



Joint Recommendations for Implementing the Academic Competitiveness Grants

Research demonstrates that the classes a high school student takes are the strongest predictor of success in college, and have a particularly strong influence on the likely achievement of students of color and students from low-income families. Yet for many students – especially poor and minority students – a rigorous college prep curriculum is neither their default high school educational option nor one that is available to them at all.

In the majority of states, the requirements for earning a high school diploma are simply not aligned with the expectations students face in college and the workplace, leaving high school graduates to struggle in remedial classes, decreasing their chances of completing college, and reducing their hopes of being successful in their careers. Research by the American Diploma Project concludes that to be well prepared for college and 21st Century jobs, students need four years of rigorous English and four years of mathematics at least through Algebra II. Only eight states currently have policies requiring students to take these courses in order to graduate. This gap in expectations, and the decreased access to rigorous high school courses that many poor and minority students face as a result, are extremely costly to both our students and our society.

The Academic Competitiveness Grants (ACG) are aimed at encouraging more students from low income families to take a rigorous academic curriculum in high school. This program, which will go into effect on July 1, 2006, provides an excellent opportunity for the federal government to simultaneously provide high-achieving, low-income students with more money for college, ensure more students take the courses that will increase college access and success rates, and encourage states to align their high school curriculum with the expectations of colleges and employers. If well implemented, the program will help more students graduate from high school with some additional financial support and the academic tools necessary for success.

To encourage effective implementation, the undersigned organizations recommend that the U.S. Department of Education adhere to the following principles in implementing the ACG program:

- *Begin with a more flexible definition of a “rigorous curriculum.”* Because this program must be implemented quickly, it is necessary to acknowledge that in its early years neither the schools nor the students will have had the opportunity to make choices in anticipation of these grants. As such, it is only fair to build some flexibility into the grants and reward students who have made an effort to prepare for college. In the short term, we recommend that the Secretary recognize at least three methods to demonstrate completion of a rigorous curriculum: 1) completion of a state-recognized college preparatory curriculum already in place (e.g., by earning a “college prep” or “honors” diploma, or by completing a sequence of courses officially sanctioned as college preparatory such as International Baccalaureate); 2) accrual of at least 6 college credits while in secondary school, or the equivalent (e.g., by earning a score of three or above on two Advanced Placement tests) and 3) completion of a course of study that does not meet one of the above criteria, but for which the SEA submits evidence to the Secretary that establishes that the course of study has prepared the student for success in postsecondary education (e.g., achieving at or above a specified score on an assessment which is given in secondary schools and also used by institutions of higher education within the state for placement decisions).
- *Require more evidence as the program matures.* The Secretary should build in safeguards to ensure that states’ approved courses of study are appropriately anchored in the skills required for success in postsecondary education. The Secretary should require states to offer evidence, within a specified number of years, that the approved college prep curriculum actually prepares students for success in postsecondary education. This could be done by analyzing data on students’ need for remediation and other measures of success in college; by requiring institutions of higher education to validate that the

states' recognized curricula aligns with their entry level expectations; by using state commissions representing higher education, business and K-12 education to agree on a rigorous curriculum; or by creating a peer review process run by the U.S. Department of Education to review state submissions.

- *Ensure broad access and a consistent level of rigor.* In addition to validating the effectiveness of the approved courses of study, states should audit the availability and rigor of course offerings across schools and districts. States should be required to report to the U.S. Department of Education on the availability of the approved courses to students eligible for the ACGs. They should also be encouraged to develop mechanisms for ensuring that the content of the courses is taught at a consistent level of rigor across the state.
- *Guarantee all eligible students receive their grants.* Given the school and financial aid calendars, most high school seniors will not have completed their college prep curriculum or received test scores at the time of initial determinations of federal financial assistance. The Secretary must develop and use administrative rules that accommodate this reality and ensure that all students who meet the program's requirements before beginning their post-secondary studies receive their grants. Furthermore, the Secretary should include, as part of the implementation, a plan to work with K-12, postsecondary institutions, and key organizations to ensure that all eligible students, parents, educators, and guidance counselors know about this opportunity for additional financial support and the requirements for applying.
- *Be transparent about expectations and publicly report on progress.* As it implements the ACG's, the U.S. Department of Education has an opportunity to provide critical information that will inform policy and facilitate accountability. To support and encourage states in providing a rigorous, college- and work-preparatory curriculum for all students, the Secretary should a) annually publish the specific course sequences and assessments that have been approved for use in each state in determining eligibility for the ACGs; b) add Pell Grant and ACG recipient status to student data surveys conducted by NCES; and c) continue and expand funding for state efforts to build longitudinal data systems that link K-12 and postsecondary education data systems and use this data to improve outcomes for all students.

Given the billions of dollars that the federal government spends annually on financial aid, it is clearly in the interest of the U.S. Department of Education to use this opportunity to make that investment more effective by ensuring that a rigorous curriculum does indeed prepare students for success in college and that all students have access to it. If implemented well, the Academic Competitiveness Grants will help more states to clarify the academic preparation needed to succeed in college, ensure more young people from low-income families complete a college preparatory curriculum, and make college more affordable.

We encourage the U.S. Department of Education to fully meet its obligations to Congress (to implement the program immediately); to students (by working to ensure every student has access to the rigorous curriculum that research shows is predictive of success in high school, college and the workplace); and to the American taxpayer (by working to ensure that students who enter postsecondary institutions – especially those supported with federal financial aid – have the skills and knowledge necessary to see their education through to its completion). In these ways, individual students and our larger society will most fully benefit from the investment.

The Department has a great opportunity to advance policy and practice in ways that provide all students with the tools necessary to succeed in college and the workplace. It should not – and must not – shy away from it.

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