



# BUILDING STUDENT MOMENTUM FROM HIGH SCHOOL INTO COLLEGE

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper is part of a series intended to encourage our nation's secondary and postsecondary systems to take joint responsibility for substantially increasing the number of young people who are prepared for college and career success. In this report, author Elisabeth Barnett of the Community College Research Center identifies key ways that high schools and higher education can collaborate to redesign the transition from 12th grade through the first year of college and build critical momentum toward completion.

Barnett proposes a student momentum framework of specific college preparatory experiences and markers of educational attainment in high school. Students who accumulate these evidence-based "momentum points" are more likely to enter college, avoid remediation, and graduate with a credential of value within a reasonable amount of time.

The intent is not to offer new hurdles that students must scale on the way to enrolling in college. Rather, the goal is to strengthen opportunities and supports for students to gain multiple experiences and attainments that propel them to and through their first year of postsecondary education.

Ideally, secondary and postsecondary institutions would co-design, co-deliver, and co-validate these strategies. This paper focuses on the high school senior year and many of the actions proposed would be delivered primarily by high schools, or by

high schools and colleges separately. However, the plans would be created collaboratively—co-designed by secondary and postsecondary institutions, and both sectors would evaluate and co-validate the results.

Drawing on the work of other scholars, the paper focuses on three dimensions of college readiness that are rooted in research:

- **Academic knowledge and skills**, such as grasping key content and engaging in critical thinking, writing, and argumentation
- **Noncognitive skills**, including affective dispositions and nonacademic skills, such as time management, perseverance, and goal setting
- **College cultural capital**, including the knowledge, tools, and assets required to navigate the transition to college.

### Academic Knowledge and Skills

The ability to grasp key content and engage in critical thinking, writing, and argumentation.

### Noncognitive Skills

Includes affective dispositions and nonacademic skills, such as time management, perseverance, and goal setting.

### College Cultural Capital

Includes the knowledge, tools, and assets required to navigate the transition to college.

## ACADEMIC KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

Acquiring core academic knowledge and skills is traditionally considered the predominant factor predicting future academic performance, though it is not the only one. The paper proposes several academic experiences and attainments that contribute to college readiness and success:

- › Participating in a rigorous core curriculum in high school
- › Taking college-level courses (i.e., dual enrollment, advanced placement, and/or International Baccalaureate) in high school
- › Attaining math and English foundational knowledge at the level required for placement in college-level, credit-bearing courses
- › Earning a good high school GPA
- › Accruing six college credits during high school

## NONCOGNITIVE SKILLS

Noncognitive skills are also significantly related to educational attainment. The paper proposes several noncognitive experiences and attainments that contribute to college readiness and success:

- › Opportunities to establish personal goals and life direction
- › Opportunities to develop and strengthen a range of noncognitive skills predictive of college success
- › Good attendance
- › Showing readiness on a noncognitive assessment

## COLLEGE CULTURAL CAPITAL

College cultural capital refers to the knowledge, skills, education, and personal advantages that permit students to enroll and succeed in college, including so-called “college knowledge.” The paper proposes several experiences and attainments related to gaining college cultural capital that contribute to college readiness and success:

- › Exposure to college norms and expectations
- › Validation by high school and college faculty
- › Completing one or more college applications and the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)
- › Commitment (submission of paperwork) to attend a college in the fall following graduation

## DEVELOPING A SYSTEM OF SHARED RESPONSIBILITY FOR STUDENT MOMENTUM

High schools often provide opportunities for these experiences and attainments, yet they do not systematically offer them to all students. There is a clear need to better prepare all students for college through the intentional implementation of these opportunities. Secondary and postsecondary institutions ought to work together to co-design, co-deliver, and co-validate a series of interventions to help students gain momentum as they make the transition from high school to college.

Under a system of shared responsibility, local and state governments would provide incentives for K-12 and higher education to play these collaborative

roles. Some of the conditions that could support development of such a system include:

- > **Visible data**—States are well positioned to take primary responsibility for making solid student data more available to educators. As part of these plans, they should improve systems of measurement and provide technical assistance to support the use of data. Incentives could include providing rewards to those who improve student performance.
- > **Accountability**—Rather than encouraging competition over scarce resources, states could incorporate better measures of student performance into both K-12 and higher education accountability systems. The recent reauthorization of the federal Elementary and Student Secondary Education Act, called the “Every Student Succeeds Act,” incorporates high school student participation in college coursework in local school and state report cards, and as a potential indicator in state accountability systems.
- > **Durability conditions**—More durable funding streams, allowing both K-12 systems and colleges to collect public funds for dual enrollment courses, for example, can play an important role in sustaining secondary and postsecondary partnerships.

All students need to leave high school ready for postsecondary education, whether or not they plan to attend college immediately following graduation. Preparing students for college success involves more than just completion of academic coursework; it requires providing them with momentum across academic, noncognitive, and college cultural capital areas. Secondary and postsecondary institutions both should encourage and enable students to accumulate experiences and attainments that collectively form a momentum chain that will allow them to complete college successfully.

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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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TEL 617.728.4446 FAX 617.728.4857 [info@jff.org](mailto:info@jff.org)  
88 Broad Street, 8th Floor, Boston, MA 02110 (HQ)  
122 C Street, NW, Suite 650, Washington, DC 20001  
505 14th Street, Suite 900, Oakland, CA 94612

[WWW.JFF.ORG](http://WWW.JFF.ORG)

