.pdf>

Much has been written about the failure of many American high schools to adequately prepare a large percentage of young people for college, work, and citizenship. The most prevalent figures state that only 70% of students nationally complete high school (Barton, 2005, p.3); of those, only 53% enter college directly from high school and only 35% earn a degree (Adelman, 2006b, p. 11).

Since the current design of high school is effective for only a small percentage of youth, it makes sense for communities to offer other options and choices to help youth succeed. One option to increase rigor and motivate students that has been gaining favor is to allow high school students to take college level courses. Arrangements that allow high school students to participate in college classes come in many forms and designs, including dual enrollment, Advanced Placement (AP) courses, Tech Prep, and middle and early college high schools. They share important common elements of strong academics keyed to postsecondary standards, increased student engagement through interesting classes and/or attendance on a college campus, and exposure to adult expectations and milieu, and often are accompanied with supports to ensure student success. From our perspective, these programs are high value programs, because they provide many of the important elements that have been missing from high school for most students: challenge, engagement, access to the adult world, and support.

The College Ladder: Linking Secondary and Postsecondary Education for Success for All Students is the result of a two-year effort to identify, summarize, and analyze schools, programs, and policies that link secondary and postsecondary education to help students earn college credit or take college-level courses. To be inclusive of the variety of models and programs that link secondary and postsecondary education, AYPF will use the term Secondary-Post-Secondary Learning Options (SPLOs). AYPF focused on identifying SPLOs serving first-generation, low income, and low-performing students, students with disabilities, and underrepresented minorities.

For those young people who are able to graduate from high school, entrance to and persistence in postsecondary education continues to be a problem. Of high school graduates, about 66% enroll in some kind of postsecondary education institution immediately following high school, but only about 25% of them earn a degree (Education Trust, 2001, pp. 8-9). As with high school graduation rates, students from various backgrounds and racial/ethnic groups enter postsecondary education and experience success at widely differing rates:

- The college-going rate for Asian students is 91.4%; for White students 79.4%; and for African-American and Latino students 69.5% and 70%, respectively (Adelman, 2004).

- At four-year institutions, only about two-thirds of all entering students earn a bachelor's degree within six years, and the success rates vary for different groups, with 52.1% of African-American and 45.4% of Latino undergraduates persisting to a degree compared to 67.6% of White and 67.9% of Asian students (Adelman, 2006a, p. 92).
- Students from families in the top income quartile are about seven times as likely as students from families in the bottom income quartile to earn a bachelor's degree (Education Trust, 2001, p. 9).

AYPF undertook an extensive literature review to identify research, evaluations, and studies on SPLOs. Programs in this compendium either have a third party evaluation or have participated in a semi-rigorous data collection effort. Twenty-two programs were identified as meeting our criteria and have been categorized by program type described. Program categories include Dual Enrollment, Tech Prep, Middle/Early College High Schools, Programs Serving Disadvantaged Youth and College Access Programs.

The evaluations included in this compendium considered a variety of outcomes at both the secondary and postsecondary levels. Only a limited number of the included evaluations have longitudinal data; instead, most have outcome data at a specific point in time, such as at high school graduation or after one semester or one year of postsecondary education. While these outcomes are useful, they do not provide a complete understanding of the long-term effects of participation in a SPLO. None of the evaluations in the compendium considers all the outcomes identified, and most only collected data on three to six outcome measures. Moreover, very few (approximately 15%) of the included evaluations were able to compare these outcomes to a control group to determine statistical significance.

### **Conclusion**

There is evidence to support the effectiveness of SPLOs, yet as the field grows, the research must become more rigorous in order to answer additional specific questions on who benefits and in what ways. We learned that SPLOs provide students access to rigorous academics, exposure to the world of college, and an opportunity to imagine a different future—many of the things that are missing from their high school experience. Although we have not answered all the questions we originally posed about SPLOs, we can say for certain that SPLOs provide students access to rigorous academics, exposure to the world of college, and an opportunity to imagine a different future—many of the things otherwise missing from their high school experience. For these reasons, SPLOs should be included in the range of options that communities and educators make available to young people. SPLOs are improving outcomes for high school-aged youth, and continue to build a strong track record of success.

For these reasons, SPLOs should be included in the range of options that communities and educators make available to young people. SPLOs, while in need of further data to measure their success, are indeed improving outcomes for high school-aged youth, and continue to build a strong track record of success.