

Helping Students Navigate the Path to College: What High Schools Can Do

[An Institute of Education Sciences](#) Practice Guide¹

Purpose of the Guide

To identify specific steps that schools, districts, and policymakers can employ to increase access to higher education for all students. Informed by research from the past 20 years, a panel of nationally recognized experts identified evidence-based strategies for increasing access to higher education for students, with a focus on low income students and students who are the first in their family to attend college.

“The courses students take in high school have important consequences for their academic preparation and their ability to access college. Yet, low-income and first-generation students are less likely than other students to complete a rigorous high school curriculum that prepares them for college, either because it is not offered by their high school or they are not encouraged to enroll in it.”

Panel Conclusions

All students should finish high school with the skills required to attend a 2 or 4-year college, without remediation. Multiple barriers exist for students, including family income, family academic history, and the inequity of academic preparation for some students. Beyond these barriers, students often have to compensate for a lack of knowledge about how to apply to and pay for college. Students need assistance with starting down the path toward college at least by 9th grade and guidance to ensure they stay on that path through the end of high school.

Common barriers

- Students who do not start taking college prep courses in the 9th grade are less likely to be academically prepared for college by the 12th grade.
- Students who are not performing at grade level will not be prepared for college level work.
- Students need to know how prepared they are for college academically and receive help in order to catch up.
- Students without adequate counseling or information may not take steps to prepare for college (e.g. selecting a college, applying for financial aid, applying to colleges, taking entrance exams).
- High schools need to develop a “college-going culture” to encourage and support students.

¹ This guide is part of a series of [Practice Guides](#) developed by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), a division of the US Department of Education, to address critical issues in education. A panel of nationally-recognized individuals with expertise in research and the specific topic of a given Practice Guide are enlisted to conduct a rigorous review of existing research. These experts established a series of recommended strategies which are assigned a strong, moderate, or low rating of evidence based on the degree of replicability and generalizability of the studies upon which they are based.

IES Panel Recommendations

Academic Preparation

- 1) Offer courses and curricula that prepare students for college-level work and ensure that students understand what constitutes a college-ready curriculum by 9th grade.
 - Implement a curriculum that prepares all students for college and includes opportunities for college-level work for advanced students.
 - Ensure that students understand what constitutes a college-ready curriculum.
 - Develop a four-year trajectory with each 9th grader that leads to fulfilling a college-ready curriculum.
- 2) Utilize assessment measures throughout high school so that students are aware of how prepared they are for college, and assist them in overcoming deficiencies as they are identified.
 - Identify existing assessments, standards, and data available to provide an estimate of college readiness.
 - Utilize performance data to identify and inform students about their academic proficiency and college readiness.
 - Create an individualized plan for students who are not on track.

“Assessment without action is virtually meaningless.”

College Aspirations and Expectations

- 3) Surround students with adults and peers who build and support their college-going aspirations.
 - Provide mentoring for students by recent high school graduates who enrolled in college or other college-educated adults.
 - Facilitate students’ relationships with peers who plan to attend college through a structured program of extracurricular activities.
 - Provide hands-on opportunities for students to explore different careers, and assist them in aligning postsecondary plans with their career aspirations.

“When students, teachers, and administrators openly talk about preparing for and going to college, the climate in the school can move toward college access.”

Steps for College Entry

- 4) Engage and assist students in completing critical steps for college entry.
 - Ensure students prepare for, and take, the appropriate college entrance or admissions exams.
 - Assist students in their college search.
 - Coordinate college visits
 - Assist students in completing college applications.
- 5) Increase families’ financial awareness and help students apply for financial aid.
 - Organize workshops for parents and students to inform them prior to 12th grade about college affordability, scholarship and aid sources, and financial aid processes.
 - Help students and families complete financial aid forms prior to eligibility deadlines.

Source: Tierney, W.G., Bailey, T., Constantine, J., Finkelstein, N., & Hurd, N.F. (2009). Helping Students Navigate the Path to College: What High Schools Can Do: A Practice Guide (NCEE #2009-4066). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wvc/publications/practicesguides>.