



Washington State Graduates: Course-Taking Patterns in English

As the nature of the nation’s economy and industrial base changes, the skills necessary to enter and to be successful in the workforce have also changed. Literacy - the ability to summarize, to analyze, and to communicate effectively - is vital to success in post-secondary education and careers in a knowledge-based economy (Southern Regional Education Board, 2008).

With the growing concern around preparing students to compete in a global economy and the research linking advanced high school courses to improved student achievement in high school and beyond (Adelman, 2006; Bottoms & Feagan, 2003; Stern & Pavelchek, 2006), education leaders and policy makers have begun to recommend raising graduation requirements. From 2004 to 2008, the number of states requiring all students to take a college and work preparatory curriculum for graduation grew from zero to 20, with an additional 10 states considering increasing graduation requirements to better prepare students for college and career (Achieve, 2004, 2009).

Washington State’s minimum graduation requirement of 19 credits (20 credits in 2013) is among the lowest in the nation, as are requirements for specific content areas (Education Commission of the States, 2006). Currently, 45 states require four or more credits of English to graduate from high school, while Washington State requires only three. However, specific subject area requirements vary by district. The majority (206 or 84%) of Washington districts with high schools require four credits of English; 40 districts require fewer than four credits (SBE database, 2008).

The Washington State Board of Education (SBE) is revising high school graduation requirements to better prepare students for career, postsecondary education, and citizenship. The proposed Core 24 graduation requirements framework, approved in July 2008 with

implementation contingent on funding, is more rigorous than current Washington State graduation requirements and, in some content areas, more rigorous than minimum college admission standards set by the Washington Higher Education Coordinating (HEC) Board (see Table 1).

Table 1.
Comparison of Washington State High School English Graduation Requirements with 2008 Four-year Public College Admission Requirements

Subject	2008 WA State Requirements	HEC Board Requirements	Core 24 Default Requirements
English	3	4*	4*

*Including at least three years of literature

Note. The Core 24 default college and career ready requirements align with the Higher Education Coordinating Board minimum college admissions requirements. Some students may choose an alternative Core 24 pathway.

Prior to proposing new requirements, the SBE commissioned a transcript study. Researchers from The BERC Group examined course-taking patterns for 14,875 students who graduated in 2008 from 100 schools in 100 districts across Washington. This research brief, with an emphasis on English, is one in a series of research briefs. More information about the study can be obtained at http://www.sbe.wa.gov/documents/SBETranscriptStudy2008_FINAL.pdf

This study was conducted to provide a baseline of information that would inform the SBE’s graduation requirements initiative. The proposed Core 24 requirements were not in place for the class of 2008, and students were not trying to meet these requirements.

The results show differences in the percentage of students meeting the minimum English requirements based on current graduation requirements, HEC Board requirements, and the proposed Core 24 default college and career ready requirements. (see Figure 1). While all students met the minimum Washington State graduation requirements, only 78.8% met HEC Board requirements and the Core 24 default requirements.

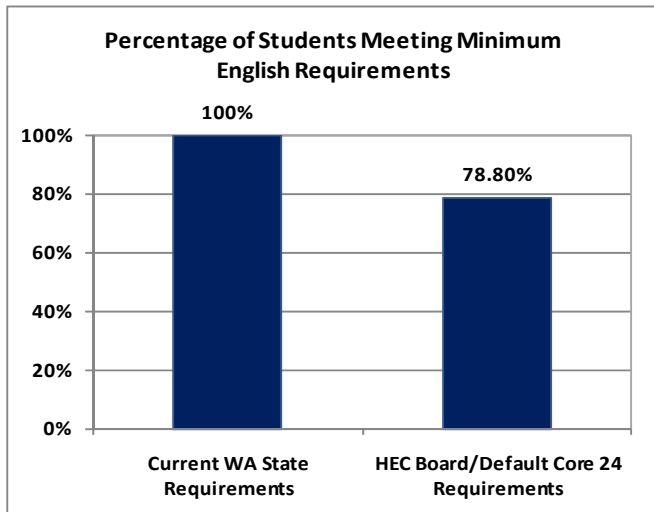


Figure 1. Percentage of Students Meeting Minimum English Requirements

Of the 21.2% of students who did not meet the HEC Board/Default Core 24 requirements, 13.6% took fewer than four credits of English, largely because the district did not require four credits of English to graduate. The remaining 7.6% of students did not meet the criteria of three literature courses. While the HEC Board requirements permit students to take certain kinds of English electives, only one elective of that nature is permitted. Often, these students took more than one elective course, including Newspaper, Debate, Drama as English, or Journalism, or they took remedial, English Language Learner, or special education English courses in place of the literature option.

Table 2 details examples of students’ course taking patterns who met and who did not meet HEC Board /Default Core 24 Requirements.

Table 2.
Sample Schedules

Sample Schedules	Met HEC Board Requirements	Did Not Meet HEC Board Requirements
Freshmen	English 9	English 9
Sophomore	English 10	English 10
Junior	English 11	Creative Writing
Senior	English 12	---
Freshmen	English Lit 9	English Lit 9
Sophomore	English Lit 10	English Lit 10
Junior	English Lit 11	Drama as English
Senior	Drama as English	Speech

Further analysis reveals that nearly all students took English each year of high school, with the exception of the senior year, when 6.5% of seniors did not take English. Students not taking English in the senior year had already met the minimum district requirement of three credits of English and did not need to make up credits for a previously failed English course.

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