

Off Track: What's Behind Declining College Admission Rates for California's Minorities?

A new report on high school course-taking patterns among California's minority and low-income youth¹ by WestEd's Neal Finkelstein and Anthony Fong finds that many high school graduates who fail to meet admission requirements for the state's universities fall off the college-preparatory track as early as ninth grade. And students who postpone these requirements to later in their high school careers face increasingly difficult hurdles in making up the missed courses. The report, "Course-taking Patterns and Preparation for Postsecondary Education in California's Public University Systems among Minority Youth," prepared for the Regional Educational Laboratory West (REL West), suggests that better middle school preparation and early intervention with students falling off the college track are needed.

Access to college among California's minority and low-income students has concerned policymakers both before and after 1996, when the state ended affirmative action in its public education system. Today, educationally disadvantaged students, whose families have little college-going history, comprise an increasing proportion of high school student populations. What policies can improve their chances for college admissions, and why are so many falling off the college track?

College Bound? — The Ninth Grade Cut Off

Like other states, California has established a set of rigorous course requirements that students must satisfactorily complete to be eligible for admission to the state university systems. In addition to their electives, aspiring college students must earn at least a C grade in fifteen designated courses in seven content areas by graduation – the so-called a-g requirements – a sequence designed to focus the high school curriculum and offer greater assurance that students can enter and succeed in college.²

The study analyzed course-taking patterns of thousands of California high school seniors for both the 2003-04 and 2004-05 school years. REL West researchers made use of new data systems that enabled them to statistically track and compare student academic patterns on a large scale by evaluating their high school transcripts. They found

that students who complete key college-preparatory courses in ninth grade begin a clear trajectory that continues through high school. And they have a greater probability than students who postpone these courses of meeting the complete set of a-g requirements.

But many high school students do not meet the admission requirements because they miss key courses. Completing one year of college-preparatory English and mathematics in ninth grade poses an enormous challenge for many students. Among those sampled, more than a third did not meet the English requirement, and more than 40 percent had not completed or received at least a C in two semesters of college-preparatory math by the end of the freshman year. The study, which focused exclusively on high school completers, found that 60 percent of seniors had not met admission requirements to California's four-year colleges simply because they failed to fulfill the course sequence in English.

"Students who fall off the college-preparatory track early in high school tend to move further from a complete college-preparatory program as they progress through high school."

The Ethnicity Gap

Disaggregating student course-taking patterns by ethnicity revealed significant differences in the trajectories of the various subgroups: White and Asian students were more likely than their Hispanic and African American peers to meet the college eligibility requirements. Achievement gaps between white and African American students were statistically significant at every grade level, and the gaps between white and Hispanic students were pronounced in all but one. Roughly half of Asian and white students sampled completed at least four units of English by the end of the 12th grade, compared with about a third of Hispanic and African American students. This ethnicity gap in completion rates appears in mathematics and laboratory science as well.

But the percentage of students who met the college benchmarks declined for every ethnic group from the beginning of high school to the end. This suggests that poor performance and course selection early in a student's education has a cascading and cumulative effect. For example, while 40 percent of African American students were enrolled in the required college-preparatory courses in ninth grade, the percentages had declined to just 15 percent by the end of high school. High schools routinely offer courses unaccredited by California's university system. According to the study, students who enroll in these courses may be unaware that they will not meet the state's college admission requirements.

Looking Ahead

In 1997, California policymakers encouraged all students to complete Algebra 1 in eighth grade. This was changed in 2008 to a requirement with mandatory testing for eighth graders to take effect in 2011. But meeting that goal has proved daunting. As recently reported in *Education Week*, some California eighth grade students are as much as three years below grade level in their foundational math skills. Many California students are falling short: According to *Education Week*, "Just 23 percent of the 740,000 middle and high school students who took the state's end-of-

course Algebra 1 exam reached proficiency in 2007, roughly the same proportion as four years earlier."³

Many schools simply lack clear data about the numbers of students who are falling off the track for university eligibility. Nor do they have an early warning system to alert students and parents. Many factors influence students' high school course selection, including what kind of academic support services they receive and what impacts such services might have on their course selection. Counselors often have little leverage to influence a student's course-taking choices, and little research has been done on how best to draw families into the course selection process. But as a 2007 Career Academy Support Network study cited in the REL West report notes: "For some students simply receiving the information during a one-on-one counseling session has prompted them to more carefully consider the courses they choose."

For policymakers, educators, and families a clear message of the study is that ninth grade remains a turning point for students, regardless of their ethnicity. In math, for example, nearly half of the students in the study veered off the college track by the end of their freshman year because they had not completed two semesters of Algebra 1 or higher and thus could not take the advanced mathematics courses required for college admission. Too many students are simply not enrolling in enough a-g courses, the authors write, "a pattern that begins as soon as students enter high school."

1 Finkelstein, N.D., & Fong, A.B. (2008). *Course-taking patterns and preparation for postsecondary education in California's public university systems among minority youth* (Issues & Answers Report, REL 2008–No. 035). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory West.

2 The a-g requirements account for roughly three-fifths of a student's total high school program. In addition, students must have a minimum cumulative grade point average (GPA) of 2.0 by the end of their junior year. But a student with a high GPA who has not met all a-g requirements will not be eligible for admission to either the California State University or the University of California system.

3 Cavanaugh, S., "Catching up on Algebra." *EdWeek* 4/23/08.

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