

FOR RELEASE: Longitudinal study at charter high school finds strengths, areas of improvements in college-prep approach

Two years into a six-year study, early results show that students from a college-prep-focused high can handle the workload, but class rigor and college bureaucracies are common obstacles.

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Even when a high school focuses on college prep, graduates can still find themselves frustrated in their higher-education experiences, new research shows.

The study, from USC Rossier's Center for Education, Identity and Social Justice, followed students at a college-prep charter school, charting their successes and challenges from high school graduation through their early college years. This research represents the first two years of a six-year longitudinal study.

The study's authors wanted to explore how a college-prep environment translates to college-going behavior, experiences, persistence, sense of belonging, and educational satisfaction. The study investigated six areas, with three related to their high school experience (curricula; finding home; and college readiness), and the remaining three pertaining to their college experiences (getting involved; course rigor; and financial aid).

The findings revealed that while students anticipated a college-level workload, the rigor of college-level work presented a more-difficult adjustment. In particular, students had trouble adjusting to college lectures; college professors used lecturing as a pedagogical approach far more often than their high school teachers. About half of the students stated that they struggled in large lecture classes and several struggled with taking high-stakes midterms and finals.

"In high school, students were taught using various pedagogical approaches. However, it seems that in college, professors still prefer lecture as the main method of teaching and continue to facilitate high stakes exams," said center co-director Shafiqah Ahmadi. These approaches do not fit with how many students are taught today. Postsecondary institutions should approach teaching and learning in a manner that supports students' in-class engagement."

Students also repeatedly discussed financial stress, with more than half saying they made their college decision based on cost, and many were worried about paying for it.

"As a result, we recommend that colleges establish on-campus resource centers for first-generation students," said center co-director Darnell Cole. "Providing support in identifying sources of financial assistance through scholarships, fellowships or emergency funds is critical for students' success."

The report includes 21 detailed interviews among two successive classes graduating from high school in 2016 and 2017 and quantitative data derived from the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) survey.

Recommendations based on the findings focused on two questions: How should high schools prepare students? And how should colleges and universities support students?

Select recommendations for high schools:

- Spend more time teaching students how to research and write papers.
- Better use high school course syllabi to guide students toward learning goals, much like professors do in college.
- High schools can offer workshops on budgeting once in college or on life, in general; the financial aid reapplication process; and life skills.

Select recommendations for colleges:

- Work with high schools to increase contact with high school academic counselors and college academic advisors focused on college transition-related issues.
- Create an on-campus resource center for first-generation college students with a financial aid specialist who can assist with finding scholarships, fellowships, or emergency funds for students in need.
- Increase their capacity to be culturally responsive organizations as students are more likely to feel like they belong.

For more, visit: rsoe.ly/CPHS2020.

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