

## Transition to College

The belief that young people need educational achievement sufficient to succeed in the labor market has driven state and local policy in New York for more than a half-century. The question: what level of educational achievement is sufficient? The answer: not just a high school diploma.

“Tonight I ask every American to commit to at least one year or more of higher education or career training,” President Barack Obama declared in February. “This can be a community college or a four-year school, vocational training or an apprenticeship. But whatever the training may be, every American will need to get more than a high school diploma.”

President Obama was reflecting the consensus among most employers and workforce experts that the American economy has fundamentally changed. The well-paid jobs once available to high school graduates have been automated or offshored out of existence. Taking advantage of this simple insight requires a retooling of high schools and the whole range of postsecondary opportunities, especially colleges.

While New York’s poor graduation rate (34<sup>th</sup> highest in the nation) is well known for its disastrous impact on the state’s workforce readiness and standard of living, another educational sinkhole has received much less attention: lack of college readiness among New York’s high school graduates.

Data from the New York State Education Department show that about six out of ten high school graduates attend college in New York State.<sup>1</sup> That’s pretty high, especially combined with another 13% of graduates who attend out-of-state colleges. But the track record after high school is less inspiring:

- **Community colleges:** Of those first-time students who attend community colleges in New York, almost half must take remedial courses. Not surprisingly, only 23% of all students who seek an Associates Degree graduate in three years; 9% more after 10 years; and 15% transfer to another college to obtain a degree. A decade after first enrollment, fewer than half (47%) of all students who first enroll in college to obtain an Associates Degree achieve one.
- **Four-year colleges and universities:** Of those first-time students who enroll at a public four-year institution, one in eight takes at least one remedial course. About 63% of all students who seek a Bachelors Degree graduate in six years; only 1% more after 10 years; and 12% transfer to another college to obtain a degree. A

---

<sup>1</sup> *An Overview of Higher Education in New York State*, Office of Research and Information Systems, New York State Education Department, April 2009. This publication is also the source of the bulleted data on community colleges and four-year colleges and universities.

decade after first enrollment, three out of every four (77%) students who first enroll in college to obtain a Bachelors Degree obtains one.

In short, more than 100,000 recent high school graduates enter college each year, but a surprisingly large number of them drop out without a degree. The lesson: New York needs to target student success in college for dramatic reforms.

SCAA reviewed three key areas to determine what New York is doing –or should be doing – to improve student success in college:

1. College readiness at the high school level
2. Basic skills reform
3. Supports for student success

**College Readiness:** “Isn’t it time that we hold high schools accountable for graduating underprepared students?” asks Eduardo Marti, President of Queensborough College.<sup>2</sup> It’s a fair question. The large population of college freshmen requiring remediation speaks to a lack of preparation at the high school level. In some cases, these high school students simply received a sub-standard education. More often, however, high school teachers are simply not teaching from curricula that align with college-level expectations.

The State Education Department is currently collaborating with representatives from higher education, especially those responsible for teacher education, to review and update the State’s Learning Standards. This will be a lengthy process, but the end result will be clearer guidance for high school teachers on improving their students’ college readiness.<sup>3</sup> Many school districts are also expanding their Early College programs, which enable students to earn college credit while in high school.

Another initiative that holds promise is a planned expansion of the State Unit Record system from high school to college. Currently, New York’s educational policymakers can track any student from first grade to high school graduation. Within the next several years, they will gain the capacity to track students to college graduation as well. That will create an intriguing opportunity. College Summit, a Washington-based nonprofit group, argues that “schools need to stop seeing high school graduation as their ultimate goal and start seeing themselves as a launch pad for college and career success.”<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, they propose rewarding high schools based on the rate at which graduates enroll in college and make it to their sophomore year. This “college proficiency” rate measure may be an idea whose time has come.

---

<sup>2</sup> “The Challenges of Remedial Education: Views of 3 Presidents,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 27, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Johanna Duncan-Poitier, Senior Deputy Commissioner of Education – P-16, New York State Education Department, Update Letter, Fall 2008.

<sup>4</sup> J.B. Schramm and Shirley Sagawa, *High Schools as Launch Pads: How College-Going Culture Improves Graduation Rates in Low-Income High Schools*, College Summit, December 2008.

What's more, readiness at the high school level extends beyond the walls of high school itself. In 2007, 30,000 New Yorkers passed their General Equivalency Degree, or GED, tests. Six out of ten said that they wanted to take their GED credential to college. Are they ready? In most cases, no. The GED does not prepare students for college study. But if out-of-school students had the option of preparing for a "GED Plus" test aligned with college expectations, they would have a better chance. In addition, pre-collegiate bridge programs have proven very effective with GED-holding students. Such programs are already operating at LaGuardia Community College in Queens and Erie Community College in Buffalo, and the State Education Department is working to create more.

**Basic skills reform:** College leaders, especially those operating community colleges, have reason to criticize high schools for low student success rates at their institutions. Under the state's open-access policy, anyone with a high school degree or GED can attend a community college, including underprepared students. But the colleges also bear responsibility. Almost half of all community college students take remedial courses in New York, and these students are far more likely to drop out. The reasons are understandable. Remedial courses use up financial aid eligibility without providing college credit or occupational experience, and thrust students into demoralizing classroom settings. The year or more that it takes to complete remedial sequences can feel like an endless treadmill.

Other states have overhauled their remedial and developmental education systems in promising ways:

- California: The Community College Chancellor's Office has launched the Basic Skills Initiative to nurture innovative developmental education practices.<sup>5</sup> One of the most impressive initiatives is the Digital Bridge Academy, which incorporates students into learning communities, where they take credit-bearing courses on career and educational planning, information technology and, most notably, a primary research project on a social justice issue. One evaluator found that DBA students enter at pre-collegiate reading levels, yet subsequently pass credit-bearing English classes for which they were "conventionally considered incapable."<sup>6</sup>
- Washington State: The state community college system established the Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) program at ten colleges, later expanding the program statewide. I-BEST pairs adult basic education instructors in the classroom with occupational instructors to help students learn effectively and of equal importance, connect their literacy instruction to their career plans. Evaluations have found "dramatic differences in the success rate of I-BEST students."<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Derek V. Price and Brandon Roberts, *Improving Student Success by Strengthening Developmental Education in Community Colleges: The Role of State Policy*, Working Poor Families Project, Winter 2008-09.

<sup>6</sup> Norena Norton Badway, Higher Education Evaluation and Research Group, as quoted in Elizabeth Redden, "Rethinking Remedial Education," *Inside Higher Ed*, January 29, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Price and Roberts *ibid*.

- Illinois: Educational leaders in Illinois are focusing on pre-collegiate bridge programs that provide boot camp instruction for students just prior to enrollment. The state is restructuring community college reimbursement to support the initiative.

New York State lags far behind in these areas. Other than a handful of pilot programs, there are no systemwide initiatives to improve basic reading, writing and math skills. As a result, dropout rates remain high, wasting millions of dollars in operating aid to colleges and financial aid to students, and depriving employers of the skilled workers they so urgently need. This would be a high-yield area for future reforms. New York should fund innovative models for basic skills instruction, recognizing that any additional spending will more than pay for itself in improved graduation rates, especially at the community college level.

**Supports for student success:** Studies have found that a crucial factor in improving graduation rates is the support that the student receives outside the classroom. For example, first generation college students (those students whose parents and grandparents did not attend college) have relatively low graduation rates, in large part because they do not understand the culture of college: managing their time, visiting a professor after class, using a library, and other aspects of college life that come naturally to children of white-collar families.

The largest obstacle to providing support for students in New York is the state's financing system. The state provides "foundation aid" based on the number of students who enroll in a college, not the number who graduate. This financing model fails to reward colleges for improving graduation rates, which discourages college administrators from investing in supports for student success. Other states have set aside performance funding dollars for colleges that achieve high graduation rates, adjusted for student demographics. New York should consider this step as well.

CUNY has taken a leadership role in improving supports for student success, particularly with its CUNY ASAP program, in which freshmen enroll full-time as part of a "learning cohort," receive expanded counseling services, and assistance in purchasing and affording textbooks. The program has been criticized for excluding students who require remediation, but it offers a potentially effective model for organizing student success supports.

By the year 2019, the number of students graduating high school in New York is projected to drop by 16%, at the very same time that the baby boomer generation will be retiring and leaving the workforce. So New York's failure to expand educational opportunity for high school graduates will not be felt only by those students – it will be felt by employers, taxpayers, and all the citizens of New York State. State and local action to improve student success in college is urgently needed. This year would not be a minute too soon.