

College Affordability Is Only Part of the Solution

As tuition costs skyrocket, elected officials have begun offering plans to make college more affordable for high school graduates. But better affordability without better preparation will not solve the bigger challenge—making a college degree more attainable to more Americans.

America's college completion rates are deplorably low.

- **Only about half** of students who enroll in 4-year colleges after high school manage to earn a bachelor's degree within six years.¹
- College going is increasing, but college *completion* is not keeping up. From 1975 to 2001, college going increased 14 percent, but college completion remained at nearly the same level as the early 1970s.²
- Out of 23 countries, *the U.S. was the only country that showed no increase in its postsecondary graduation rate between 2000 and 2005.*³

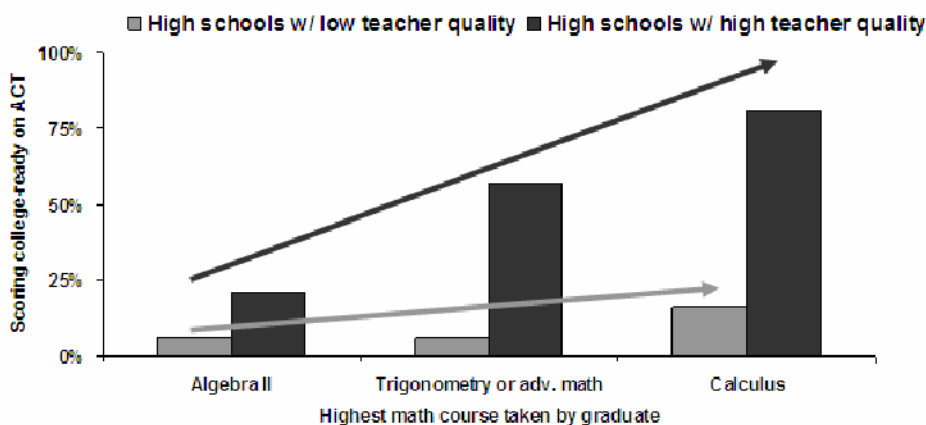
Poor preparation is the problem.

- Many college freshmen have to take remedial classes to learn what they should have learned in high school. More than one in three college freshmen enroll in at least one remedial course, a figure that rises to **42 percent** in the nation's community colleges, which educate a rapidly growing number of America's undergraduates.⁴ In some states, the problem is even worse:
 - In March, the California State University system reported that **56 percent** of freshmen who enrolled in fall 2006 had to take remedial courses in English or mathematics.⁵
 - In May, the Florida Legislature reported that **55 percent** of freshman that enrolled in public postsecondary institutions in fall 2003 required remediation in mathematics, reading, and/or writing.⁶
- Only **30 percent** of students who have to take remedial reading in college ever earn a degree or certificate.⁷
- The rigor of a student's high school curriculum counts more than anything else in predicting whether college freshman will persist and earn a bachelor's degree.⁸
- Even when high school graduates think they have prepared for college, they often find otherwise:
 - Only **one out of four** students *who prepare for college* by taking four years of English and three each of math, science, and social studies actually leaves high school fully prepared to handle college courses.⁹
 - **62 percent** of college students say that knowing what they know now about the expectations of college, they would have taken more challenging courses in high school.¹⁰

- Poor preparation makes it harder to afford college, too. Just at the community college level, families spend \$283 million in tuition for remedial courses every year.¹¹

Boosting college attainment requires strengthening K-12 schools.

- Rigorous Education Standards. Without strong standards to back them up, many high school courses end up being “college prep” in name only. Over the last 15 years, high school students have taken harder courses and earned better grades. But during the same period learning actually **decreased**, with the percentage of 12th graders *proficient* in reading dropping from 40 to 35 percent.¹²
- Effective Teachers. Research shows that good teachers are critical to prepare students for college. One study found that only 16 percent of students who take calculus in high schools with poorly qualified teachers graduate ready for college, compared with 81 percent of calculus completers in schools that have highly qualified teachers.¹³



- Time and Support for Learning. Students cannot go to college unless they complete high school—and only 70 percent do. A national study found that high schools where teachers have the time to provide students with high levels of support manage to *cut dropout rates in half*.¹⁴

¹ The NCHEMS Information Center. (2007). *Six Year College Graduation Rate of Bachelor's Students*. National Center for Higher Education Management Systems. Accessed at www.higheredinfo.org

² Carey, K. (2004, May). *A Matter of Degrees: Improving Graduation Rates in Four-Year Colleges and Universities*. Washington, DC: The Education Trust.

³ Postsecondary Education Opportunity. (2007, November). *Upper Secondary and Tertiary Graduation and Attainment in OECD and Partner Countries: 1996 to 2005*. Oskaloosa, IA: Author.

⁴ Strong American Schools analysis of the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (2003-2004) and the Beginning Postsecondary Students Survey (2003-2004).

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⁵ The California State University. (2007, March 13). *English, Math Proficiency of CSU Freshmen Remains Steady*. Retrieved from <http://www.calstate.edu/PA/news/2007/results.shtml>

⁶ Florida Legislature Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability. (May 2007). *Half of College Students Needing Remediation Drop Out; Remediation Completers Do Almost as Well as Other Students*. (Report No. 07-31). Tallahassee, FL: Author.

⁷ Writ, J., Choy, S., Rooney, P., Provasnik, S., Sen, A., and Tobin, R. (2004). *The Condition of Education 2004, Indicator 18* (NCES 2004-0777). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

⁸ Adelman, C. (2006). *The tool box revisited: Paths to degree completion from high school through college*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education.

⁹ ACT. (2007). *Rigor at Risk: Reaffirming Quality in the High School Core Curriculum*. Iowa City, Iowa: Author.

¹⁰ Achieve, Inc. (2005). *Rising to the Challenge: Are High School Graduates Prepared for College and Work?* Conducted by Peter D. Hart Research Associates/Public Opinion Strategies. Washington, DC: Author.

¹¹ Alliance for Excellent Education. (2006). *Paying Double: Inadequate High Schools and Community College Remediation*. Washington, DC: Author.

¹² Grigg, W., Donahue, P., and Dion, G. (2007). *The Nation's Report Card: 12th-Grade Reading and Mathematics 2005* (NCES 2007-468). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

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¹³ Illinois Education Research Council. (2005). *The Demographics and Academics of College Readiness in Illinois*. Edwardsville, IL: Author. (p. 30)

¹⁴ Croninger, R. & Lee, V. (2001). Social capital and dropping out of high school: Benefits to at-risk students of teachers' support and guidance. *Teachers College Record*, vol. 103. (pp. 548–581)