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COMMENTARY

Charting the Course to Postsecondary Success

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High school graduation rates in California recently topped 80 percent—the highest they've ever been. It's an accomplishment that has earned California educators some well-deserved praise. Unfortunately, in California and across the U.S., high school graduation is not yet a reliable indicator of postsecondary readiness. For example, 68 percent of students who successfully graduate high school and enter the California State University system still require remediation before they're ready for entry-level, credit-bearing college coursework. A recent national report from ACT echoes these rather dismal trends: In 2014, only 26 percent of ACT takers met all four exams' college-readiness benchmarks. Thirty-one percent met none of them.

Most of these statistics aren't news to educators, so it's becoming clear that K–12 education should be about readiness, not just completion. Yes, it's important to keep students in high school, but it's ultimately more important to ensure they'll be ready for life *after* high school. Unfortunately, few systems have been implemented to track children's progress toward this important goal. Instead, college-readiness information is typically conveyed late in a student's high school career, and tends to focus solely on academic accomplishments—grades and admissions test scores. There's more to college readiness than academic achievement, and there's no reason college-readiness diagnoses can't be delivered earlier, giving off-track students multiple years to correct course, catch up, and acquire the skills they'll need for whatever comes next.

To help address these gaps in research and practice, we developed acollege-readiness index for middle school students. The index's inputs are diverse; we certainly included grades and test scores, but we weren't singularly focused on academic achievement. We also measured motivation, behavior, social engagement, school characteristics, and family circumstances—all of which have been shown to move the needle on later-life preparedness. Using nationally representative data (the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS)), we examined the relationships between these middle-school indicators and conventional college-readiness measures (SAT, ACT, and cumulative GPA).

What we found surprised us. First of all, middle school data—as long as they're sufficiently diverse—can offer powerful predictions of high school outcomes. If we use eighth-grade indicators to project whether students will meet the SAT's college-readiness benchmarks at the end of high school, our predictions are correct 88 percent of the time. Far more important, these predictions aren't dominated by academic achievement. Grades and test scores are significant for sure, but motivation and behavior are also quite influential—together, they're more important to college readiness than academic achievement. These findings suggest to us that a new generation of educational interventions focused on the whole child may succeed where others have yielded middling results.

We haven't hit a ceiling on college readiness in the U.S.; we can continue to make meaningful progress in this vital domain. But like anything worth doing in schools and classrooms, it won't be easy. To realize these ambitions we have to start collecting and

analyzing a diversity of indicators—not just grades and standardized test scores—and provide school systems the support they'll need to intervene early. It's a paradigm shift for public education, but we're technologically and pedagogically equipped to pull it off. And with economic inequality on the rise, the stakes have never been higher. In our view, postsecondary readiness*for all* is the sine qua non if we want our educational system to live up to its promise, what Horace Mann called the "great equalizer of the conditions of men—the balance wheel of the social machinery."

The full study can be found in Matthew N. Gaertner and Katie Larsen McClarty, "Performance, Perseverance, and the Full Picture of College Readiness," Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice.

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