

College Readiness

The Issue

Data maintained by ACT indicate that 25% of freshmen at four-year institutions and 50% of freshmen at two-year colleges do not return for the second year. In a poll commissioned by Achieve, Inc., 60% of the students surveyed felt well prepared, while 40% indicated poor preparation in one, if not several, areas required for success in college. Just 20% of college professors participating in the same survey indicated that students come to college well prepared.

The Research

In research to determine college readiness, ACT established benchmarks correlated with scores on the ACT. Those benchmarks indicate the preparation (as shown by ACT scores) necessary to have a 75% chance of earning a C or higher in specific college courses.

- Twenty-six percent of high school graduates who took the ACT in 2004 were prepared to be successful in the first-level college biology course, 40% were ready for college algebra, and 68% were prepared for freshman English composition courses.
- Only 22% of graduating seniors who took the ACT in 2004 had sufficient knowledge and skills to be successful in all three courses (biology, college algebra, and English composition).

The same study analyzed the effect of taking courses beyond the core curriculum, defined by ACT as four years of English; three years of social studies; three years of math, with courses through Algebra 2; and three years of science. This analysis resulted in the following information:

- Students who took only the core curriculum in math were no better prepared for success in college algebra than those students who took less than three years of math.
- Student success rates in college algebra increased with each year of high school mathematics completed beyond the basic three-year core.
- Forty-five percent of students who completed courses in biology, chemistry, and physics were prepared to be successful in the first-level college biology course, as indicated by ACT scores.

Data from other sources indicate the following:

- Approximately three-fourths of high school sophomores who were part of the U.S. Education Department's longitudinal survey in 2002 indicated that they planned to attend college, but only half of them were enrolled in college preparatory courses.

- Data collected in 2004 by Achieve, Inc., indicate wide variation in state requirements for coursework. Approximately half of the states (24) require three years of mathematics, and five require four years; but 22 of the states do not specify what the math courses should be.
- A rigorous college-prep curriculum is important for preparing students for the workplace, even for those students who do not attend a two- or four-year institutions.

Practical Implications

- Many states are in the process of raising course requirements for all students. Even without state mandates, districts can increase graduation requirements for their own students.
- School personnel must give attention to course content and expectations as well as course titles. Approximately one-fourth of the students in the Achieve survey indicated that expectations in their respective high schools were high and that coursework challenged them. These were the students who felt they were best prepared for college.

Questions to Consider

- Does our school or district require students to complete courses necessary for success in college?
- Is the content of those courses sufficiently rigorous, with high expectations for all students?
- Do we provide support for those students who need extra help in meeting those expectations?

References

- “Crisis at the Core: Preparing All Students for College and Work.”
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- “A Profile of the American High School Sophomore in 2002.”
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