Academic and Social Support Critical to Success in Academically Rigorous Environment

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To ensure that more American students attend college and are prepared to participate in a global economy, secondary schools have increased academic rigor and raised standards. By emphasizing vertical alignment of courses from preschool through college, secondary schools can help close the expectation gap that exists between high school and college that leaves 30%–40% of students in remedial courses their first year of college.

Many schools are instituting a systemic college-preparatory curriculum that includes four years of English; three years of social studies; four years of math, including geometry and algebra I and II;

three years of laboratory science, including biology, chemistry, and physics; and two years of a foreign language—standards that meet the definition of rigorous, according to High Schools that Work, the College Board, and ACT. But in the rush to implement these curriculum changes, some experts say that aspects critical to success have been overlooked.

According to Michelle Asha Cooper, president of the Institute for Higher Education Policy, rigorous academic standards can work to increase college success—as long as they are coupled with other elements. "A rigorous curriculum can't be the only thing we focus on," she said. "We can't negate the social support students need as well as the financial support that is critical to so many students." She describes these three aspects—

academic preparation, support structures, and the ability to pay for college—as a three-legged stool upon which college success relies.

Aligning Efforts

The Pathways to College Network, which comes under the umbrella of the Institute for Higher Education Policy, is undertaking a national initiative to ensure that as rigorous programs are implemented, traditionally underserved students—particularly low-income students, underrepresented minorities, and first-generation college students—are not left behind.

The network is an alliance of national organizations that connects policy makers, education leaders, and practitioners as well as community leaders with effective strategies for improving college preparation, enrollment, and degree completion. Its work centers on the education pipeline from middle school through college graduation in four areas: academic readiness for college; college access and information; financial aid and affordability; and college success.

Network members maintain that a combination of academic and social support plays an integral role in the success arena. According to the report, "Social support builds the network, connectedness, and motivation which underpin students' willingness and capacity to take advantage of academic strategies such as tutoring, learning communities, and other helpful policies and practices." In other words, if social support is lacking, academic success within a rigorous curriculum will be compromised.

As part of its work, the network commissioned a paper to create a unifying framework for how to align rigor with academic and social support.

Removing Roadblocks to Rigor: Linking Academic and Social Supports to Ensure College Readiness and Success outlines five key areas of support that can and must be integrated within the matrix of higher academic standards: emotional, instrumental, informational, appraisal, and structural.

Emotional support, delivered through empathic, caring and respectful interactions, builds self-esteem and trust. It also promotes student engagement, which is manifested in how much time students spend on their schoolwork, and how much effort they put into it, as well as levels of enthusiasm and curiosity. Examples of emotional support include: individual counseling, group and peer support, mentoring, and other activities that develop strong, supportive interpersonal connections among students, parents, faculty, and school staff.

Examples of these activities can be found in Illinois, where the

Board of Education has incorporated social and emotional development standards into state learning requirements organized around three goals: self-awareness and self-management; social awareness and relationship skills; and responsible decision making. The Harlem Children's Zone and the I Have a Dream program are two examples of community-based programs that offer emotional support.

Instrumental support is active support and includes spending time with a student, helping him or her to achieve a goal, or providing monetary or in-kind support. Workshops focused on skills needed for college, outreach programs, summer bridge programs helping students adjust from middle school to high school, and tutoring are all examples of instrumental support, as well as financial aid and fee waivers for standardized tests.

Informational support involves supplying students with advice, suggestions, directives, and information to help them meet their academic goals. Examples include academic advising, developing education plans to achieve college goals, freshman orientation programs, helping students navigate the admissions and financial aid application process, job shadowing and internships, career exploration and placement services, early college awareness programs, and campus visits.

Appraisal support provides frequent and timely assessments for students so they can receive affirmation, feedback, and social comparison regarding their progress, and it helps faculty, staff, and parents intervene appropriately. These activities also help to show students what their interests and abilities are and guide them through the steps necessary to make progress on goals. At the systemic level, No Child Left Behind is an example of appraisal

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support, as are tests and tools such as the PSAT, Accuplace, WorkKeys, and the Collegiate Learning Assessment.

Structural support refers to formal and informal structures that embed student support into social institutions or programs. Examples include Extended Learning Time, after-school or summer programs, dropout prevention programs, AP and IB courses, formalized study groups, and block scheduling, which allows students to take two or more courses linked thematically and has been shown to increase student engagement.

According to Cooper, many of these examples of support exist in schools today but may not be used to their best potential. ▶

"We hope that this report can encourage school leaders to engage faculty in discussions about these support systems and programs, to demonstrate the role of faculty and staff in ensuring college success," she said.

Moving Forward

The network aims to inform and educate policy makers, opinion leaders, and practitioners on ways to improve college success for underserved students, serves as an information clearinghouse, and develops tools and products to support the implementation of research-based reforms.

Recommendations for educators and policy makers based on this report include:

• Align academic instruction with support services.

• Optimize skill sets of school guidance counselors.

• Ensure that school faculty and staff possess appropriate training in adolescent development.

• Create stronger incentives for teachers to help students meet the demands of rigorous academic programs.

• Increase the frequency of student assessments to keep students on track.

Cooper explains how these recommendations may be acted upon as legislators are faced with the expiration of the No Child Left Behind Act.

"My hope is that this report can help policy makers develop a strong framework for the country's next iteration of accountability."

One area that may change is how schools think about altering or augmenting the role of guidance counselors and teachers to have more formalized involvement in the support areas outlined in the paper. Cooper maintains that whatever actions are taken, they must be done with the intention of connecting the dots to create the comprehensive synergies that ensure students receive all of the supports critical in ensuring an obstacle-free pathway to college.

The good news is that opportunities for fortifying and integrating existing support structures exist, thanks to stimulus money as well as innovation funds.

"We know there is an expressed commitment at the federal level for removing roadblocks to success because of the money President Obama has earmarked for education," said Cooper.

The specific path to progress may not always be clear. What is clear in the current legislative climate is that a shared desire to improve access to and success in college will move the issue forward. Exactly how may not be evident at this point, but the Pathways to College Network will continue to serve as a clearinghouse for the actionable research and data that can ensure it happens—in whatever form it may take. □