

# COLLEGE-PREP COURSE SEQUENCE COMPLETION

## An Overview

A college-prep course sequence is a set of high school courses designed to prepare students for college. Historically, these courses have been more rigorous than the standard course of study, though what is “standard” is changing in an era where schools aspire to get all of their children college and career ready.

Research shows that students who complete a rigorous sequence of high school courses are much more likely to succeed in college. But though the overwhelming majority of high school students now aspire to attend college, more than half are “meandering toward graduation” — taking a random, undefined set of courses instead of a coherent sequence.<sup>1</sup>

## How is it measured?

There are two things that are important to measure when it comes to course sequences:

1. Participation: The percent of students enrolled in the course sequence; and
2. Success: The percent of students successfully completing required courses.

## What do the research/data tell us?

1. Nationally, students from high socioeconomic status families are substantially more likely to complete a college-prep course sequence than students from low socioeconomic status families. Only 47 percent of low-income graduates have accessed a college- or career-ready course sequence, compared with 56 percent of higher income graduates.<sup>2</sup>
2. Not all course sequences are equally high quality. A sequence of classes that’s called “college prep” is not always aligned with actual entry requirements for the state’s colleges.

## What are the benefits and risks of including this measure in a school rating system?

### Benefits

- Including course sequence measures sets the expectation that all students should complete a coherent course sequence, which should lead to more students completing such sequences.
- The measure is especially useful if the sequence is aligned to admissions requirements for the state system of higher education.
- The measure is an indicator that is highly relevant to students and parents.

### Considerations/Warnings

- If not carefully matched with the actual courses that colleges require, the measure can be weak and not provide much information.
- If the measure isn’t fully aligned, students could mistakenly think they will meet the admission requirements for state systems of higher education.
- There may be pushback from CTE and arts educators if those courses are not reflected in the sequences.
- Including this indicator in accountability could incentivize reduction in rigor for the courses so as to increase participation and success rates.

**State example:** In California, the A-G course sequence is aligned with the admission requirements for the University of California and California State University systems. The courses are certified by state institutions of higher education, which confirm that high schools are providing the content necessary to succeed in college.

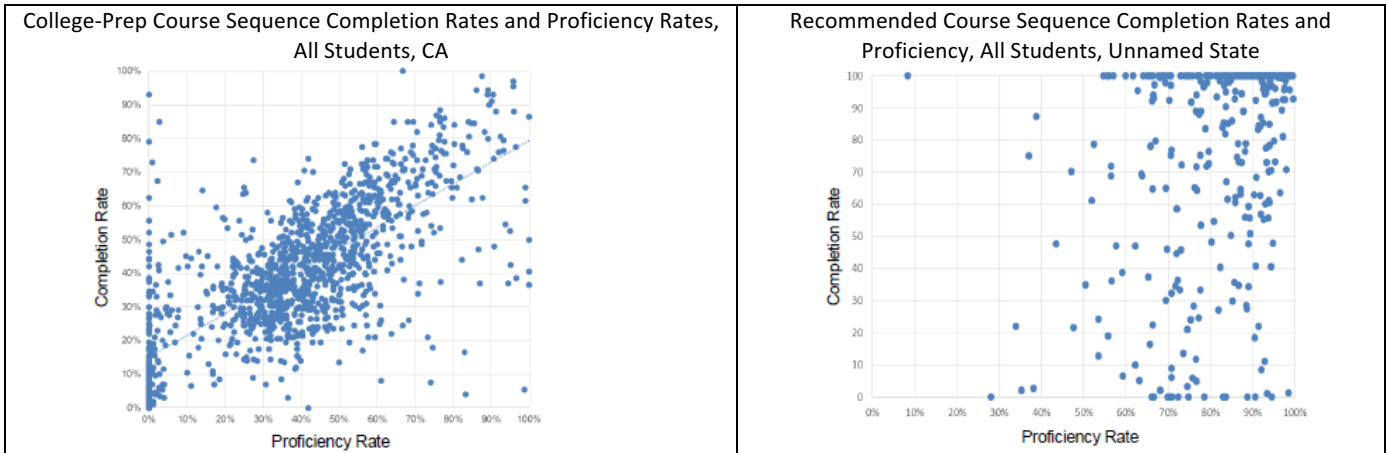
<sup>1</sup> Marni Bromberg and Christina Theokas, “Meandering Toward Education: Transcript Outcomes of High School Graduates,” (Washington, D.C.: The Education Trust, April 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Marni Bromberg and Christina Theokas, “Meandering Toward Education: Transcript Outcomes of High School Graduates,” (Washington, D.C.: The Education Trust, April 2016).

## If your state is considering including course sequence completion measures in school ratings, what questions should you ask? What should you watch out for?

### How will the state define “college-prep course sequence”?

How the state defines the sequence of classes that form a college-prep sequence is hugely important. A course of study that’s called “college prep,” but isn’t actually, has little use as an accountability measure, and may actually cause harm to students who are led to believe they are being prepared for college when they aren’t. At minimum, your state should be able to show that its college-prep course of study is aligned with admission requirements in its institutions of higher education. (Note: Advocates should ask how schools’ course sequence completion rates compare with other indicators of academic success, such as proficiency on state assessments. If the sequence is rigorous, schools that show higher percentages of students completing a college-prep course of study, overall and by student group, should also show higher results on other measures of academic success.<sup>3</sup>)



**Strong college-prep course sequence:** In California, schools where more students complete a college-prep course of study also show higher results on state assessments.

**Weak college-prep course sequence:** In this state example, many schools with high completion rates show low results on state assessments, and vice versa.

### How will the state measure participation and success in a course sequence?

If your state plans to hold schools accountable for college-prep course sequence completion, it must measure both participation and success rates. Measuring only participation will give schools an incentive to water down classes, while measuring only successful completion rates could incentivize schools to restrict access to only the perceived highest performers.

**How will your state calculate participation rates?** Will a participant be any student who is taking courses in the sequence and is on track to complete all required classes? Or will it only be someone who completed the entire sequence by the end of 12th grade? And will the denominator be all students in the cohort, or just graduates?

- **Tip:** Watch out for attempts to include only graduates in the participation rate denominator: Doing so could increase the incentive to push lower performing students out of school entirely.
- **Note:** If a college-prep course sequence is the default for all students in your state, it’s still important to track participation (and completion) rates to make sure that some students aren’t getting “opted out” of the course sequence at higher rates. If there are gaps in participation between schools or between groups of students, school ratings should take that into account.

**How will your state define successful completion?** As passing grades? As grades required for admission into institutions of higher education? As passing a series of end-of-course exams?

- **Tip:** To the extent possible, successful completion should be defined in a way that meaningfully aligns with higher education admission or placement requirements (for example, a specific grade or performance on a common end-of-course exam). And all students who count as participants should be in the success rate denominator.

### How will the state ensure that the data are accurate? Is there a process for auditing districts to verify that data are correct? What does that process involve?

If states are planning to hold schools accountable for course sequence success, they need to have quality controls in place to make sure the data are accurate (that is, not just self-reported), and a means of protecting students from courses labeled “Algebra II” that only teach the content of eighth-grade math.

<sup>3</sup> Based on preliminary Education Trust analysis of data from the California Department of Education and another state.