

ADMISSIONS & STUDENT AID

High-School Diploma Options Multiply, but May Not Set Up Students for College Success

By *Katherine Mangan* | OCTOBER 19, 2015

For too many students, high-school diplomas are "tickets to nowhere" that offer "false assurances" that graduates are ready for college or a job, according to a report released on Monday.

The report, "How the States Got Their Rates," was issued by Achieve, a nonprofit group that works with states to raise academic standards and graduation requirements.

As states try to increase their high-school graduation rates and tailor programs to different goals, the number of diploma options has become "incredibly complex," the report notes. It's not always clear to students and their parents which ones are likely to set them up for success, said Michael Cohen, president of Achieve.

The increase in high-school graduation rates nationwide is generally a good thing, Mr. Cohen said. But when credentials are handed out for work that doesn't prepare someone for college or a career, "these diplomas are tickets to nowhere that provide false assurances of academic readiness for success in college and career."

Achieve's report was released amid growing concerns that students graduating from high school aren't ready for college. Last week the American Association of Community Colleges, the Association of Community College Trustees, and Higher Ed for Higher Standards announced a plan to work together to push for more-demanding standards for high-school graduation.

The three groups reported that about half of first-year students at two-year colleges and one in five of those entering four-year institutions require remedial coursework before they can start college-level classes.

That patterns not only slows students down, but also costs students and taxpayers billions of dollars per year, the report says.

A College-Readiness Gap

In a study underlying its report, Achieve analyzed the 93 diploma options available across all 50 states and the District of Columbia for the class of students who graduated from high school in 2014. It looked at how many diplomas a state offered and whether it had one that met college- and career-ready expectations in English and mathematics.

The study also examined testing requirements for each kind of diploma and how student outcomes were reported.

The group found, among other things, that:

- Many states give students multiple diploma options, a number of which fall short of assuring readiness for college.

- Twenty states do not offer a diploma that requires students to complete college- and career-ready standards in English and math.
- Only nine states that offer multiple diplomas report which students complete which requirements, making it hard for policy makers to interpret high-school graduation rates.

Achieve, which has worked to develop and promote the Common Core State Standards, defines college or career readiness as taking at least three years of math and four years of rigorous English.

Achieve describes the state standards as a "clearly defined set of expectations" in English and math, but to others they remain highly politicized and deeply controversial.

So, too, are the responses many states have made to growing concerns about the slow progress students make once they are placed in remedial courses. Some, including Connecticut, Florida, and Tennessee, have taken steps to allow nearly all students to enroll directly in college-level courses, with help on the side.

Evidence of just how wide the gap is between high-school graduation and college readiness has some educators worried that some students are being set up for failure. The college-readiness gap is also putting an unnecessary burden on two-year colleges, says a statement from the community-college groups about their effort to raise graduation standards.

"Although community colleges have time-tested expertise in filling the need for remediating students and preparing them for college," it says, "providing remediation to 50 percent or more of entering students is a tremendous strain on resources that can be applied to teaching students at the college level."

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