

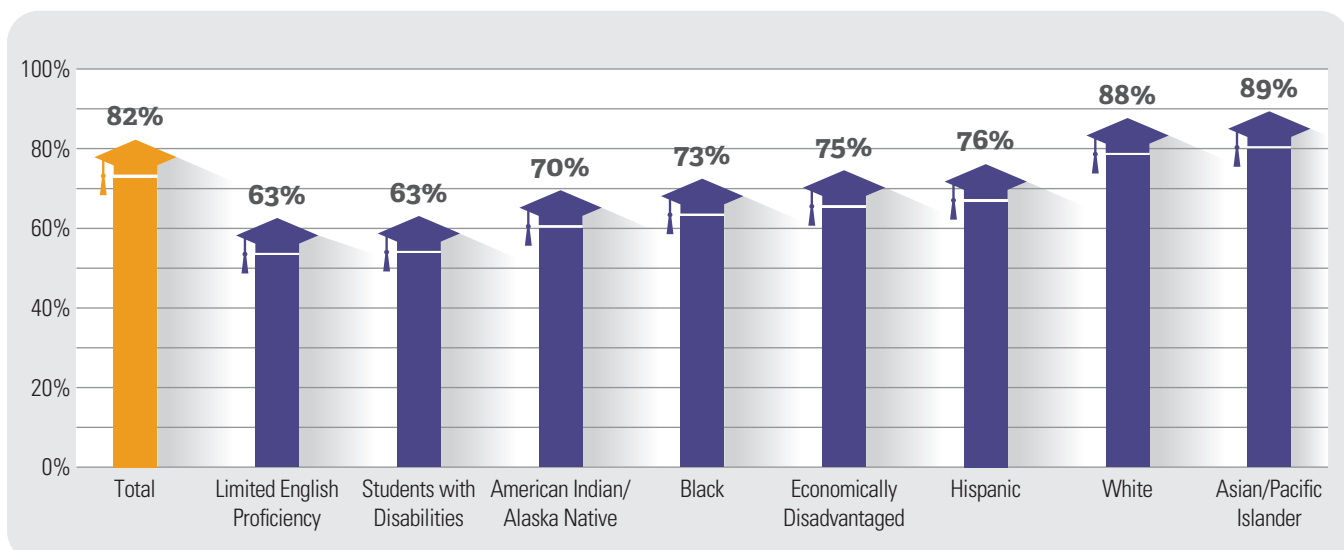
Section One: Getting Ready for College

Admission criteria and selectivity levels vary widely across colleges and universities in the United States.³ However, with few exceptions, the common denominator is that American applicants must complete a high school diploma or equivalent to be considered for postsecondary enrollment. The nation's high school graduation rate has climbed gradually and hit a new record high at 82 percent in 2014.⁴ Much of this success is attributable to increases in performance by

black and Hispanic students and the declining number of high schools with high dropout rates.⁵ Despite such improvements, variation in graduation rates associated with race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, English proficiency, and disability persists (Figure A).

Furthermore, despite the overall increase in graduation rates, the total number of high school graduates leveled off over the last decade and will likely remain steady for

Figure A: U.S. Public High School Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate, by Race/Ethnicity and Selected Demographics: 2013–2014



SOURCE: National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, Table 1, “Public High School 4-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR), by Race/Ethnicity and Selected Demographics for the United States, the 50 States, and the District of Columbia: School Year 2013–14,” https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/tables/ACGR_RE_and_characteristics_2013-14.asp.

3. For the purposes of this document, the terms *college*, *university*, and *postsecondary institution* may be used interchangeably, but all refer to degree-granting institutions that grant associate or higher degrees and participate in Title IV federal financial aid programs.

4. National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, Table 1, “Public High School 4-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate: School Year 2013–14,” Common Core of Data, https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/tables/ACGR_RE_and_characteristics_2013-14.asp.

5. See Civic Enterprises and Everyone Graduates Center at John Hopkins University, *Building a Grad Nation Report: Progress and Challenge in Ending the High School Dropout Epidemic* (Washington, D.C.: America's Promise Alliance, 2015), <http://www.gradnation.org/report/2015-building-grad-nation-report>; and Richard J. Murnane, *U.S. High School Graduation Rates: Patterns and Explanations* (Cambridge, Mass.: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2013), <http://www.nber.org/papers/w18701.pdf>.

the next decade at approximately 3.3 million annually due to projected declines in the size of the eighteen-year-old population cohorts.⁶

PATHWAYS AND PITFALLS TOWARD COLLEGE

Approximately 68 percent of students who graduate from high school enroll in college within a few months of graduation, an enrollment rate that has increased gradually from 60 percent in 1990.⁷ A mix of academic, financial, and aspirational factors affect a high school student's trajectory through high school and into college, but one recent research review⁸ identified the high school behaviors that most strongly correlate with college enrollment:

- Missing no more than 10 percent of school days per grade level;
- Maintaining a 3.0 GPA or higher;
- Passing high school exit or college entrance exams that assess ability to complete college-level coursework;
- Meeting or exceeding benchmark state and national assessments;
- Completing mathematics courses including algebra, geometry, trigonometry, and calculus; and
- Dual enrollment participation.

Conversely, well-documented barriers that prevent high school students from pursuing college fall into four broad categories: academic struggles, financial hurdles, low college awareness and/or aspirations, and an

6. National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics, Table 219.10, "High School Graduates, by Sex and Control of School: Selected Years, 1869–70 through 2023–24," http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/tables/dt13_219.10.asp.

7. Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, "College Enrollment and Work Activity of 2015 High School Graduates," news release, April 28, 2016, <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/hsgec.pdf>.

8. American Institutes for Research, "Predictors of Postsecondary Success," November 25, 2013, <http://www.ccrscenter.org/products-resources/predictors-postsecondary-success>.

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inability to complete instrumental requirements such as applying for financial aid.⁹ A growing number of studies address the mismatch between the high school curriculum and entry-level college course expectations, while others document factors including family and peer influences and limited resources.¹⁰ Moreover, along the pathway from college consideration to matriculation, students—particularly those from lower-income, immigrant, and/or noncollege-educated families—face complicated choices and may lack sufficient support and structure to navigate burdensome processes and institutional bureaucracy.¹¹ And for those high school students who do continue on to college, a substantial proportion of students find that they are not adequately prepared academically to succeed in college-level coursework.

9. See, for example, Eric Bettinger, Bridget T. Long, Philip Oreopoulos et al., "The Role of Application Assistance and Information in College Decisions: Results from the H&R Block FAFSA Experiment," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* (2012); Mandy Savitz-Romer and Suzanne M. Bouffard, *Ready, Willing and Able: A Developmental Approach to College Access and Success* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Education Press, 2014); Daniel Klasik, "The College Application Gauntlet: A Systematic Analysis of the Steps to Four-Year College Enrollment," *Research in Higher Education* 53 (5) (2012): 506–549; and Andrea Venezia and Laura Jaeger, "Transitions from High School to College," *Postsecondary Education in the United States* 23 (1) (2013): 117–136.

10. See, for example, Patricia Gandara and Deborah Bial, *Paving the Way to Postsecondary Education: K–12 Intervention Programs for Underrepresented Youth* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 2001), <http://nces.ed.gov/pubspubs2001/2001205.pdf>.

11. Lindsay Page and Judith Scott-Clayton, *Improving College Access in the United States: Barriers and Policy Responses* (Cambridge, Mass.: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2015), <http://www.nber.org/papers/w21781.pdf>.

College readiness—generally understood as possessing a sufficient level of preparedness to enroll and succeed in a college program of study without the need for remedial courses—is a complex standard and has been measured in several ways, including through standardized test scores and transcript analysis.¹² However measured, approximately one-half of all college students will take one or more developmental or remedial courses while enrolled.¹³

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INTERVENTIONS TO IMPROVE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' COLLEGE READINESS

A complete overview of the tremendous range of school-level reforms that aim to encourage and support high school students' pathways to college is beyond the scope of this primer. But programs also exist at the national and state levels. For example, the Federal TRiO Programs Upward Bound and Talent Search provide outreach and student services to low-income and first-generation students, as well as to students with disabilities, while GEAR UP works with students attending high-poverty schools and their families. Dual-enrollment programs, often

supported through state funding, allow high school students to take college-level courses and earn high school and college credit simultaneously. Middle college high schools and early college high schools are small schools that provide students with comprehensive, structured, and supported opportunities to earn college credits and even degrees while attending high school. Many states have legislated default high school curriculum requirements that align with college entrance expectations.¹⁴

While these school-, state-, and federal-level programs are well-intentioned, rigorous research is needed to determine their effectiveness. Analyses on school-level reforms and precollege outreach programs raise concerns about the scope and rigor of the evidence regarding the effectiveness of these interventions; it has so far proved difficult to isolate specific effective strategies.¹⁵

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ADULTS PREPARING FOR COLLEGE

Approximately 31 percent of undergraduate students are aged twenty-five years or older.¹⁶ These students range from veterans returning from service to displaced work-

12. American College Testing, *Crisis at the Core: Preparing All Students for College and Work* (Iowa City: American College Testing, 2005), <http://www.csun.edu/~rinstitute/Content/policy/Crisis%20at%20the%20Core.pdf>; and Clifford Adelman, *The Toolbox Revisited: Paths to Degree Completion from High School Through College* (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Education, 2006), <https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/research/pubs/toolboxrevisit/toolbox.pdf>.

13. Judith Scott-Clayton, Peter Crosta, and Clive Belfield, *Improving the Targeting of Treatment: Evidence from College Remediation* (Cambridge, Mass.: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2012), http://www.nber.org/papers/w18457.pdf?new_window=.

14. See Education Commission of the States, “50-State Comparison: High School Graduation Requirements,” <http://www.ecs.org/high-school-graduation-requirements/>.

15. Bridget Terry Long, “Dropout Prevention and College Prep,” in *Targeting Investments in Children: Fighting Poverty When Resources are Limited*, ed. Phillip B. Levine and David J. Zimmerman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), <http://www.nber.org/chapters/c11729.pdf>; Venezia and Jaeger, “Transitions from High School to College”; and Murnane, *U.S. High School Graduation Rates: Patterns and Explanations*.

16. National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics, Table 303.50, “Total Fall Enrollment in Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions, by Level of Enrollment, Control and Level of Institution, Attendance Status, and Age of Student: 2013,” https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d14/tables/dt14_303.50.asp?current=yes.

ers seeking to change careers to working parents wanting to improve their job prospects. Over the past several years, an increasing amount of attention has focused on adults who have earned some college credit but have not completed an undergraduate credential. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, about one-fifth of Americans aged twenty-five and older have some college experience but no credential.¹⁷ The most common motivations for adults who return to college to complete a degree are career advancement and personal satisfaction.¹⁸

APPROACHES TO PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT

The awarding of college-level credit for the knowledge and skills adults gain outside of the classroom commenced when large numbers of veterans started enrolling in postsecondary institutions through the G.I. Bill in 1944. The American Council on Education (ACE) introduced a new service to review military experience and make recommendations for equivalent college credit. ACE currently reports providing academic credit recommendations for more than thirty-five thousand courses, exams, and certifications offered by more than six hundred organizations. Other methods of assessing

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a student's prior learning include several national standardized testing programs, individualized student portfolio assessments, campus-developed challenge exams, and evaluations by colleges of noncollegiate instructional and training programs. Currently, no national system tracks the acceptance and use of college-level credits earned through prior learning.

17. See analysis in Doug Shapiro, Afet Dunder, Xin Yuan et al., *Some College, No Degree: A National View of Students with Some College Enrollment, but No Completion* (Herndon, Va.: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2014), https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/NSC_Signature_Report_7.pdf. See also United States Census Bureau, Table 3, "Detailed Years of School Completed by People 25 Years and Over," <http://www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/education/data/cps/2014/tables.html>.

18. For example, see Andrew P. Kelly, *High Costs, Uncertain Benefits: What Do Americans Without a College Degree Think About Postsecondary Education?* (Washington, D.C.: Center on Higher Education Reform, American Enterprise Institute, 2015), <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/High-Costs-Uncertain-Benefits.pdf>; and Carolin Hagelskamp, David Schleifer, and Christopher DiStasi, *Is College Worth It For Me? How Adults Without Degrees Think About Going (Back) to School* (New York: Public Agenda, 2013), <http://kresge.org/sites/default/files/Is-College-Worth-It-For-Me-Public-Agenda-2013.pdf>.