

Making the Grade After Graduation

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Millions of high school seniors are beginning to receive college acceptance letters, but data surrounding students' performance once they get to college should dampen the elation. The [American Dream 2.0 Report](#) found that 46 percent of all students who enroll in an institution of higher learning do not graduate with any credential within six years. The statistics are even starker for our nation's African-American and Hispanic high school graduates, with 63 and 58 percent, respectively, leaving college before graduating.

Clearly earning a high school diploma is not synonymous with college readiness. True preparedness means not only acquiring knowledge, but being able to apply that knowledge and demonstrate skills like critical thinking, time management, self-direction, and collaboration.

All too often communities rely on graduation rates and college attendance plans as evidence that students are receiving an adequate education. We need more courageous education leadership at a time when the rate of student borrowing to finance college has grown dramatically while college graduation rates have not improved. Local, state, and federal policies can help bring transparency to this college preparedness crisis. It is time to adopt policies that measure college readiness beyond what's detailed on most transcripts today.

At [New Tech Network](#) (NTN) -- an organization consisting of 120 schools across the U.S., 90 percent of which are public district schools -- we measure what matters for college readiness: student growth during high school and student progress through college. While we celebrate NTN college attendance rates--which are seven percent higher than the national average--we are even more focused on how students fare once they enroll in college. What encourages us most about our [2013 Report Card](#) are the dramatic differences NTN graduates demonstrate in college persistence - the measure of how students progress with their college education. Data provided by the [National Student Clearinghouse](#) shows NTN students persist in four-year and two-year colleges at rates 17 and 46 percent higher, respectively, than the national average.

These results did not happen overnight; school districts around the country are to be commended for their investment and commitment to re-imagine teaching and learning. Our urban, suburban, and rural public district schools, many of which are populated with students from underserved areas, are demonstrating how students learn is as important as what they learn. [The College and Work Readiness Assessment](#) (CWRA) - which tests high school students on critical thinking, analytic reasoning, problem solving, and writing - shows that NTN students develop 75 percent more in these higher order thinking areas between freshman and senior year than a comparison group.

Persistence is a crucial attribute to carry through life, not just for success in college. And students learn best when they learn by actively doing, not passively listening. According to Brandon Venerable, a graduate of Sacramento New Tech High School and a student at California State University Sacramento, "Project-based learning challenges your mind and helps to give you critical thinking skills."

Expecting post-secondary success to improve without making fundamental changes to how teachers teach and how students learn is foolish. Kelsey Adams, a graduate of Zebra New Tech High School in Rochester, Indiana, and a student at the University of Indianapolis, said, "New Tech's emphasis on oral and written communication taught me to express my thoughts and feelings through both the written and spoken word. Through many presentations and projects, I learned to find confidence and use it to my advantage when I spoke to others. I know that I can manage my 18 credit hour college schedule with my time management and organizational skills. I can be a leader in clubs and organizations because I know I have the leadership skills necessary. I will succeed in classes because I have the communication skills and the work ethic needed to succeed."

The [Common Core State Standards](#) provide an opportunity to change instructional practices and measure meaningful student growth with the goal that every student graduates high school ready for college or the workforce. Changing the culture of education means focusing on work that engages students, empowers them to think critically, encourages analysis rather than memorization, promotes problem-solving individually and as a member of a team, and fosters exploration of the world outside the classroom as well as communication with others.

Ubiquitous, relevant and meaningful education is the key to a vibrant economic future and to improving the likelihood of success for every student. We hope the success NTN schools demonstrate might serve as a model to public school district leadership for creating, operating, and sustaining innovation so that all students gain the skills, knowledge, and attributes they will need to thrive in college, career, and civic life.

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