



# College Transition Programs: Promoting Success Beyond High School

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Parents have higher educational aspirations for their children than ever before: 86 percent of parents want their children to pursue some postsecondary education.<sup>1</sup> Young people themselves share these high aspirations. The National Education Longitudinal Study, which followed a nationally representative sample of 8<sup>th</sup> grade students beginning in 1988, found that 88 percent of 8<sup>th</sup> graders expected to participate in some form of postsecondary education right after high school.<sup>2</sup> While many had the desire, far less actually enrolled and even fewer graduated from college. Twelve years later, the study found that 63 percent of these students had attended some type of postsecondary institution following high school,<sup>3</sup> 47 percent had earned some college credits, and 30 percent had completed a bachelor's degree or higher.<sup>4</sup>

Many of these young people fail to realize their aspirations because the process of preparing for life after high school is often a mystery to them. Making matters worse is our current system of college advising. K-12 educators cite a number of problems with our preparation system including inadequate college resources and materials, inequitable college advising by counselors and teachers, inequitable college preparatory curricula, and a general lack of teacher knowledge of college preparation issues.<sup>5</sup>

American youth need to have not only access to postsecondary education and training but also the knowledge and skills necessary to continue their education beyond high school. Studies examining the benefits of postsecondary education have concluded that education beyond high school increases earning potential and employment opportunities.<sup>6</sup>

There are many valuable options available to students for education and training beyond high school, including programs that lead to apprenticeships and certificate, associate, and bachelor degree options. This paper focuses on programs primarily designed to help students make smoother transitions into traditional colleges and universities. These *college transition* programs counsel students about the types of high school courses that prepare them for college-level work, the college application process, the required entrance assessments like the SAT or ACT, and the steps in applying for student aid.

## The Need is Great

The primary goal of college transition programs is to provide students with early awareness of the benefits of continuing their education by enrolling in college. These programs encourage students to think about college, and at the same time provide the academic and other support services students need to enter college. Sometimes referred to as “early intervention programs,” services range from academic tutoring, to college application assistance, to help in accessing student aid.

The need for transition programs appears to be great for those students who are minorities, disadvantaged, whose parents did not go to college, and students with disabilities. Data indicates that minority students graduate from high school, enroll in college, and complete college at much lower rates than other students. In 2001, 55 percent of African American and 52 percent of Hispanic high school graduates enrolled immediately in college, compared to 64 percent of White graduates.<sup>7</sup> Students whose parents have not attended college have similar needs. According to a 2001 report by the National Center on Education Statistics (NCES), “disparities exist along all the stages of the path to college” for students whose parents did not have any type of postsecondary education compared with students whose parents had a bachelor’s degree. Students whose parents did not have any type of postsecondary education are more likely to be African American or Hispanic and to be from families that earn less than \$25,000 per year.<sup>8</sup> Students with disabilities are also considerably less likely to enroll in postsecondary education than their nondisabled peers.<sup>9</sup>

Support for transition programs stems from the need to close these educational gaps. Policymakers and educators argue that college transitions programs are needed in order to address the historical disparities that exist in our educational systems. “America is a diverse country, racially, economically, and ethnically,” President George W. Bush has said, “and our institutions of higher education should reflect our diversity.”<sup>10</sup>

## Range of Services

The nature and content of college transition programs vary widely. Some programs offer minimal academic counseling while more comprehensive programs offer a broad array of intensive college preparatory services. Comprehensive programs typically provide the following services:

- **Academic enrichment** activities that enhance the curriculum including tutoring, summer school, after-school programs, and extra coursework;
- **Information sharing** to educate students and parents about college options, testing and admission requirements, financial aid procedures, and campus life;
- **Mentoring** by a peer or adult that provides educational and social support; and
- **Social enrichment** activities that provide students with the opportunity to learn leadership skills, set-goals, visit college campuses, and explore the arts.

## What We Know

**Participation.** Researchers estimate that there are thousands of college transition programs in the United States.<sup>11</sup> A 1994 *Survey on Precollegiate Programs for Disadvantaged Students at Higher Education Institutions*, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, found that approximately one-third of sampled postsecondary institutions operated a transition program.<sup>12</sup>

Due in part to the wide range of programs and sponsors, national data on the number of students involved is limited. Participation data do exist for federally sponsored programs. Upward Bound and Talent Search projects, for instance, served nearly 823,000 students from grades six through college graduation in fiscal year 2002. In the same year, GEAR UP, another federal program, served an estimated 1.2 million students.<sup>13</sup>

While the numbers may seem impressive, studies suggest that only a small proportion of the students who could benefit from these services actually receive them. Data collected from 1992 high school graduates through the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) reveal that approximately five percent of students considered educationally at-risk reported participating in Upward Bound, Talent Search, or similar programs.<sup>14</sup> A more recent study estimates that the federal programs provide services to less than ten percent of eligible students.<sup>15</sup>

**Effectiveness.** Research on the effectiveness of college transition programs has been limited, as very few programs have been rigorously evaluated. Many programs claim success, although the evidence supporting these claims is often anecdotal or not based on conclusive research practices. Even among those programs that have been rigorously and independently evaluated, differences in program practices, program intensity, and target populations make it difficult to apply findings to other programs.

Nevertheless, the existing research suggests that some programs can have positive effects on students. One national study, *Toward Resiliency: At-Risk Students Who Make It To College*, used the NELS data to compare high school students who were involved in transition programs with similar students who did not participate. The findings revealed that participants in transition programs had nearly twice the odds of enrolling in a four-year college as non-participants.<sup>16</sup>

Upward Bound, one of the largest college transition programs, has been closely studied using rigorous evaluation methods. A study sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education revealed mixed findings,<sup>17</sup> including:

- Participating students had higher educational expectations and earned more high school, math, and social studies credits compared to a group of similar students not involved in the programs.

- Upward Bound did not appear to influence students' in-school behavior, participation in extracurricular activities, grade point average, or high school credits earned in English or science.
- Upward Bound students were no more likely to attend a community college or baccalaureate institution than a comparison group of students; however, they did earn more non-remedial credits from four-year colleges, were more likely to receive financial aid, and were more actively engaged in college life.

## What Is Being Done

**Federal Support.**<sup>18</sup> While many organizations such as Diploma Plus, Puente Project, Project Grad, MESA, and AVID offer comprehensive college transition services at the local, state, and national levels, one of the largest financial supporters of college transition programs is the federal government.

Since college access continues to be a national policy priority, the federal government provides funding for state and local college transition efforts under the Higher Education Act (HEA). The Upward Bound and Talent Search programs have supported the transition from high school to college for several decades.<sup>19</sup> More recently, the 1998 amendments to the HEA created the GEAR UP Program, which awards grants to states and partnerships to provide services at high-poverty middle and high schools. GEAR UP begins serving entire cohorts of students in middle schools and follows the cohort through high school.<sup>20</sup> Federal support for Upward Bound and Talent Search was approximately \$400 million in 2002, with an additional \$283 million dedicated to GEAR UP programs.<sup>21</sup>

**State and Local Programs.** College transition programs vary considerably from location to location. The following are some examples of programs around the country:

- **The Puente Project**<sup>22</sup> has been implemented at 56 community colleges and 36 high schools in California. Sponsored by the California Community Colleges and the University of California, the project has served approximately 43,000 students directly. Puente's three-part model focuses on teaching, counseling, and mentoring. English teachers deliver a rigorous academic curriculum that develops college-level critical thinking and writing skills. Counselors provide intensive academic and career counseling. Mentors, from the local professional community, serve as role models to Puente students. To apply the model, Puente trains school-level teams in program requirements. The components of the model are fully integrated into the school's existing curriculum, as opposed to an after-school, weekend or add-on program.
- **Upward Bound at the University of Montana.**<sup>23</sup> The program prides itself on serving students from diverse cultural backgrounds who aspire to complete a college degree. The vast majority of the students (65 percent) are American Indian. All students meet weekly with their local Upward Bound counselor for academic advisement; assistance in math, science and English high school courses; and support counseling. UB Montana also includes a summer and bridge component. Upon graduation from high school, Upward Bound seniors enter the UB Bridge Program. Graduates get a head start on college by enrolling in three University of Montana courses that carry a total college credit load of 8 to 10 credits (a full-time summer session load).
- **The Academic Bridges to Learning Effectiveness (ABLE)**<sup>24</sup> at Longview Community College in Lee's Summit, Missouri, is an example of a program developed by a community college to serve students with disabilities. The ABLE program provides a structured curriculum and intensive support services to help students with learning disabilities and brain injuries make successful transitions to college. During their first semester, students complete a basic core of courses that are designed to orient them to the college environment and to provide them with college "survival skills," such as time-management, note-taking, and research techniques. Though ABLE is open to students of all ages, Longview makes special efforts to market the program to high school students and their parents by collaborating with secondary school counselors and hosting campus visits.

## Conclusion

Policymakers and educators must consider such critical issues as the impact of transition programs on student outcomes, how best to design such efforts, what are the critical components of programs, and who has access to these programs.

**Access.** Given that only a small proportion of the students who might benefit from these services actually receive them, serious attention should be paid to expanding access to them through school-based, comprehensive efforts. Some researchers have referred to college transition programs as a lottery where only the lucky—those in a specific school or assigned to a school counselor aware of such resources—have access.<sup>25</sup>

**Quality.** Performance standards should be established to improve the quality of services available. College transition programs are not held accountable to specific standards of consistency or quality. For example, high attrition rates are regularly noted in the research as being a persistent problem in need of a remedy,<sup>26</sup> but there are no standards or benchmarks for success in this area. An additional challenge is the variety of structures and services, resulting in inconsistent program quality.

**Integration.** Transition programs need to be viewed not as fix-it strategies, but as part of comprehensive counseling programs and as integral to the process for transforming the American high school. Currently, most college transitions programs are “add-ons” and not part of comprehensive counseling programs at the school level. If more students are to be served, then comprehensive counseling programs need to be part of and support the reforms being undertaken by schools. At the high school level, these programs must educate students about the range of career options available and the level of postsecondary education needed to pursue different career interests. Even for students who have firm plans to attend a traditional college or university, integrated career awareness activities are likely to help them make a decision about a school and an academic major that is more grounded in knowledge than in intuition.

**Design.** Attention needs to be given to the critical components of college transition programs. Transition programs should provide a range of postsecondary and training options to students based on their career interests. The focus of many traditional college transition programs is towards helping disadvantaged students access traditional baccalaureate-degree programs. But in today’s economy, there are many other forms of postsecondary education requiring solid academic and technical preparation that lead to successful employment.

**Reaching high expectations.** Most importantly, today’s American high schools need to be designed to set high expectations for all students, while offering a variety of personalized strategies and options to help students reach these high levels of performance. We need to assure that all students finish high school with a strong set of academic knowledge and skills as well as the habits needed for continued education and workplace success. This is the most important prerequisite to helping students make a smooth transition to education and training beyond high school.

## Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Education, NCES. 1996. *National Education Longitudinal Study: 1988-1994: Descriptive Summary Report*. Washington, DC. Available from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs/96175.html>.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Education, NCES. 1996. *National Education Longitudinal Study: 1988-1994: Descriptive Summary Report*. Washington, DC. Available from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs/96175.html>.

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