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More than half of Hawaii high school grads head to college

Study looks at how well Isle schools prepare kids for life after graduation

*By Loren Moreno
Advertiser Staff Writer*

About 51 percent of Hawai'i's 2008 public high school graduates continued on to college, with a third entering a four-year university, according to a new study.

Kalani High School sent the most students to college, about 79 percent. Meanwhile, Wai'anae High School sent the fewest students, at about 30 percent, according to the study by the Hawai'i P-20 Initiative, a partnership between the public school system and the University of Hawai'i.

For decades, the state had been unable to accurately track the number of public school graduates who entered a university or college. The Hawai'i P-20 Initiative's College and Career Indicators Report, released this week, is the first report of its kind to take nationwide college enrollment data, along with several other college readiness statistics, and break it down school-by-school.

It's the most accurate picture to date on how successful Hawai'i's public schools are at preparing students for life after high school.

"On one hand, it's encouraging because we're starting to get some good data about where students are going and what they are doing. But on the other hand, it's a real wake-up call for us," said Ron Nozoe, a Honolulu complex area superintendent.

Nozoe, who oversees the Kalani High School complex, among others, noted that the school had the highest college-going rate in the state, but also noted that a majority of those students went to a community college. According to the report, 40 percent of Kalani's graduates in 2008 went on to a two-year college, while 39 percent went on to a four-year college.

Increasing those numbers across the state will require all schools, not just high schools, to adopt a "college-going culture" on their campuses, Nozoe said.

"If you try to get kids excited about college in high school, it's kind of late. The college-going culture has to start when they are very young. ... The expectation has to be there early on," he said.

A partnership between the University of Hawai'i, the state Department of Education and early childhood educators, the Hawai'i P-20 Initiative is releasing the data in part to shine a spotlight on the need to increase the readiness among high school graduates to enter the workforce or a degree program.

new diploma

The P-20 Initiative is expected to announce at a news conference this morning its new "Step Up" campaign, an effort in the public school system to get students to strive toward a more rigorous, voluntary high school diploma, known as the "College and Career Readiness" diploma. The diploma, approved last year by the state Board of Education, is being offered for the first time to the new freshman class, the class of 2013, and requires students to earn credits in advanced science, math and writing.

For instance, in math, students would take four credits instead of three and would need to complete algebra 1, geometry, algebra 2 and an algebra 2 end-of-course exam. For English, students would still earn four credits but would need to complete a semester of expository writing. In science, students would still need three credits, but two of the credits should be chemistry, biology or physics.

By raising the academic expectations through the new diploma, officials hope to see an increase in the state's college-going rates.

Statewide, the goal is that 55 percent of working-age adults will have a post-secondary degree by the year 2025.

Linda Johnsrud, UH vice president of academic planning and policy, said the most recent national college-going rate is about 60 percent.

"No. 1, we'd rather be at the national rate, but No. 2, the national rate is not high enough," Johnsrud said. "The real issue for the nation is increasingly jobs require some education or training beyond high school. And so getting that college rate up is really important."

While the college-going rate should be higher, Johnsrud said it isn't realistic to expect that 100 percent of high school graduates go to college.

"Not everyone necessarily will go on to get a four-year degree or even a two-year degree. But there is a certificate or training program or something after secondary school that is going to be important for their future. They need to be on that pathway," she said.

For years, principals and educators unsuccessfully sought college enrollment data so that they could gauge how successful their students were. Aside from enrollment figures or remediation rates provided by the UH system, principals had little indication of what had happened to their recent graduates, especially if they went on to a Mainland school.

The state Department of Education had previously conducted exit surveys with its graduates, but the results only showed what students planned to do after high school and not what they actually did.

"Up until now, we never had a systematic picture of what happened to students (after high school)," said Tammi Chun, the executive director of the Hawai'i P-20 Initiative. "It's not perfect information. There's lots of information we'd like to have about students after high school that is not yet available, but we're slowly filling in the pixels so we have a better picture of what happens to students after high school," she said.

underreported data

The college enrollment data used in the report comes from the National Student Clearinghouse, which is traditionally used by lenders to confirm if students receiving financial aid are still in school. Because many schools do not report their enrollment to the clearinghouse, such as Hawai'i Pacific University, the college-going rate in the report is likely on the low side, Chun said.

Farrington High School Principal Catherine Payne said the school had only been able to track its enrollment rates in the UH system and those numbers have been increasing. According to the new report, about 47 percent of Farrington's students in 2008 went on to college, with a majority going on to a two-year school.

While the 47 percent may seem low, Payne said the school has been making progress in getting more kids to go on to technical training or on to college.

"Our scholarship money went from a little more than a million a couple of years ago to \$3.4 million last year," she said.

One way the school has been attempting to increase its college-going rate is through its eight career pathway academies. Each junior and senior is required to pick one of the career pathways, such as health or culinary arts, with the idea that students should be career-ready by the time they graduate.

"It really is about changing the whole culture," Payne said. "One of the things that has helped is so many of the young Farrington graduates have come back to the school to teach or to provide some type of service. ... It's having these role models in the community who can say I did it, I came from a tough situation and here I am, I'm a teacher, a doctor, a lawyer," she said.

Cara Tanimura, director of the DOE's systems accountability office, said the DOE is creating a longitudinal data system, which will be used to track students as they move from preschool through college. That system, which was part of a nationwide push under the federal stimulus dollars, will be in place within the next two years, she said. It'll be a more accurate accounting of college-going rates, she said.

Tanimura said the challenge for principals will be deciding what to do with this new data.

"You have it, now what? What are schools going to do next? The expectation is we have to figure out how to take it to the next level," she said.
