



Executive Summary

Undermeasuring: College and Career Readiness Indicators May Not Reflect College and Career Outcomes

As America continues to fight off the economic fallout induced by the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for a highly skilled and educated workforce remains as vital as ever. Today, four in five good jobs require at least some postsecondary education or training.¹ Yet college enrollment rates² and college completion rates³ are persistently low, especially for historically marginalized students. Such a serious disconnect between K–12 schooling and postsecondary education is alarming.

To address this disconnect, state education leaders have been working on policies to help students graduate from high school prepared for postsecondary options, including new data reporting and accountability measures. Since the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015, **37 states** (including Washington, DC) have incorporated college and career readiness indicators into their school accountability systems. Specifically, 36 states include college-ready measures (e.g., earning dual credits) and 35 states include career-ready measures (e.g., earning an industry credential) in their readiness indicators, while only 13 states use military-ready measures (e.g., enlistment in the military).

However, because there is no uniform way to measure readiness, states have developed different metrics and set different benchmarks for students. For example, students in one state

need to pass two Advanced Placement (AP) exams to be considered college ready, while students in another state demonstrate readiness by taking an AP course. As a result, there is tremendous variation in the percentage of students who are ready for postsecondary opportunities—18% to 89%, a whopping **71-percentage-point difference**. Further, since most readiness measures that states use are technically proxy measures meant to predict postsecondary outcomes—just four states use college enrollment or course placement data in their readiness indicators—there are legitimate concerns regarding whether states are relying on the “right” measures to evaluate readiness.





Findings

We explore these concerns in this report by comparing statewide college and career readiness, college enrollment, and college remediation rates for recent high school graduates. Our analysis reveals that many students, especially students of color, are both unable to access and underprepared for higher education. **Compared to their White peers, we find that Black and Latinx students are less likely to be college and career ready as well as to enroll in college.** The racial gaps in readiness rates are more pronounced for Black students, while the racial gaps in college-going rates are larger for Latinx students.

However, we also find that **many states' college and career readiness indicators may be "undermeasuring" students' postsecondary potential**—just as many highly qualified students are “undermatched” and do not enroll in colleges that match their abilities. In other words, in 34 states (including Washington, DC), the percentage of students who are prepared for postsecondary opportunities is *lower* than the percentage of high school graduates who ultimately enroll in college.

In 34 states, college and career readiness rates undermeasure students' postsecondary potential.

Similarly, in 25 of the 28 states where remediation data is available, the percentage of students who are prepared is *lower* than the percentage of high school graduates bypassing remedial coursework in college.

Undermeasuring does not affect all states—or all student groups—similarly. Specifically:

- Undermeasuring is especially problematic in states where our data relies exclusively on student performance on college entrance exams.
- States are more likely to undermeasure readiness for Black and Latinx students than for White students. In particular, readiness rates in states where our data only includes student performance on college entrance exams are an especially poor predictor of whether Black and Latinx students enroll in college.

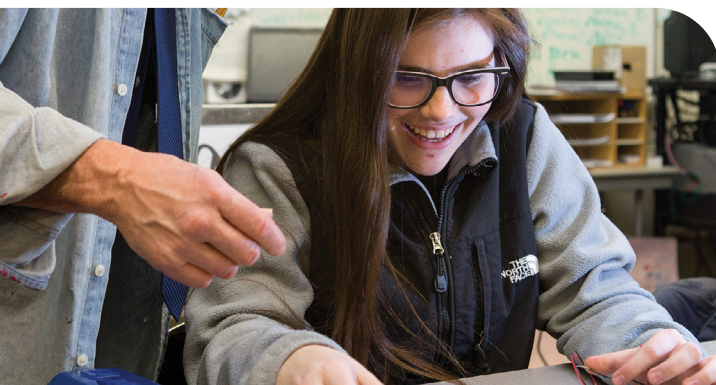
Recommendations

In light of these findings, and as school accountability systems resume after a two-year pause due to the pandemic, state policymakers should examine data on students' postsecondary readiness compared to actual postsecondary outcomes and redesign and improve their college and career readiness indicators so they are more nuanced and can reflect the skills and knowledge students need to succeed.



Meanwhile, federal policymakers should provide guidance on ESSA's accountability and reporting provisions and help states build the data infrastructure and capacity needed to do this work.

To start, we encourage all states to publish data related to college and career readiness, postsecondary enrollment, and college remediation for recent high school completers—for all students and disaggregated by each subgroup of students required by ESSA—on their report cards. We also recommend all states incorporate at least one college and career readiness indicator into their school accountability systems to incentivize high schools to offer college and career pathways and encourage students' participation and success in these experiences. Highly effective accountability systems provide transparency to the public and promote alignment between K–12 and postsecondary education.



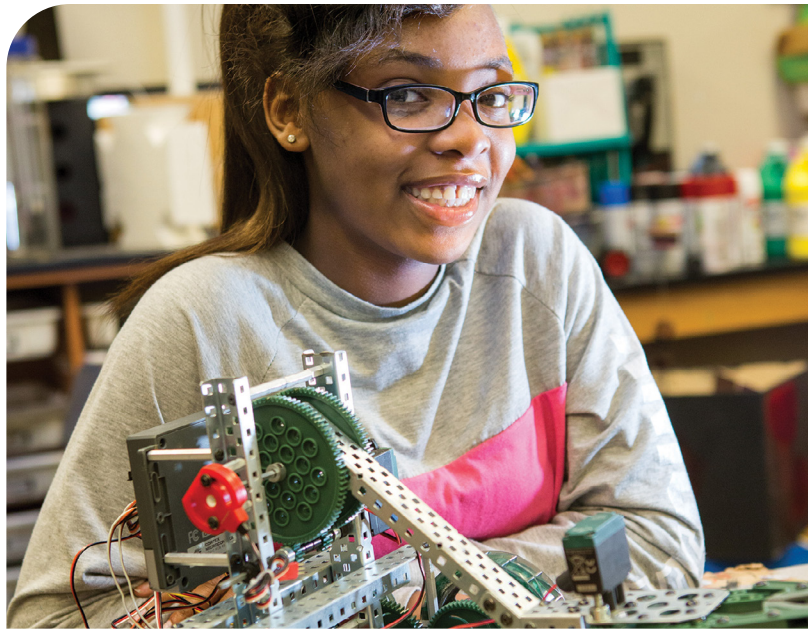
States should also take steps to improve their college- and career-ready measures, so the indicators they use will be less likely to

undermeasure students' postsecondary potential and provide better information about students' abilities to succeed beyond high school.

We encourage states to:

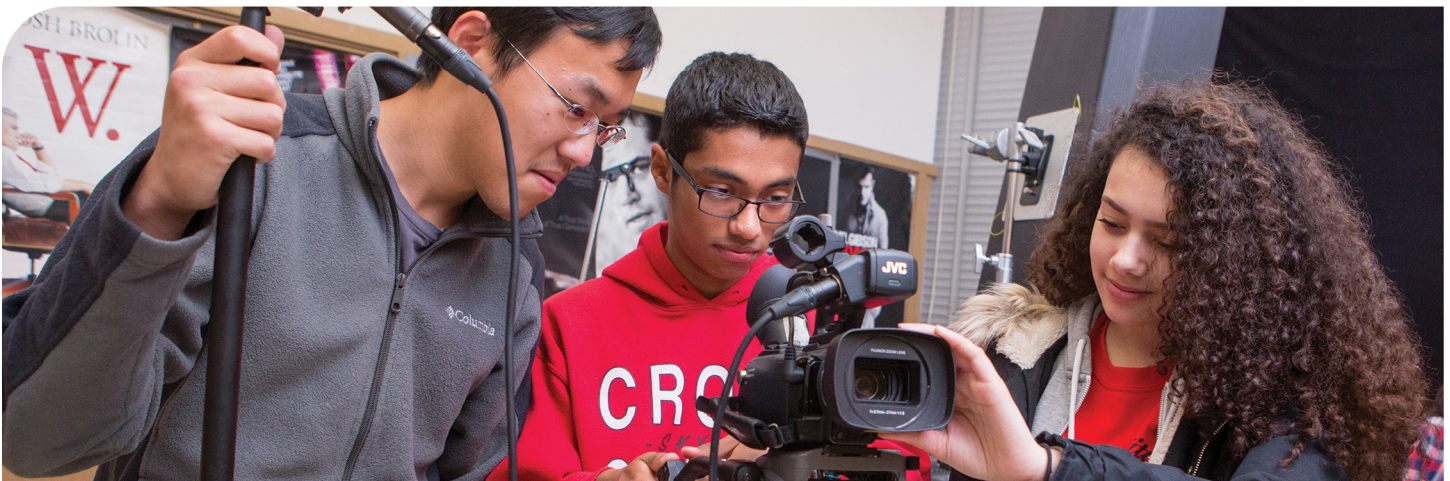
- 1. Use readiness indicators that consider multiple options for students to demonstrate readiness, as opposed to relying on a single measure.** We found less evidence of undermeasuring in states that recognize many different early postsecondary opportunities (e.g., dual enrollment, AP, and career and technical education (CTE) pathways that lead to industry credentials).
- 2. Include postsecondary measures in college and career readiness indicators.** Incorporating postsecondary outcomes, including rates of postsecondary enrollment and remediation, into states' college- and career-ready indicators will help reduce the mismatch between readiness rates and postsecondary success.
- 3. Integrate college readiness into career-ready pathways.** We recommend states update their indicators to expect students completing career-ready or military-ready pathways to also complete college-ready options. Career pathways that require little postsecondary education or training result in credentials of low value and often lead to low-skill, low-wage jobs with few options for career advancement.

As state education leaders continue to make improvements to their college and career readiness indicators, they will also be better positioned to work together—nationally or regionally—to develop best practices and common approaches to measuring readiness that will reduce variation across states and more accurately and fully capture if students are prepared for postsecondary opportunities. To this end, we hope this report will help education leaders better understand the landscape of college and career readiness indicators across states, avoid undermeasuring students' abilities to succeed in postsecondary pathways, and inspire them to make the necessary policy changes to better align postsecondary readiness with postsecondary outcomes.



Endnotes

- 1 Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, *Three Educational Pathways to Good Jobs: High School, Middle Skills, and Bachelor's Degree* (Washington, DC: Author, 2018), <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/3pathways/> (accessed November 15, 2022).
- 2 U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *College Enrollment Rates, Condition of Education* (Washington, DC: Author, 2022), <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cpb> (accessed November 15, 2022).
- 3 J. Causey et al., *Completing College: National and State Report on Six-Year Completion Rates for Fall 2015 Beginning Cohort (Signature Report 20)* (Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022).



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