

IQS Research

Special Report

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PREPARING STUDENTS TO TRANSITION FROM HIGH SCHOOL TO COLLEGE

A review of the perceptions surrounding college and
the challenges students face as they prepare for their
collegiate experience



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THE TRANSITION FROM HIGH SCHOOL TO COLLEGE:

UNDERSTANDING THE GAP BETWEEN PERCEPTIONS AND REALITIES

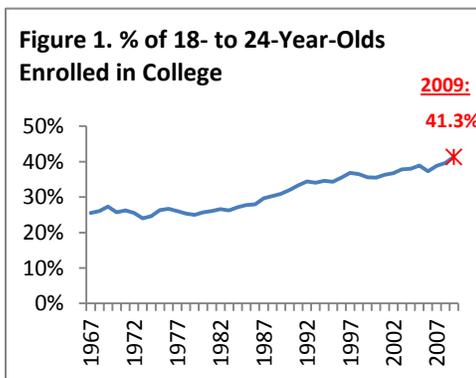
There is a pressing issue in the education of our youth: the increased dropout rates of college students. But the challenge of preparing our youth for the transition from high school to college is a difficult one. The problem does not exist in promoting the importance of college to students. Today’s high school student understands the importance of college. Some 96% of students believe college is important, and 98% of them intend to go to college. However, the true challenge is converting those perceptions into realistic expectations that allow the student to better understand what college requires and how to be successful once there.

Despite the fact that an overwhelming majority of students believe college is an avenue worth pursuing, only 68 percent actually enroll immediately after high school. Of those students who do enroll, 42 percent, will not complete their degree within six years.

Thus, the prerogative of educators, parents, and school administrators must be to increase the preparedness of students so that the transition between high school and college is one that is met with realistic expectations and a better knowledge of what is required to be successful in college. But the solution is not an easy one. The purpose of this research brief is to elucidate the obstacles students face in making this transition and to provide a compass by which meaningful influencers in students’ lives can better address the problem.

EXPLORING THE PROBLEM – INCREASED INCIDENCE OF COLLEGE DROPOUTS

Underlying this entire issue is the end result of increased dropout rates in the collegiate space. The simple fact is that despite the positive signs that we are seeing with increased enrollment, the high rates of failure overshadow the process. To put this into perspective, the United States has witnessed a positive trend in college enrollment over the past several decades. Between 1999 and 2009, there was a 38 percent increase in enrollment (when adjusted for population growth).



1 “Community Perceptions of Higher Education” (2010), IQS Research. A study of 300 students (7th through 12th grades) and 1,000 adults in the Greater Louisville community that measured perceptions and attitudes toward the collegiate experience

2 According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, October 2011

3 Figures are from U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2011)

The fact that enrollment has increased is an indicator of two things:

- College is becoming more accessible to students.
- Students are being informed about the importance of a college education.

But what becomes evident in this discourse is the fact that students are ill prepared for college. A 2012 NCES study⁴ showed that 42% of students who begin their work towards a bachelor's degree will not graduate within six years. A surprisingly high 70 percent of those seeking an associate's degree will fail to obtain it within three years.

Although college is a noble pursuit, there are indeed challenges that have gone unaddressed in the push to further educate our population. And this in turn has unintended but real consequences for both students and the economy at large.

ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM – WHY THE HIGH DROPOUT RATES

The solution to this problem of high dropout rates is not an easy one, but must be addressed at the very core of the student thought and behavior process. To be sure, academic failure is a major reason why students drop out of college. However, it is not the only reason, and it is oftentimes a symptom of missing behaviors once in college. So while we can argue for academic preparedness, we must also recognize the need to prepare for the new and challenging situation of the college classroom.

The reason why student perceptions must be addressed is because, quite simply, these perceptions are not in step with the realities of college. Our own research has consistently pointed to a severe gap between student expectations about college and the realities they will indeed face. This in turn contributes to an increased likelihood that a student will not be successful in his or her collegiate career.

Many students simply do not understand what is expected of them in the college classroom. These unknown expectations, however, begin early in life, and are not simply a result of bad guidance in the last few years of high school. Thus, in order for real change to occur, the attitude toward college must begin shifting when students are young.

The Disparities between Perceptions and Reality

A recent IQS Research study⁵ showed that real disparities exist between what students expect college to be and what college actually entails. While we know that most students *intend* to go to college, largely because of their beliefs that college is important, it has also become just as evident that students do not know what to expect the first day they step into a college classroom or how to be successful thereafter.

⁴ National Center for Education Statistics (2012), *The Condition of Education*

⁵ *Ibid.* 1, p1

Approximately half of students who start work towards a bachelor's degree will complete it within six years.

42% of students will not complete their postsecondary degree within six years.

A major contributor to why students drop out of college is the gap that exists between perceptions about college and the realities of earning a degree.

Only one in 9 students believes that college will be “difficult.”⁶ This is alarming given the low success rate for students in their first year of college. Furthermore, we see that the real divide in perceptions is not with importance, but rather unrealistic estimations of the dedication and behaviors that must be present in order for success in college to occur.

In addition, nearly half of students in grades 7 through 12 expressed that they do not believe college will be difficult for them.

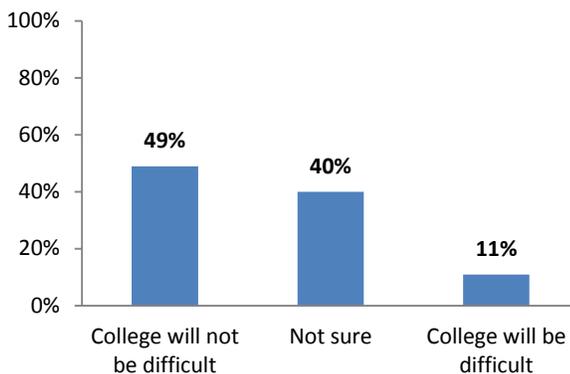
If students believe that college is not going to be a difficult experience for them, then one can hypothesize that their behaviors will indeed reflect this perception in terms of how they prepare to make that transition from high school into college and the behaviors they demonstrate once in college. And that is exactly what we see among first year students in college.

If we consider the thought pipeline for these students, we find the following: Students believe college is important, which encourages them to enroll in college. These aspirations are quite grounded in the sense that students can articulate where they want to go to college and *why* it is important for them to get a degree. But because these aspirations are not coupled with realistic expectations of how to prepare for college, one of two outcomes often results:

- 1) Students decide not to enroll in college because they realize they are not prepared.
- 2) They do enroll and this lack of preparedness contributes to their eventual failure in college.

What becomes increasingly evident is that students are not aware of the real challenges that college will place upon them. This piece of information is simply not being embraced by the students as they prepare to make the transition to college. This notion is further supported by the way students express their concerns (or lack thereof) about their future college experience.

Figure 2. Perceptions Around Difficulty of Attending College, Opinions of Students



Only 11% of students believe that college will be difficult.

Some 49% specifically indicate that it will not be difficult.

⁶ *Ibid.* 1, p1

Underlying Obstacles Facing Students: A Largely Unrealized Challenge

We also see evidence in how students specifically articulate the challenges they think they will encounter while enrolled in college. This certainly helps to identify where gaps in perceptions occur so that they can be better addressed.

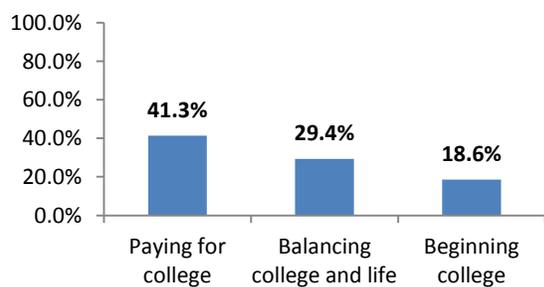
Beginning the Collegiate Experience

Fewer than 1 in 5 students are concerned about how to begin their collegiate experience. This is concerning because students who do not adopt the right behaviors early on in their college career are more likely to perform poorly in school. And given the evidence of the gap that exists between perception and reality in opinions surrounding the difficulty of college, it makes sense that only a small percentage of students would be concerned about knowing how to begin; particularly when they view this transition as a continuation of high school.

A yearlong study⁷ of first year college students revealed that lower performers (academically) had behaviors that were distinctly different from those students with higher GPA's. These lower performers did not study as much, were not as involved in peer groups related to coursework, and were less comfortable using resources available to them (namely professors and college counselors/advisors).

In short, they did not effectively acclimate into the college culture. So many times academics are blamed for high dropout rates. However, while academic performance is indeed the lynchpin in determining matriculation, we must also be aware of the attitudinal and behavioral hindrances that contribute to poor academic performance.

Figure 3. A Lack of Concern: Percentage of Students Who Think Obstacles Will Affect Them



Acclimating to the culture of college is vital to being successful in the classroom and moving on to the sophomore year. However, those who cannot balance the various aspects of their lives will have more trouble succeeding in college. First year college students who are slow to adopt particular behaviors, such as study habits, time management, and flexibility are more likely to perform poorly.

Many students are slow to adopt successful behaviors in college that will help them manage juggling their personal lives with college.

Just 29% of students indicate that balancing life with college will be a challenge.

Even fewer students are concerned about beginning the college experience.

Acclimating to the culture of college is vital to being successful in the classroom and moving on to the sophomore year.

Balancing Life with College

Nearly 70 percent of students do not believe that balancing school with their personal and work lives will be a real problem for them in college. However, those who cannot

⁷ IQS Research study that tracked first year college students on their opinions of college and its challenges throughout the course of their first year.

Many students undoubtedly enter their chosen postsecondary institution with the idea that it is simply an extension of their high school experience. They are unaware that college demands more discipline to manage the freedoms they are given as an autonomous student. Given this, many of the behaviors that are required for success are not adopted until later in their collegiate career when it may be too late. Some of the behaviors that we have found among higher performing students include:

- Adopt study habits that reflect coursework needs throughout the semester – oftentimes studying at least 6 hours per week starting at the beginning of the semester.
- Utilize appropriate resources available to them, namely professors and academic advisors, for help when needed.
- Maintain a realistic attitude about the challenges college will present – successful students were more likely to indicate college is difficult.

Furthermore, if a student has to dropout in his or her first year because of academic failure it is rare that the academic failure was the only issue. Rather, the inability to manage school demands and life outside of class, as well as a failure to adopt appropriate external academic activities (e.g. studying) all compound and lead to poor academic performance.

What becomes evident throughout the data is that students are not prepared to mentally (and academically in many situations) adjust to the demands of college life.

Paying for College – Awareness, but Not Fully Understood

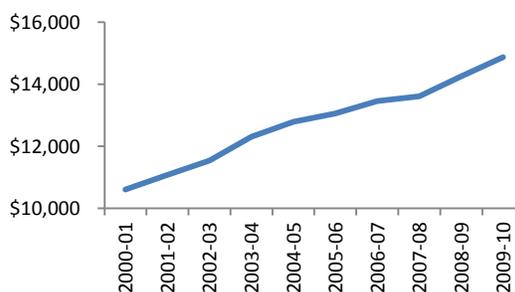
Although we find a higher percentage of students are aware of the costs of college, they still do not fully grasp the responsibilities necessary to obtain the funds and how to manage those funds. On average, a student will pay nearly \$15,000 per academic year at a public university.⁸

And this cost to students is expected to continue to increase.

Since 1990, tuition and fees at four-year public universities has increased 150 percent.⁹

Just over 40 percent of students believe that paying for college will be a challenge to their success in college¹⁰. This is also a concern among parents, as nearly 7 out of 10

**Figure 4: Tuition Continues to Increase:
Cost of 4-Year Public Institutions**



A common perception that contributes to high dropout rates in college is the belief that college is simply a continuation from high school.

While many students are aware that college is expensive, they do not fully grasp the responsibilities of applying for and managing financial aid.

⁸ Figures from National Center for Education Statistics, and costs include room and board

⁹ Figures are from The Wall Street Journal, 2012. Average cost not including room and board.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 1, p1

of them are worried about the costs of college. In short, there is indeed an awareness of how expensive college will be, but the burden is not fully realized, particularly by students.

A recent national study¹¹ discovered that more high school students worry about financing their education than about getting into college and being successful in college. This pressure not only manifests itself in more loans being taken by students, but also in the percentage of students who use their credit card for living and school-related expenses. One-quarter of students use a credit card to pay for tuition, and 41 percent of these students will carry a debt balance a year after this transaction is made.¹²

What this data reveals is that while paying for college is a concern, there is little awareness of how to find responsible means to pay. While there are some federal funds and other sources of funding available, students are not familiar with the required processes of filling out a FAFSA form or applying for scholarships and grants. Instead, many rely on credit cards or working multiple jobs to manage the cost of college, which in turn can lead to their eventual failure in the classroom.

Changing Perceptions to Align With the Realities of College

The question then remains, how should we go about making the realities of college known to students? There are several key indicators that can help to answer this question. The means of going about implementation, however, is the charge of parents, teachers, and school administrators.

Starting Early: Parent's Role in Shaping Perceptions of College and Mixed Messages that They Send

Not surprisingly, parents play a key role in student's academic success. The literature is saturated with research that elucidates the relationship between parental involvement and student outcomes. And while it is certainly important that parents be involved in their child's schooling, it is also important that they send the right messages about school.

Parents can unintentionally send mixed messages to their children regarding the importance of college and what it takes to succeed once there. For instance, there is no question that parents indicate that college is important. Nearly all parents (94%) surveyed¹³ agree that a college education is highly important for students today to be successful as adults. Given a parent's position in the life of their child, it is very important that this belief is passed on to the student.

¹¹ "MetLife Survey of the American Teacher," 2011

¹² According to U.S. Federal Reserve Data

¹³ A 2006 IQS Research study of nearly 400 adults looking at the perceptions surrounding math and science curriculum initiatives.

However, the same research also indicated that only slight majorities of adults believe that math is “extremely important” to success in college. These majorities wane as we look at how important knowledge of mathematics is to life in general. Science is looked upon with much less importance to success in both college and life.

So why is this so concerning? It is not a matter of whether

parents fail to realize the importance of a college education. On the contrary, multiple studies¹⁴ have highlighted that the perceptions surrounding *importance* of a college degree among adults is very positive. What becomes concerning is the message that parents may inadvertently be relaying to their school-aged children

Figure 5. Sending Mixed Messages - Parent's Opinions of Math and Science

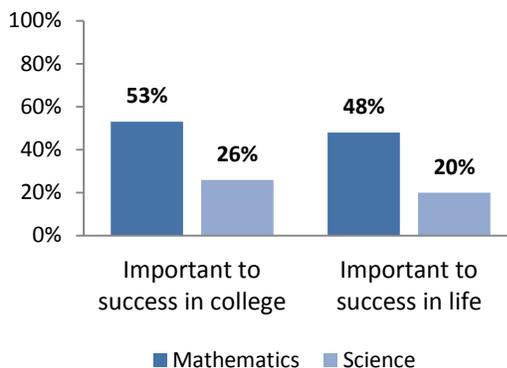
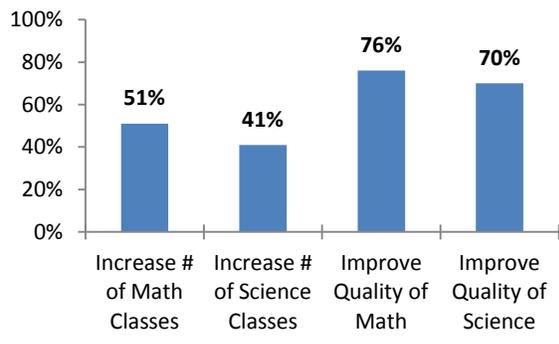


Figure 6. Parental Support of Changes in High School Math & Science Classes



Yet, only half of parents support increasing the number of math classes a student must take, and only 41 percent believe required science classes should be increased in number. And while a majority of parents believe that the quality of these classes should be improved, there is still an alarming percentage of parents who are not supportive of such an endeavor.

about the importance of mathematics and science as a tool to help ensure success in college. More rigorous math and science education has been linked to a higher likelihood that a student will be accepted into a competitive college. Furthermore, this has a bigger impact on the likelihood of acceptance than raising one’s GPA.¹⁵

Parents often send mixed messages to their children about the importance of college and the academic process to be successful.

Most parents believe that college is important to success.

However, there is little emphasis on mathematics and science in the overall picture of this success.

Success in these types of courses is a strong predictor of success in college.

¹⁴ IQS Research studies in 2006 and 2010 reveal vast majorities of adults believe that a college education is of high importance.

¹⁵ A 2010 analysis of selective admissions and qualified applicants by Jim Hull of the Center for Public Education

When this Conversation Takes Place has an Impact

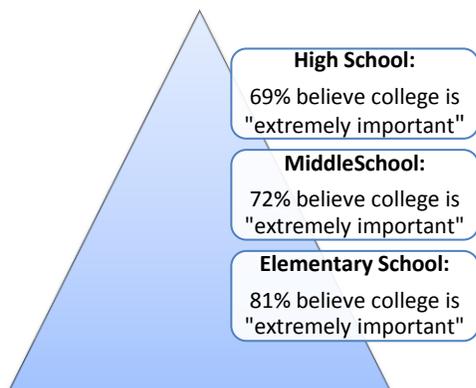


Figure 7. Collegiate Discourse Should Begin Early

Research shows a clear relationship between early discourse with a child about college and the ability for that child to comprehend the realities of college by the time they are ready to transition from high school to the university. The earlier conversations with students begin, the more realistic the student’s expectations of college will be. Students who were talked to about college at a younger age were more likely to believe that (1) college was more important and (2) college will be difficult.

If the conversation about college begins at an early age, then students will form more realistic expectations about college.

Particularly if we look at perceptions of importance and categorize based on first conversation about college, we see a clear pattern emerge around grade groupings. The figure above shows the percentage of students who believe that college is “extremely important” among those who had the collegiate discourse in elementary school, middle school, and high school.

The Role of the High School and College Counselor

Just as parents, counselors can be instrumental in the academic and attitudinal development of students. However, our findings have shown reluctance for students to utilize counselors for information, both while in high school and once in college.

In high school, a majority of students are not getting college information directly from their counselors. While findings suggest that counselors are the biggest single source of awareness, just over 4 in 10 students indicated that they receive information about college from their counselor in high school. Additionally, high school counselors are perceived to be unapproachable and unknowledgeable in the eyes of the students.¹⁶ As a result, the value of this resource is often diminished by those who need it most.

There is reluctance among students to approach counselors and advisors for information about college. This continues into college, as students are hesitant to utilize these resources for help.

Moving beyond high school into college, students continue to have distant relationships with the counseling and advising resources available to them. This is not necessarily a result of low awareness on the part of the students, but rather a disinclination to go to them for help when needed.

Furthermore, this phenomenon is not unique to high or low performing students, but rather is universal across academic strata. Given the confusion surrounding the transition into college and the first year of the collegiate experience, the role of the

¹⁶ According to multiple studies by IQS Research, including a 2007 yearlong study of High School juniors and seniors from across the state of Kentucky.

counselor can be a very influential one, should the student be made more comfortable and knowledgeable about the benefit of the resources available.

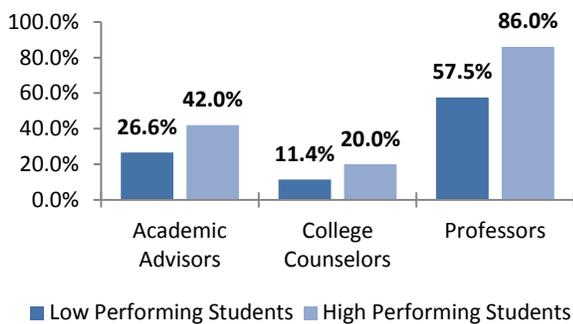
Educators as a Source of Inspiration and Awareness

To be sure, the role of the educator is to prepare students for academic success and to increase the student's knowledge. However, there is also a role for educators as well in this transition beyond the academic initiative. Teachers can be a great influence on students' aspiration not only to attend college, but also be successful once there. Given their relation to the student, the educator has a unique insight into the student's abilities and perceptions, and can use the data presented in this report to promote a realistic perception of what college will entail.

Moreover, educators can be a great source of awareness about the intricacies of the transition. Less than 20 percent of students indicated that they get their information about college from teachers. This is a startling low number, given the teacher's role in the student's life.

Moving beyond high school into college, professors and instructors must make themselves more available to the student. This includes working to break down the barriers that contribute to a students' reluctance to utilize the teacher as a resource. Students who are less academically successful not only start off with more apprehension toward asking professors for help but increase this reluctance as the semester progresses. Just as with counselors, this reluctance is an issue of perceived approachability.

Figure 8. Breaking Down the Barriers: Percentage of First Year College Students Comfortable Using Resources



Educators have a unique position to help the student set real expectations about college.

CONCLUSION

At the heart of this, students are largely not being directed to ensure that they have a good understanding of what to expect in college. In turn, they are not prepared for the realities of the collegiate experience, which occurs at all levels of postsecondary education (four and two year institutions alike).

While specific suggestions on how to improve the situation cannot be made by IQS Research, we can say that the data clearly suggests that there needs to be a more concerted effort in the years leading up to high school graduation to make sure that all students intending to go to college have a better formed opinion of what they will encounter in the college classroom. Contributions to this understanding surrounding the transition to college must be made by:

- Teachers/Educators
- Counselors
- School administrators
- Parents

Once in college, there must also be an effort to quickly acclimate the student to his or her new life including study groups, homework, and available resources. Academic preparation is not enough, as this is oftentimes not the only contributor to dropout rates in college. Rather, the attitudinal perceptions and academic requirements surrounding what college will be as an experience beyond high school also need to be understood.

IQS Research specializes in opinion and attitudinal research for education, government and for-profit entities. Through the use of scientifically based data analysis combined with extensive data collection ability, IQS Research is able to answer the complex questions facing organizations today. The contents of this Special Report are derived from both proprietary research and national data from a variety of public institutions.

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