

National Association of State Boards of Education

➔ Beyond College Readiness: College Awareness as a First Step

By Sarah-Jane Lorenzo

The first step toward college attendance is students' awareness of their college and career options, but few states have standards that require them to learn about these options during the school day. Students who do not receive college and career guidance at home thus receive limited exposure to a realm of possibilities as they prepare and apply for jobs or postsecondary education.

State boards are in a powerful position to augment their states' college readiness standards with college awareness initiatives. State boards should build plans that provide access to college guidance for students in all communities. And while not every student

must attend college to attain postsecondary success, every student needs to set postsecondary goals, and they must have individual support and mentoring to identify the best path to achieve those goals. Students should set goals well before their senior year so they can identify the courses and experiences needed to make their goals attainable.

Nearly all state boards have the authority to write college and career awareness standards or to enhance existing programs in their states. By requiring college and career awareness in all schools, state boards create opportunities for student exploration and goal setting.

These efforts can increase college-going rates (the map shows the variation among states). When students hear more about

college options within their communities, they are more likely to apply.¹ Furthermore, access to college counseling significantly increases the odds that first-generation students will attend postsecondary schools.² But college counseling is not available to all students, and not all students who receive counseling obtain the same information about college opportunities.

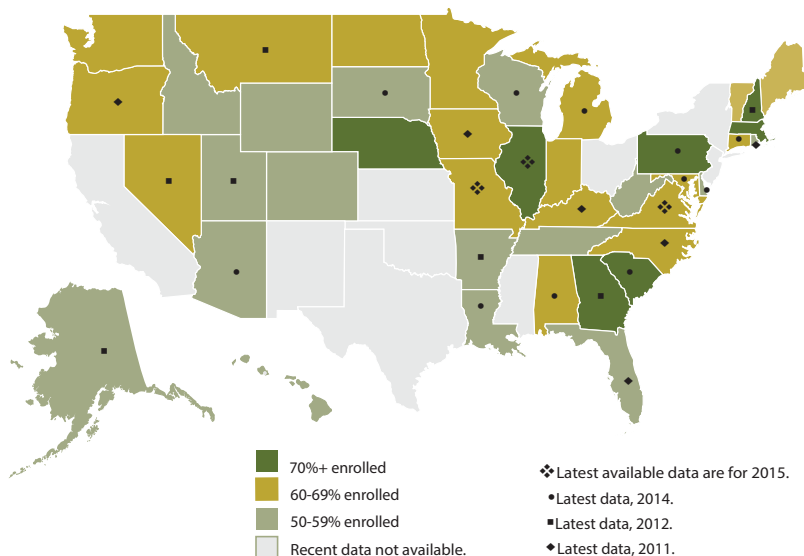
States have adopted several strategies to broaden college and career awareness and provide all students an equal chance at postsecondary success. These strategies include setting college awareness standards, requiring high schools to hire school guidance counselors, partnering with institutes of higher education, and using federal GEAR UP college readiness grants. Of these strategies, institution of college awareness standards is most likely to ensure that all students in a state learn what they need to know about their postsecondary options.

WASHINGTON'S COLLEGE AWARENESS STANDARDS

With its postgraduation preparedness program, the High School and Beyond Plan, the Washington State Board of Education is a leader in college awareness standards. Its program requires students to start setting postsecondary goals in eighth grade and continue piecing their plans together throughout high school. Students' personalized plans, which are created in collaboration with school staff members and shared with parents or guardians, aim to ensure that all students think about their postgraduate options while they are planning their path through high school.

The program does not set specific guidelines for what each plan should include and gives local education agencies autonomy in setting guidelines. However, the Washington state board suggests that plans require students to identify a career goal; identify the education needed to reach that career goal; research postsecondary programs, admission requirements, and financial aid opportunities; and participate in experiential opportunities

College Enrollment Rates for High School Graduates,* 2013 (percent)



* Data definitions vary by state: Many count fall enrollment after graduation; others count enrollment within 12 months, 16 months, or two years.

such as college site visits or job shadowing. The board also suggests that students create resumes and develop practical skills to use after high school, such as the ability to create a budget.

PARTNERSHIPS, GRANTS, AND COUNSELING MANDATES

Other state strategies are less likely than standards to reach all students but can be effective for some students. College partnerships and GEAR UP grant funding often target specific regions or school districts. A traditional means of raising college awareness is through guidance counselors, who provide personalized support to students and help them set goals and determine steps needed to achieve them.

Not all states require schools to employ counselors, and those that do often set ratios that mandate as few as one counselor per 450 students. Such limited employment of counselors cannot guarantee that all students will receive the one-on-one guidance and support needed to make college accessible. Recognizing this, some states have included postsecondary readiness standards within their counseling mandates. Idaho is one: Its counseling standards require all students to create a parent-approved plan for their high school coursework and postgraduation options by the end of eighth grade.

IDAHO'S COUNSELING STANDARDS

In 2010, Idaho's rate of students continuing to college after graduation was among the nation's lowest, at 45 percent.³ This data, along with a projection of the need for advanced degrees in the workforce, spurred Idaho's State Board of Education to call for a comprehensive school counseling program that requires all students to create and maintain an annually updated, parent-approved learning plan beginning in eighth grade that identifies academic courses for each student to take. Schools are also required to provide students individualized planning opportunities, such as personal meetings with school counselors, to assist them with educational and career development. The Idaho counseling standards do not specify that all students must receive guidance specific to postsecondary plans and could be strengthened by

including a postsecondary planning provision, but the Idaho state board supplements the learning plan standards by promoting college awareness through several statewide initiatives.

The board's boldest initiative, its Direct Admissions program, this year proactively admitted all 20,171 Idaho high school seniors to one of the state's eight public colleges and universities or six community colleges and technical schools. Students were admitted to public colleges or technical schools based on their senior-year grade point averages and scores on college entrance exams.

Admittance is provisional: Students have to follow some formal application procedures in order to enroll. To assist them, the state recently launched a website, Next Steps Idaho, which has information and resources to help students apply and learn about financial aid.

Idaho's Direct Admissions program complements another initiative, Complete College Idaho, a strategic plan supporting the goal that 60 percent of Idaho residents between ages 25 and 34 hold postsecondary degrees or certificates by 2020. The Idaho state board also encourages districts and local education agencies to participate in College Application Week, a nationwide program that partners high schools with local colleges and universities and provides students one-on-one assistance as they work on applications.

COLLEGE AWARENESS STEPS FOR STATE BOARDS

The strategies employed in Washington and Idaho provide just a few examples of actions state boards can take to broaden student access to college guidance and increase consciousness of the need for postsecondary planning programs to supplement quality curricula.

To maximize the positive effect of standards and statewide awareness programs, state boards can target state counseling mandates as a point of reform and work to increase the availability of personalized guidance counseling. Such counseling can ensure that someone familiar with a student's goals is helping them optimize their path and overcome obstacles.

However, state boards must determine whether implementation is feasible. State boards must ask whether districts are employing enough counselors to serve all students and whether counselors' administrative duties are so burdensome that they interfere with their ability to spend adequate time with students. Some states have imposed limits on the percentage of time counselors can spend on administrative tasks in order to maximize the time spent providing guidance.

College awareness programs are a crucial step up from the college readiness programs states have worked hard to strengthen in recent years. These awareness programs are essential to ensure that all students know their postsecondary options and move through high school with the future in mind.

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NOTES

1. M. Wade Derden and Michael T. Miller, "Predicting Postsecondary Attendance through Cultural Norming: A Test of Community Expectancy," *Critical Questions in Education* 5, no. 2 (2014): 112–24, <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1046705.pdf>.
2. Chung Pham and Tracy Keenan, "Counseling and College Matriculation: Does the Availability of Counseling Affect College-Going Decisions among Highly Qualified First-Generation College-Bound High School Graduates?" *Journal of Applied Economics & Business Research* 1 (2011): 12–24, http://www.aebrjournal.org/uploads/6/6/2/2/6622240/3_cp_tk_college.pdf.
3. National Information Center for Higher Education Policymaking and Analysis, "College-Going Rates of High School Graduates Directly from High School, 2010," <http://www.higheredinfo.org/dbrowser/index.php?measure=32>.