

# READY OR NOT: IT'S TIME TO RETHINK THE 12TH GRADE

HOW HIGH SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES CAN SHARE RESPONSIBILITY FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

This series takes on one of the most pressing problems of our time—**how to prepare many more young people, especially those from underserved communities, to succeed in college and careers.** While this is a topic of increasing concern across K-12 and higher education, our particular focus is on the last year of high school and the transition to the first year of college.

As critics have observed, this crucial period has long been a lost opportunity in American education. Millions of teenagers stumble through senior year, barely completing required coursework, or unable to make up enough ground to graduate. Many who do enter college a few months later show up on campus without the skills for college-level work. Placed in remedial classes, far too few move on to credit-bearing courses or ever complete a credential. The emphasis today on college and career readiness for all students further heightens the concerns about what does—and doesn't—happen in 12th grade, especially to help low-income and first-generation college students prepare for what lies ahead.

*Ready or Not: It's Time to Rethink the 12th Grade* argues that such problems cannot be fixed by K-12 acting alone. While our nation's secondary and postsecondary systems have always operated independently, it is time now to consider a joint approach, a strategy that brings together high school and college educators where their interests converge. We propose a shared transition zone, where both systems assume responsibility for college readiness and success, and where they collaborate in key ways to substantially increase the number of youth truly prepared for college and careers.

Why is now the time? Despite deeply rooted challenges to secondary-postsecondary collaboration, there is currently momentum in cross-sector policy and practice that can be built upon to create bigger breakthroughs. Implementation of college-and-career-ready standards and assessments, which judge the

college and career readiness of 11th graders, is already inspiring more K-12/college cooperation. For example, numerous colleges have validated college-and-career-ready assessments, agreeing to use strong results as evidence that high school graduates can bypass remedial courses and immediately begin college-level work upon entry. In some states, secondary and postsecondary institutions have co-created 12th grade transition courses in English and math to help students catch up and become college ready by the end of senior year.

There are also recent precedents of high school/college partnerships that have raised college readiness and success rates, led by innovators across the country and documented by leading researchers. They are neither panaceas nor comprehensive models. But they do provide significant examples of evidence-based practices and enabling policies that can be extrapolated to envision how practitioners and policymakers can take steps toward a shared transition zone.

With support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Jobs for the Future convened and consulted with leaders of such efforts to discuss what kinds of innovative strategies are most likely to put more 12th graders on a path to college and career success. Reflecting the collective wisdom of these groups, the series outlines evidence-based principles of partnerships, practice, and policy that can drive a resurgent effort to rethink—and, eventually, remake—the transition from high school to college.

The five papers in this series delve into topics that emerged as critical to this vital agenda:

**1. Why 12th Grade Must Be Redesigned Now—And**

**How:** Joel Vargas of JFF provides the rationale for restructuring 12th grade and tying it more tightly to the first year of college through new high school and college partnerships. The paper proposes a new common benchmark of readiness that high schools and colleges can work together to meet to ensure momentum toward earning postsecondary credentials. It also describes promising practices and addresses the formidable challenges of the inherent norms underlying our education systems that must be changed if we are to succeed in creating a shared transition zone. The paper concludes with ideas for how state policymakers and local practitioners can start the shift to a new normal.

**2. Creating High School and College Partnerships to Increase Postsecondary Success:**

Joel Vargas of JFF and Andrea Venezia of the Education Insights Center outline the principles of co-design, co-delivery, and co-validation that must guide the new partnerships between high school and college campuses and systems to raise college readiness and success. They describe the practices of exemplary partnerships around the country and suggest policies to promote the development of more partnerships that can spread this innovative work.

**3. Building Student Momentum from High School into**

**College:** Elisabeth Barnett of the Community College Research Center proposes research-based markers and milestones of student momentum from 12th grade through the first year of college. The paper describes the key experiences and accomplishments identified by these markers and suggests ways that local high school and college partners can collaborate to support their attainment.

**4. How High Schools and Colleges Can Team Up to Use Data and Increase Student Success:**

High schools and colleges could help many more young people succeed if they collaborated to use the vast amount of data about our nation's students to inform interventions and supports. In this paper, Michael Grady of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University describes strategies high schools and colleges can employ to examine and apply data to inform the closer collaboration needed to promote college readiness and completion.

**5. Beyond Academic Readiness—Building a Broader Range of Skills for Success in College:**

Jenny Nagaoka and Matthew A. Holsapple of the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research look beyond narrow academic views of college readiness and explore the “noncognitive” dimension of preparing students for postsecondary success. They focus on the critical need for students in grades 9-12 to become independent, self-directed learners and to build strong identities as future college students. Based on research, the paper argues that high schools, with input and support from higher education, should provide students with early college-like experiences that contribute to the development of these factors.

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For more information about JFF services to build educational pathways that prepare all young people for college and careers, contact Joel Vargas, Vice President, School and Learning Designs, [jvargas@jff.org](mailto:jvargas@jff.org).



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