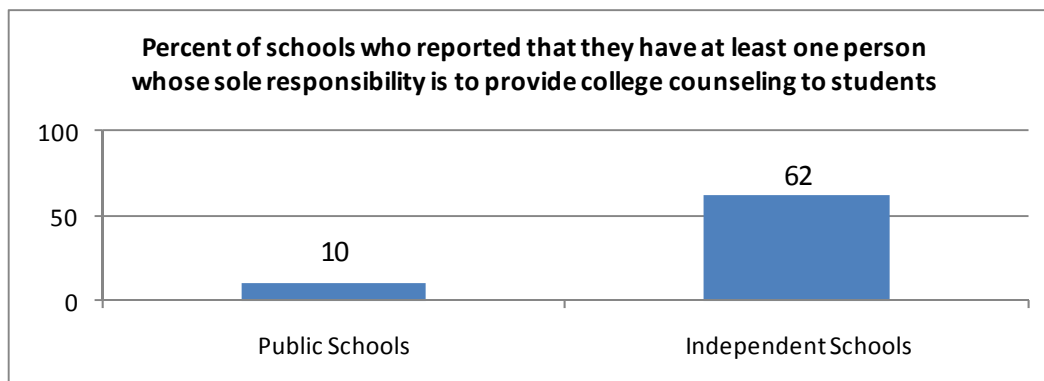


October 2009 – Reality Check: Making Sure Your High School Students are Adequately Prepared for College

Now that your students are enrolled in college-preparatory high school programs, they are firmly on the path to college; right? Well, not always. Not all college-prep high school programs are created equal, and the likelihood that students apply to and enroll in four-year colleges is highly dependent on the type of college-prep high schools they attend and the support they receive while in high school. Students who attend the most academically rigorous high schools (e.g., independent schools) will generally need a lot less college-preparatory support than students who enroll in a college-prep tract within a large comprehensive public school. Academically rigorous independent and/or small high schools generally have more intensive college-preparatory support services, exemplified by a lower student to college counselor ratio. The average student to college counselor ratio at public schools is 358:1, while the average student to college counselor ratio at independent schools is 300:1 and the average student to college counselor ratio at large comprehensive schools with more than 2000 students is twice as large (531:1) as the student to college counselor ratio at schools with fewer than 500 students (258:1). Many more independent schools have counselors who are devoted solely to providing college counseling, whereas counselors at large comprehensive public schools have a host of other responsibilities. For example, only 10% of public schools report that they have at least one person (part-time or full-time) whose sole responsibility is to provide college counseling to students (see Figure 1).¹

Figure 1:



If your students are attending college-prep programs within large comprehensive public high schools, what do you need to do to make sure these students are, in reality, being prepared well for four-year colleges? What are the red flags you should watch for? And what can you do to support your students if you discover that they aren't being adequately prepared for four-year colleges? The following charts summarize some of the issues to consider; the research that supports why this issue is important or of concern; and action steps you can take to address each issue.

¹ Hawkins, D. & Clinedinst, M. (2007) *State of College Admission*. Arlington, VA: National Association for College Admission Counseling.

Components of a rigorous, college-prep high school experience	Issues of concern/red flags	Relevant data & research	Support needed/steps to take
<p>Enrollment in a rigorous college-preparatory core curriculum (e.g., 4 years of English; 4 years of math, culminating in pre-calculus or calculus; 3-4 years of lab science; 3-4 years of social studies; 3-4 years of the same foreign language)²</p>	<p>When a college-prep curriculum is not the default curriculum (as often happens in large comprehensive public high schools), students can easily be counseled out of college-prep courses or not be given sufficient information to select all of the appropriate and necessary courses to be well-prepared for college (e.g., they don't necessarily know that they should be taking 3-4 years of a lab science).</p> <p>In California, for example, many public high schools' graduation requirements are not aligned with the eligibility requirements for California's public universities (i.e., the A-G requirements), therefore students can fulfill all requirements to graduate high school and still fall short of being eligible to apply to a University of California (UC) or California State University (CSU) campus.</p>	<p>According to 2006 survey data from the Southern Regional Education Board, only 24% of 8th grade students surveyed met with school personnel and parents to plan their course of study in high school and 21% of 9th grade students reported not knowing the course requirements for high school graduation.³</p> <p>Another survey of middle school students showed that even though 92% of middle school students surveyed aspire to go to college, only 32% of students felt as though they had quite a bit or a great deal of information about choosing the high school courses that will prepare them for college.⁴</p> <p>In 2008, only 34% of California's graduating seniors completed the A-G courses required for entrance into a UC or CSU campus and only 23% of Hispanic graduates and African-American graduates completed the required A-G courses for UC/CSU entrance.⁵</p> <p>"Parents of underrepresented students are less likely than other parents to know about the repercussions of current course choices on future class placements, to know about the differences between high school curricular tracks, or to feel entitled to request changes to higher-level courses for their children. Student and parental confusion about courses can be compounded when high schools offer a wide variety of courses, which include non-college-preparatory classes."⁶</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Track students' courses & grades closely to ensure they are taking a rigorous college-prep core curriculum. • Provide guidance and training to students and families about what courses to take now and in the future. • Advocate for students and teach students how to advocate for themselves, so that students know whom at the high school to talk to (and are comfortable talking to these counselors/ staff) so they are placed in high-level, college-prep courses. • Teach families how to advocate for their children.

² Though there is no one standardized college-prep curriculum, most researchers and practitioners agree that these courses, at minimum, are necessary for students to be prepared for four-year colleges. For more information, see California's A-G requirements; Indiana's "Core 40" Curriculum; the State Scholars Initiative; ACT's *Rigor at Risk*; and Southern Regional Education Board's *High Schools That Work*.

³ Bottoms, G. & Timberlake, A. (2007) *Giving Students a Chance to Achieve: Getting Off to a Fast & Successful Start in Grade Nine*. Southern Regional Education Board.

⁴ NASSP/PDK (2007) *A Voice from the Middle: Highlights of the 2007 NASSP/PDK Middle School Student Poll*.

⁵ California Dept of Education Dataquest - <http://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>

⁶ Vargas, J. (2004) *College Knowledge: Addressing Information Barriers to College*. Boston, MA: The Education Resources Institute.

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Enrollment in AP courses & taking AP exams	<p>Even where AP classes are offered, if it's not a part of the school culture to make sure AP courses are accessible to all students, it may be difficult for students to enroll in AP classes (e.g., because there's not enough room in the classes or because the culture of the school is such that AP classes are "reserved" for only some students).</p> <p>Students should take the AP exams for the AP classes in which they are enrolled. If students enrolled in AP classes are not taking the exams, one should question the rigor of the AP classes and the degree to which students are being adequately prepared for college-level work.</p>	<p>Minority students, particularly African-American students, are underrepresented in AP participation. While African-American students made up 14.4 % of the graduating class of 2008, African-American students made up only 7.8% of the population of students taking AP exams.⁷</p> <p>Students who take AP courses <i>and exams</i> outperform students who take just AP courses (in terms of college GPA and four-year college graduation rates).⁸</p> <p>Earning a "3" or higher on an AP exam is strongly predictive of a student's ability to earn a bachelor's degree.⁹ Earning a "1" or "2" on AP exams is not as strongly predictive of college success, but researchers found that even when students score just a "1" or "2" on an AP exam, they still develop stronger content knowledge than students who did not take AP courses.¹⁰</p> <p>Colleges report that the most important factor in making admissions decisions is students' participation and performance in college-prep courses (including AP, IB, dual enrollment courses).¹¹</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Because college admissions officers are looking for students who maximize what is available to them, encourage students to take as many AP classes & exams as possible. • Advocate for students (and teach students to advocate for themselves) to be placed in AP classes. • If the high school offers only a limited amount of AP classes, encourage students to take college credit classes at local colleges (i.e., dual enrollment).

⁷ *The Fifth Annual AP Report to the Nation* (2009). The College Board.

⁸ Hargrove, Godin & Dodd (2008). *College Outcomes Comparison by AP and Non-AP High School Experiences*. The College Board.

⁹ Dougherty, C. Mellor, L., & Jian, S. (2005). *The Relationship Between Advanced Placement and College Graduation*. National Center for Educational Accountability

¹⁰ Gonzalez, E. O'Connor, K. & Miles, J. (2001). *How Well do Advanced Placement Students Perform on the TIMSS Advanced Mathematics and Physics Tests?* The International Study Center, Lynch School of Education, Boston College

¹¹ Hawkins, D. & Clinedinst, M. (2007) *State of College Admission*. Arlington, VA: National Association for College Admission Counseling.

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Classes that are rigorous both in name & content	<p>Just because a course is named “AP,” “honors” or “accelerated” does not guarantee that it is a rigorous college-prep course. As mentioned above, an AP course that is offered without the requirement, or at least strong encouragement, that students take the corresponding AP exam may not be as rigorous as it should be.</p> <p>Similarly, “accelerated” or “honors” courses may be “accelerated” or “honors” in name only, and may not be adequately preparing students for college-level work. As the National Center for Educational Accountability puts it, “It has proven to be much easier to enroll and give students credit for a course labeled ‘Algebra 2’ than it has been to ensure that those students actually learn algebra.”¹²</p>	<p>In a recent survey, AP teachers expressed concern about maintaining the rigor of AP courses as more AP courses are offered to more students, but a vast majority of AP teachers (86%) believe that the AP exams serve to maintain a high standard of AP course quality.¹³</p> <p>Research from the National Center for Educational Accountability found that “as student enrollment in advanced courses has expanded, increasing percentages of students who are receiving credit for those courses are not learning the content implied by the course titles.”¹⁴</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be familiar with the courses in the most academically rigorous high schools in your area and make sure the college-prep courses in the schools your students are attending are aligned with the rigorous content & instruction found in these top high schools (e.g., talk with students about what their courses are covering, review course outlines, etc.) • If the AP, honors, or advanced courses in students’ schools are not adequately preparing students for four-year colleges, provide guidance to students about other high school options. And, as you learn this information about these schools, be very intentional about whether or not to counsel future students into these schools.

¹² Dougherty, C., Mellor, L. & Jian, S.(2006) *Orange juice or orange drink: Ensuring that “Advanced Courses” live up to their labels*. Austin, TX: National Center for Educational Accountability.

¹³ Duffett, A. & Farkas, S. (2009) *Growing Pains in the AP Program: Do Tough Trade-Offs Lie Ahead?* Washington DC: The Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

¹⁴ Dougherty, C., Mellor, L. & Jian, S.(2006)

Components of a rigorous, college-prep high school experience	Issues of concern/red flags	Relevant data & research	Support needed/steps to take
Academic support for rigorous courses	Top college-prep high schools that expect 100% of their students to attend four year colleges are often proactive about providing academic support to students who need it, but large comprehensive high schools may not be as sensitive and immediate with their academic interventions. It's more likely that students in large comprehensive high schools will need to seek out academic help should they need it.	<p>Research on public schools where there are consistently high expectations for students; where students are actively prepared for college and encouraged to take challenging courses; where students make better than expected achievement gains found that these “high-impact” high schools made sure that students got the additional academic support they needed, whereas “average impact” high schools offered additional academic support, but made it optional. “High-impact” schools also closely monitored students’ academic progress and identified students who needed additional help before it was too late, whereas “average-impact” schools tended to provide remedial help after the fact.¹⁵</p> <p>Additional research (most recently from the AP Expansion Project) shows that when access to AP courses is expanded, students will succeed provided that they are given additional academic support through summer prep programs, AVID, etc.¹⁶</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Track students’ courses & grades. Monitor students’ academic progress and make sure students have the academic support they need. • Build your knowledge of additional academic support programs to help students and their families navigate additional academic assistance options at their schools. • When sufficient academic assistance is not available within the school, make sure that students get the academic support they need by either providing individualized academic support through your program (if possible) or through partner organizations.

¹⁵ The Education Trust (2005). *Gaining Traction, Gaining Ground: How Some High Schools Accelerate Learning for Struggling Students*.

¹⁶ Wakelyn, D. (2009) *Raising Rigor, Getting Results: Lessons from AP Expansion*. National Governors Association Center for Best Practices.

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Comprehensive college & financial aid counseling	In many large comprehensive high schools there are simply not enough staff (i.e., few counselors who have significant time to devote to college counseling) to provide intensive, in-depth college & financial aid counseling. It is low-income students, students of color, and students whose parents did not attend college who are more likely to attend large comprehensive high schools and are most in need of extensive guidance around applying for college & financial aid.	<p>Beyond academic preparation, some of the strongest predictors of college attendance include having access to information about college admissions, testing and financial aid.¹⁷</p> <p>Low-income and minority families are more likely to overestimate college costs. Research shows that having inaccurate beliefs or insufficient information about the costs of college discourage students from attending college.¹⁸</p> <p>Research also shows that when students have more information about financial aid, they are more likely to apply and enroll in college. Only about half of high-achieving low-income students attend college if they did not talk to someone (e.g., teacher, counselor, loan officer) about financial aid, whereas 84% of high-achieving low-income students attend college if they do talk to someone about financial aid.¹⁹</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer college admissions readiness services (e.g., college test prep, application support, financial aid information, college tours, etc.) to students who need this support. • If you don't have the capacity to provide these services, partner with other organizations to provide these services. Some suggestions: college/university minority recruiting offices, specialized programs for first-generation and students of color will sometimes offer pre-collegiate preparatory programs (minority math and science programs, for instance).

¹⁷ Martinez, M. and Klopott, S. (2005). *The Link Between High School Reform and College Access and Success for Low-Income and Minority Youth*. Washington, DC: American Youth Policy Forum & Pathways to College Network.

¹⁸ Goldrick-Rab, S. (2007). *Promoting Academic Momentum at Community Colleges: Challenges and Opportunities*. Community College Working Paper No. 5; Grodsky, E. and Jones, M. (2004). Real and Imagined Barriers to College Entry: Perceptions of Cost. *Social Science Research* 36:745–766.

¹⁹ Akerhielm, K., Berger, J., Hooker, M., & Wise, D. (1998). *Factors Related to College Enrollment: Final Report prepared for Under Secretary U.S. Department of Education*. Princeton, N.J.: Mathtech, Inc.

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