

Mind the Gaps

How College Readiness Narrows Achievement Gaps in College Success

Executive Summary

A postsecondary credential offers many opportunities and benefits to high school graduates. However, not all students have access to these benefits: while the majority of high school students plan to go on to some form of postsecondary education, there are substantial gaps in college enrollment rates across racial/ethnic groups and annual family income ranges. Worse, students from racial/ethnic minority groups historically underrepresented in higher education are also much less likely than other students to earn a college degree—and this is all too frequently due to lack of preparation for college-level coursework during high school.

In the policy report *Mind the Gaps*, we describe the current state of college readiness of high school students and examine the contributions of pre-college indicators to improving college success specifically among underrepresented racial/ethnic minority students and students from lower-income families. Although nonacademic factors

also influence college success, the report examines several academic factors—including level of academic achievement, coursework preparation, and educational and career planning in high school—that contribute to students’ success during their first year in college and their likelihood of returning to college for a second year.

The table below summarizes some of the academic factors that ACT research shows are directly related to college success: college readiness (defined as meeting or exceeding ACT’s College Readiness Benchmarks), taking the ACT-recommended core curriculum in high school, and taking additional high school coursework beyond core in mathematics and science. Success in college was defined in this research by four indicators: first-year enrollment (immediately following high school graduation), first- to second-year retention, earning a grade of B or higher in selected first-year courses, and earning a first-year grade

Academic Factors Related to Success in College

Academic Factors	College Success Indicators				
	First-year enrollment	First- to second-year retention	B or higher grade in first-year courses	First-year GPA of 3.0 or higher	Decreased need for remedial English or mathematics coursework
College readiness	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Core curriculum	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Additional mathematics coursework	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Additional science coursework	✓	✓	✓	✓	N/A



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point average (GPA) of 3.0 or higher. In a smaller study, ACT also showed that college readiness, taking a core curriculum, and taking additional mathematics and science coursework beyond core have the additional benefit of lowering remediation rates in English and mathematics coursework in the first year of college.

Mind the Gaps discusses factors that contribute to lower college success rates among underrepresented racial/ethnic minority students and students from lower-income families. But the report also shows that *racial/ethnic and family income gaps in college success rates narrow substantially among students who are ready for college.*

We need to ensure that all students, including underrepresented racial/ethnic minority students and students from lower-income families, have access to high school coursework that is of sufficient depth and intensity to adequately prepare them for college and career. We also need to ensure that these students receive better guidance to eliminate the discrepancies that exist between their educational aspirations and the high school coursework they plan to complete to be prepared to meet these aspirations.

Policymakers and educators have the power to help these students substantially narrow the achievement gaps that currently prevent students from taking full advantage of the college experience. With this goal in mind, the results of this research suggest the following recommendations:

- 1. Close the gap between student aspirations and high school course plans by ensuring that all students take at least a core curriculum in high school.**
- 2. Close the gap in the alignment of high school courses with college and career readiness standards by focusing high school core courses on the essential standards for college and career readiness.**

- 3. Close the gap in the quality of high school courses across schools by offering all students rigorous high school core courses that cover the essential knowledge and skills needed for college and career readiness in sufficient depth and intensity.**

Racial/ethnic and family income gaps may seem large and persistent, but research offers a straightforward remedy: help to ensure that underrepresented racial/ethnic minority students and students from lower-income families are ready for the challenges of postsecondary education through a rigorous core curriculum that is clearly focused on the essential knowledge and skills for college and career readiness.

Helping to prepare all students to benefit equally from postsecondary education and training should be the mission of every high school in the United States; the research results presented in *Mind the Gaps* lead to recommendations for making this happen. By making sure that all students become ready for college and career—in particular, by ensuring that high school core course offerings are rigorous and that all students are given the opportunity to take additional, higher-level coursework beyond core in mathematics and science—some of our country's seemingly most intransigent social disparities can be reduced.

Visit www.act.org/research/policymakers/reports/MindtheGaps.html to read the full *Mind the Gaps* policy report.



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