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Greater Alignment Between High School and State Colleges Would Help Students Better Navigate Path to College Degree, Says Latest Research by Michal Kurlaender*

Students are attending college in greater numbers than ever before. Those with college degrees have significantly better job prospects than their high school counterparts, especially in a growing information economy that demands a highly skilled workforce. However, despite the record numbers of high school students pursuing higher education, the path to a college degree is not always a straightforward one. Cost, location and program “fit” are among the many issues that students must consider when they decide which college or university to attend. Students from underrepresented backgrounds also obtain degrees at lower rates than whites and some Asian groups. Also, the college graduation rate has not increased substantially in recent years. Policymakers must address such obstacles that make it difficult for students to earn degrees if we are to increase the next generation’s participation in the labor market and strengthen our economy.

Education researchers investigating difficulties with

obtaining college degrees have pointed out that “misalignment” between high school and college systems may represent one type of obstacle for students. For example, standards for success in high school and college are often very different from each other. Students who receive B’s in high school may end up in remediation or basic skills courses in college. Remediation in college is also costly and redundant to the education that students already receive in secondary school. Researchers indicate that the high rates of students taking remediation classes represent strong evidence of poor alignment between K-12 and institutions of higher education. According to this perspective, programs that improve the communication or transition of students between these two systems should also increase the number of students who go on to complete their college degrees.

Recent research findings by Michal Kurlaender, a UCEC Site Director, provide some helpful insight into this issue

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of alignment with California high school students across both the community college and Cal State University (CSU) systems. Community colleges represent the most common pathway for students moving toward four-year degrees and they play a key role in offering “second chances” for non-traditional students. In one of her studies¹, Kurlaender investigated the relationship between high school students’ performance on achievement tests and the kinds of courses they took in community college. Specifically, she looked at whether English and math achievement scores (CST’s) were related to students taking either remediation or CSU-transferrable classes in the first year of community college as well as their GPA in these classes. As one might expect, she found that students who scored in the bottom 25% of the CST were more likely to take remedial courses and less likely to take CSU transferrable classes than students who scored in the top 25%.

Findings from Kurlaender’s study also highlighted significant racial differences in community college course taking. She found that whites and Asians were less likely to take remediation classes and have higher GPA’s than blacks and Latinos even at the same levels of high school achievement. While this racial disparity finding is quite troublesome, it also calls our attention to other factors besides student achievement that could help explain why students who score similarly on a standardized test such as the CST may end up in either remedial or CSU-transferrable classes.

One example of such a factor is the college campus itself. Kurlaender’s research sample included a wide swath of community colleges. A further examination of her data revealed that the community college a student attended actually accounted for more of the variation in student course-taking than the student characteristics such as achievement did. In other words, students with similar high school achievement scores, but who attended different community college campuses, ended up taking remediation classes at different rates. Thus, Kurlaender

infers policies at the community college level appeared to have a larger impact on student course placement than the actual achievement of the high school students. Other research by Kurlaender provides additional support for how alignment between two education systems matters for student course taking¹. In another study, she investigated California’s Early Assessment Program (EAP), which was designed to reduce rates of remediation in college by providing high school juniors with feedback about their readiness for math and English classes at CSU. In theory, the information students receive in the program about their readiness should either encourage them to make additional preparations in their senior year or discourage them from applying if they are not ready.

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By looking at students who participated in EAP compared to similar students who applied to CSU when the program wasn’t available yet, Kurlaender found a small, but significant reduction in CSU remediation in English. She also found a small, but non-significant reduction in math. Interestingly, students who received feedback from EAP that they were not quite ready for college level courses were more likely to apply to CSU than students who had “passed out” of these basic skills courses. Based on these findings, Kurlaender concludes that the EAP program increased the ability of students to make informed choices about their coursework across these education systems, which, in effect, reduced the number of students needing remediation, although to a small degree. This line of

research offers some initial confirmation that low-cost programs such as EAP can in fact improve student outcomes and the so-called alignment between high school and college.

Together, Kurlaender's findings indicate that there should be better alignment between high school and community college *as well as* between community college and 4-year, degree granting institutions. In her research, she demonstrates how a lack of alignment between educational systems including K-12, community and 4-year colleges, contributes to inefficient or poor course placement decisions. Consequently, this may lead to higher rates of students taking remediation classes in college for a variety of reasons. However, EAP was one example of a program that provided high school students with more information about their readiness for college and contributed somewhat to reduced remediation rates. In a similar fashion, Kurlaender suggests that community colleges could also use high school achievement scores to help with their initial placement decisions to reduce remediation. Similarly, if programs like EAP were implemented at the community college level, they could also help students make better choices about their readiness for 4-year colleges. Students, counselors, college advisors and campus administrators would all stand to benefit from this increased level of information sharing and communication that results from greater alignment across these education systems.

Notes:

¹ Kurlaender, M., & Larsen, M. (2013). K–12 and Postsecondary Alignment: Racial/Ethnic Differences in Freshmen Course-taking and Performance at California's Community Colleges. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 21, 16.

² Howell, J. S., Kurlaender, M., & Grodsky, E. (2010). Postsecondary preparation and remediation: Examining the effect of the Early Assessment Program at California State University. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 29(4), 726-748.

About the UCEC Site Director:

Michal Kurlaender is Associate Professor of Education at the University of California, Davis. Her work focuses on education policy and evaluation, particularly factors that influence inequality at various stages of the educational attainment process. Currently Dr. Kurlaender is conducting a statewide evaluation of a program intended to improve college readiness for California students.