

May 2006

Commentary: Adding Rigor to the Pell Grant

Starting this fall, low-income students who have taken a rigorous curriculum in high school may receive an increase in annual Pell grant funding of \$750 to \$1,300 for each of the first two years of college, under the newly enacted Academic Competitiveness Grants (ACGs) program.

The underlying principle of the ACGs is sound: Provide low-income college-bound students with incentives to take a curriculum that will prepare them for success once they get there, thereby increasing the odds that those students will persist and earn a college degree. Economically disadvantaged students are far less likely to have access to a rigorous high school curriculum. This grants program has the potential to help turn that situation around and, as a result, increase college enrollment and success among the most underrepresented groups in our nation.

Here's the rub. The law does not define which courses students need to take to be eligible for the grants; that was left to each state, subject to approval by the secretary of education. Because the first grants will be awarded to students enrolled in college this fall, states will need to define their courses of study by June.

The research on what constitutes a rigorous course of study is pretty clear. Those who take math beyond Algebra II, for example, are at least 50 percent more

News Clips

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1. **Better living through education.** States facing economic challenges from global competition and demographic shifts are focusing on education to help solve the problem. [Ohio](#), which traditionally has relied on manufacturing to generate jobs, is considering raising course requirements for high school graduation to ensure that workers have the higher-level skills to succeed in the new economy -- a move recently made by [Michigan](#). The six [New England](#) states also have joined together to better prepare their students for college and reverse the current trend of young people leaving the region. Business supports these efforts -- in [Colorado](#), business leaders cite education as more important than corporate tax cuts for stimulating the state economy.
2. **Next steps in Kentucky.** As part of its comprehensive efforts to better prepare students for college and the workplace, [Kentucky](#) recently passed a bill to strengthen its assessment system to identify students who are behind academically. Juniors will be required to take the ACT to determine whether they are college ready, and 8th and 10th grade students will be given diagnostic tests to assess whether they are on track for success.
3. **Connecting academic classes with real-world needs.** To engage students and keep them in school, many states and school districts have renewed interest in integrating career training into rigorous academic learning -- a move endorsed by [struggling](#)

likely to earn a bachelor's degree than those who stop at Algebra II, nearly four times more likely than those who stop at Geometry and nearly nine times more likely than those who stop at Algebra I. A rigorous high school curriculum is a particularly important equalizer for low-income and minority students -- it can cut the college completion gap between white and minority students in half.

State education agencies that are tasked with defining a rigorous curriculum will have to make a choice: Define rigorous based on the best available research and, as a result, limit the number of Pell-eligible students who will receive the additional financial aid this fall, or distribute the funds more broadly by low-balling the definition of a rigorous curriculum.

The U.S. Department of Education issued guidance to states last week, which frames a clear set of options for defining a rigorous course of study. The options are sensible and largely reflect the latest research on the skills students need to be successful in college, yet they leave each state the flexibility to define rigor for itself, which may lead some to aim lower.

We encourage states to use one of the options spelled out by the Education Department rather than proposing a less rigorous standard. For states that already have defined a college-prep course of study, either by making it the default curriculum for high school graduation or by defining an advanced or honors diploma, they should use that curriculum as the target for the ACGs. For states that have not yet defined a rigorous college-prep course of study, this is the opportunity to do so.

[students](#) themselves.

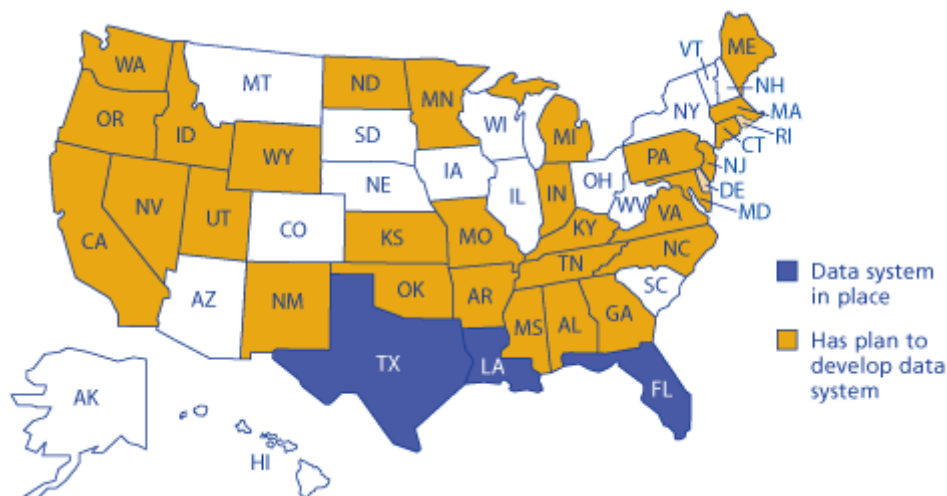
If states succumb to the temptation to maximize the number of their students who can receive the additional funds by setting the bar low, they will once again sell low-income students short by subjecting them to “the soft bigotry of low expectations.” Their reward will be additional financial aid but with the same high odds of needing to take remedial courses and the same extremely low odds of completing a college degree.

College readiness means more than simply getting in the door of a postsecondary institution. It means being adequately prepared to succeed once you get there.

Read more about the Academic Competitiveness Grants ([summary fact sheet](#)).

Did You Know?

States Are Building P-16 Longitudinal Data Systems



Source: Achieve Survey/Research, 2006.

To better understand how many students are dropping out of the education pipeline and to hold high schools accountable for improving student transitions to college and work, states need high-quality data systems that can follow individual students' progress from elementary school through the postsecondary level. Currently, only three states have such a system in place, but 31 others have plans to develop their own. For some states, this will mean expanding their existing K-12 systems to the postsecondary level. For

many others, it will mean linking their K-12 and postsecondary systems, which currently operate independently.

New Resources

- In [*Making Good on a Promise: What Policymakers Can Do To Support the Educational Persistence of Dropouts*](#), researchers from Jobs for the Future look at which students are dropping out and why. Their results show that the problem is not confined to low-income students -- about one in 10 young people from families in the two highest socioeconomic levels drop out. Also, many dropouts eventually earn a GED and then attempt to complete their postsecondary education, but few succeed. The report includes recommendations for policymakers, such as refocusing K-12 accountability systems to emphasize raising both high school graduation rates and academic standards.
- As states and districts consider policies and practices to improve the transition from high school to college and the workplace, it helps to examine what has and has not worked in other places -- and why. From High School to the Future is a multiyear research project by the Consortium on Chicago School Research that promises to provide a valuable close-up look at the factors that affect the postsecondary experiences of Chicago Public Schools (CPS) graduates. The project's first [report](#) provides baseline data on CPS students' college enrollment, preparation and success rates. Future reports will address issues such as social and academic supports, coursework and access, and college choice.
- American Diploma Project and other research demonstrate that more than two-thirds of new jobs require some postsecondary education or training. Yet in California, a state that traditionally has one of the most highly educated workforces, educational attainment is projected to decline between 2002 and 2022. In [*Keeping California's Edge: The Growing Demand for Highly Educated Workers*](#), the California Business Roundtable and the Campaign for College Opportunity examine the impact this trend will have on California's economy. Among the findings, by 2022 one out of three new jobs will require an associate's degree, a bachelor's degree or higher. Technical services, education and health care will employ the largest numbers of highly educated workers and therefore will face the most significant impact. Three other industries -- finance, manufacturing and information services -- also may be affected.

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