



# Washington State Graduates: Course-Taking Patterns in Social Studies

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. A high school education no longer guarantees economic viability, and increasing numbers of jobs will require some technical training or college education. This means high schools must prepare all students for continuing their education after graduation.

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 is among the lowest in the nation, as are requirements for specific content areas (Education Commission of the States, 2006). Currently, 29 states require 3 or more social studies credits to graduate from high school, while Washington State requires 2.5. However, specific subject area requirements vary by district. The majority (214 or 87%) of Washington districts with high schools require more than the state’s minimum social studies 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). In 2008, students were required to take 2.5 social studies credits. This requirement would increase to three social studies credits with the implementation of Core 24 (see Table 1).

**Table 1.**  
*Comparison of Washington State High School Social Studies Graduation Requirements with Four-year Public College Admission Requirements*

Subject	2008 WA State Requirements	2008 HEC Board Requirements	Core 24 Default Requirements
Social Studies	2.5	3	3

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 social studies, 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](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 social studies requirements based on current graduation requirements, HEC Board minimum admissions 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, 90.2% met HEC Board and Core 24 default college and career ready requirements.

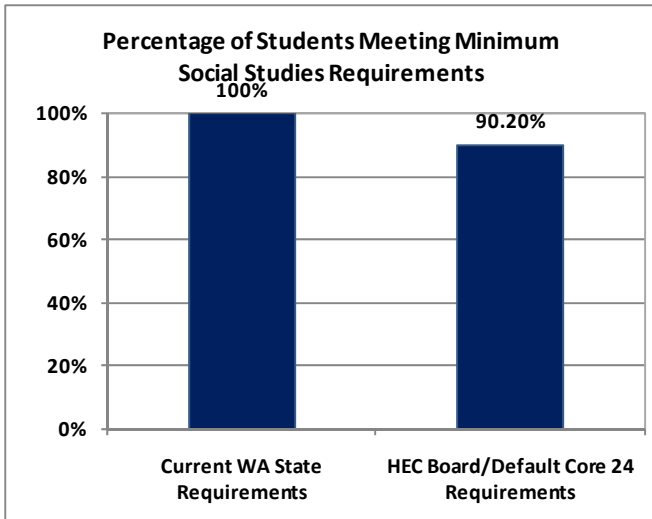


Figure 1. Percentage of Students Meeting Minimum Social Studies Requirements

Of the 9.8% of students who did not meet the HEC Board requirements, 8.1% took fewer than three credits of social studies, largely because the district did not require three credits of social studies to graduate. The remaining 1.7% took social studies courses that did not meet HEC Board standards. In most cases, these consisted of basic courses completed by students in the special education program.

Further analysis reveals that fewer students took social studies in their freshman year with the percentage increasing each subsequent year (see Figure 2).

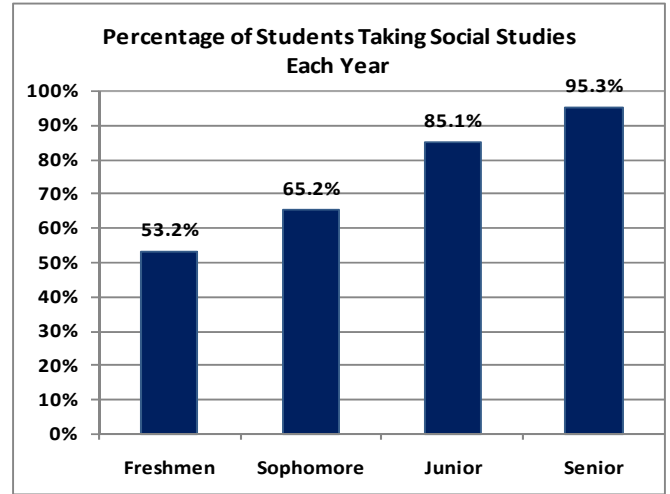


Figure 2. Percentage of Students Taking Social Studies Courses Each Year

The most frequent courses taken by students include United States History, World History, Current World Problems, and Government. Approximately 39.9% of students completed Washington State History in middle school, receiving the designation on their high school transcript. Approximately half of the students received credit for taking this course in middle school, and the other half received a notation of course completion. Students who did not take Washington State History in middle school completed this course in high school.

References:

Achieve Inc. (2004). *The expectations gap: A 50-state review of high school graduation requirements*. Washington, DC: Achieve, Inc.

Achieve Inc. (2009). *Closing the expectations gap: An annual 50-state progress report on the alignment of high school policies and the demands of college and careers*. Washington, DC: Achieve, Inc.

Adelman, C. (2006). *The toolbox revisited: Paths to degree completion from high school through college*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved August 27, 2008 from: [www.ed.gov/rschstat/research/pubs/toolboxrevsit/index.html](http://www.ed.gov/rschstat/research/pubs/toolboxrevsit/index.html).

Bottoms, G. & Feagin, C. (2003). *Improving achievement is about focus and completing the right courses*. Southern Regional Education Board, Washington, DC.

Education Commission of the States. (2006). *State strategies for redesigning high schools and promoting high school to college transitions*. Denver, CO: Author.

SBE database. (2008). <http://www.sbe.wa.gov/documents/Copy%20of%20Graduation%20Requirements%20Database%202010.xls>

Stern, P. & Pavelcheck, D. (2006). *Who's prepared for college work?* Washington State University Social & Economic Sciences Research Center: Olympia, WA.