

May 2005

Commentary: Got Data?

How many students graduate from high school, enter college and ultimately earn a degree? States are having a difficult time answering this critical question about our education pipeline.

Two widely circulated pipeline resources offer somewhat different perspectives while highlighting the shortcomings of our current data systems. The U.S. Department of Education reports that out of every 100 8th graders in 1988, 78 graduated from high school on time in 1992 and 34 earned a college degree eight years later. These data are drawn from the results of the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS), a 12-year study that followed a national sample of students from 1988 through 2000.

Data from the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) paint a grimmer picture. NCHEMS data estimate that for every 100 9th graders, only 68 graduate from high school within four years and 18 earn a two-year degree within three years or a four-year degree within six years.

The best way to assess the strength of the education pipeline is to follow individual students as they move through the education system, which the Department of Education study does. The department's data, however, are not collected regularly and include only a national sample for research purposes -- they offer no state-specific results. Although the NCHEMS study provides state-by-state results and its data align well with other state estimates of students' academic progress, it provides only snapshots of different groups of students rather than following a single cohort. Neither source is perfect, but right now they are the best we have.

States have the primary responsibility for improving student achievement and therefore need data about every institution's

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1. **One giant step. [Indiana](#)** has offered the rigorous Core 40 college-prep curriculum to high school students for about a decade. But now, the state has stepped up its expectations by passing a law requiring all students to take the Core 40, starting with the class of 2011. The higher education community is supporting the move by making the Core 40 a requirement for admission to the state's universities. This is a great example of a state-led effort to create a seamless K-16 education system.
2. **Improving student retention in college.** Higher education institutions across the country are focusing on ways to ensure that students not only enroll but also [stay in college](#) and earn their degrees. One way to do this is to give students a leg up so that they can earn college credit while still in high school. Two studies from the National Center for Education Statistics on dual-enrollment and dual-credit programs find that more than half of the nation's colleges and universities enrolled high school students in college courses. [Dual Enrollment of High School Students at Postsecondary Institutions: 2002-03](#) and [Dual Credit and Exam-Based Courses](#)

performance -- both high schools and colleges -- to help guide their policy decisions, target resources and design interventions. States won't be able to address these crucial needs until they develop data systems that follow individual students -- not just a sample of them, but *all* students -- as they move through the education system from elementary school through postsecondary education. Florida is among the few states with a unified data system that can do this effectively. Many more states will need to move in this direction if they are going to provide schools and the public with the data they need to make a real difference in students' lives.

New Resources

- More and more students view education as valuable and plan to pursue a postsecondary degree, according to [A Profile of the American High School Sophomore in 2002](#), a new report from the National Center for Education Statistics. In 2002, 72 percent of 10th graders surveyed reported that they intended to earn a bachelor's or advanced degree, compared to 59 percent in 1990 and 41 percent in 1981. The report also shows that although their expectations may be high, many students, particularly minority students, are not prepared for college-level math and reading.
- In the first of its series of annual reports on the impact of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law, the [Northwest Evaluation Association](#) finds that student achievement has increased under NCLB, but the achievement gap between certain subgroups appears to be growing. The study also reveals that students in grades that were required to take state tests showed more improvement than students in other grades, particularly when high stakes were attached to the assessment. However, results from the study should be analyzed carefully. For example, some critics have faulted it for excluding large urban centers and

[in U.S. Public High Schools: 2002-03](#) are companion reports on these innovative and growing programs.

3. **Thinking ahead.** [Los Angeles](#) school officials are mulling the idea of requiring all students to take the rigorous A-G course sequence required for admission to **California's** universities. Requiring these courses would better prepare students for college and would decrease the [number of freshmen who need remedial help](#) in English and math -- a goal the state has been working toward for the past decade. Last spring, the state gave high school juniors a voluntary exam to gauge college readiness. Those who struggled were provided courses tailored to help them catch up during their senior year of high school and the summer before entering college.
4. **Capacity a deal breaker?** Concerned that **Oregon's** high school graduation requirements are among the lowest in the nation, Gov. Ted Kulongoski recently proposed raising the requirements in math and English to better align them with the skills needed for success in college and the workplace. His proposal to require three years of math and four years of English has raised concerns about whether all schools have the capacity to teach higher-level courses. This is a legitimate question, and one that should not be taken lightly, although we hope concerns about capacity will not become an excuse for leaving low expectations in place. Thirty other states currently require students to take three years of math to graduate; some even require four years and specify the

underrepresenting minority groups, particularly African Americans.

- Two surveys sponsored by [The Teaching Commission](#) reveal that a large portion of the American public believes that teachers' salaries should be tied to student performance. Eight out of 10 people surveyed support an education reform agenda that includes increasing salaries for those teachers whose students show the biggest achievement gains, raising teacher standards and adding more accountability for teachers.

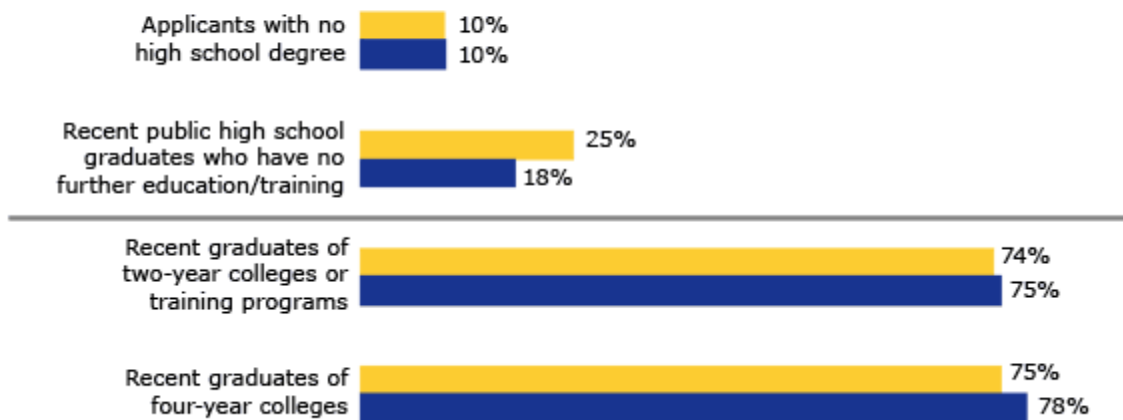
courses. Perhaps Oregon lawmakers should look to those states for answers.

5. **Aiming higher in Minnesota.** Over the past several years, **Minnesota** has undertaken a serious effort to revise and upgrade its standards and assessment system. In an [editorial](#) in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, the chair of the Senate's education policy committee makes a powerful case for raising high school expectations and aligning them with what is needed for success in college or the workplace.

Did You Know?

Students Need More Than Just a High School Degree, Employers Say

- Extremely/very well prepared for typical job in my company
- Extremely/very well prepared for advancement in my company



Source: Peter D. Hart Research Associates/Public Opinion Strategies, *Rising to the Challenge: Are High School Graduates Prepared for College and Work? A Study of Recent High School Graduates, College Instructors, and Employers*, prepared for Achieve, Inc., 2005.

The high school diploma alone is no longer a passport to good jobs and career advancement. In a recent [national poll](#) commissioned by Achieve, employers felt that only one in four high school graduates with no further education or training has the skills necessary for jobs in their companies. Conversely, employers felt that three out of four students with two-year or four-

year postsecondary degrees have the necessary skills. The message: High school students must be prepared to continue their education after graduation to be prepared to succeed in the workplace.

New from Achieve

- **Benchmarking science standards in Maryland.** Maryland asked Achieve to undertake a comprehensive review of its science standards. In Achieve's [Analysis of Maryland's Voluntary State Curriculum in Science](#), we found that the standards stress the core knowledge students need and that, with additional work, they will be comparable to the best science standards from other states. Many states are beginning to turn their focus to improving science achievement because of both the new requirements in the No Child Left Behind law and the importance of science in the new economy. Benchmarking standards to the best, as Maryland has done, will be critical to ensuring that students are prepared for success.
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