

Finishing College

The Facts that Most Influence Success

School quality is the most likely predictor that a student will or will not attain his bachelor's degree. The content of a child's high school curriculum has everything to do with college success. This conclusion comes from a unique U.S. Department of Education Report, *Answers in the Tool Box: Academic Intensity, Attendance Patterns, and Bachelor's Degree Attainment*.

In addition to the quality of the high school curriculum, two other elements influence whether someone will complete college—persistence and completion, and multi-institutional attendance.

The High School Curriculum

High schools are supposed to prepare students to enter college ready to learn, but quality of curriculum varies from school to school. The rigor and quality of courses taken in high school is a strong factor in determining the success a student will have in college.

Universities generally do not look at the rigor, level, or quality of the curriculum that an applicant has endured. Instead, they rely on class rank, and grade point averages, which are relative to a school and individual teachers and, therefore, are of little real value. For example, a student could have a GPA of 3.6 and rank in the top 40% of her class, and still not have taken an algebra 2 class, a laboratory science, or 3 years of a foreign language. The bottom line is that not all high schools offer the same opportunities to each student. Students from rural areas, working class students, and minority students are more often affected by schools that do not offer the advanced courses needed to prepare them for college. A student can graduate with a high grade point average, high class rank, and come to college in need of remediation.

The new study by Clifford Adelman of the U.S. Department of Education found that students with a rigorous academic background previous to college tend to complete bachelors' degrees with more frequency than those who do not. Rigorous is defined as: having four units of English (no remedial classes), four units of math (no remedial math classes), three or more science units (two of which should be lab science units), three or more years of social science/history units, two or more units of a foreign language, and a half unit of computer science. The study concludes, "No matter what the outcome, curriculum intensity and quality holds the strongest relationships with that outcome while class rank/GPA holds comparatively weak relationships."

Using demographic data, it is clear that the lessons of providing rigorous programs apply to minorities as well. Black and Latino students who had a rigorous high school curriculum attained bachelor's degrees 73% and 79% of the time, respectively. Judged only on their test scores or grade averages, many of these same kids may not have been selected into a post-secondary program. Black students who were chosen by test scores only graduated 67% of the time, Latinos only 66% of the time. Black students chosen by grades point averages and class rank only graduated 59% of the time and Latino students only 57% of the time. It is clear that when GPA, class rank, and test scores are the only college entrance criteria, minorities suffer. The corollary is often true. Students who have high-test scores and GPAs, do not necessarily have commensurate knowledge. Colleges would be well advised to review the depth of an applicant's high school curriculum for better gauging their aptitude in higher education.

Students who take advanced courses, such as Advanced Placement tests, are less likely to need remediation or tutoring. The more successful a student is in college, the more likely he will complete his program and graduate. High schools should raise the level of course offerings of all students. Schools can make more appropriately target their resources to making these changes that result in greater student achievement.

Persistence and Completion

How long it takes a student to get his degree also influences his success. While some students may take longer to get there, a consistent attendance pattern in higher education will contribute to attaining a bachelor's degree. According to *Answers in the Tool Box*, colleges and universities that end remedial programs and instead switch the burden on high school or two year institutions to prepare students for a four-year program, are helping students better to succeed. This would also put pressure on high schools to offer more rigorous curricula, or allow high school students to take advanced courses at community colleges if a school does not offer them.

Attendance

Finally, a student that is given a wide variety of options to choose from is more likely to attend, stay in, and be successful in higher education. According to *Answers in the Tool Box*, "The increasing complexity of attendance patterns is one of the most significant developments in higher education of our time." Students are less attached to institutions and view their interactions with them as doing business. Consider that in 1972, 60% of students stayed at one university for the duration of their degree program. By 1993, that number dropped to 47%. Attendance of two or more colleges is now double what it was twenty years ago. Convenience, location, courses, and price are important factors to the many students who are filling their under graduates portfolios with courses from two or more institutions.

Conclusions

As reformers long ago concluded, students respond well to high expectations. College completion has more to do with preparation than a family's background. Students that have a rigorous academic background come to college more prepared, are

less likely to need remedial help, and are more likely to finish a degree program. High schools must improve their curriculum by offering advanced level courses, or give students the option to study these courses at a community college. Raise the bar—and college will gain real meaning among more students, and help us to close our persistent gaps among the races.

For more information, see Clifford Adelman's report, *Answers in the Tool Box: Academic Intensity, Attendance Patterns, and Bachelor's Degree Attainment*. For related information on K-12 solutions, visit the Standards & Curriculum pages of the CER website at www.edreform.com.

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