



Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

The Academic Path to College

Neal D. Finkelstein, Ph.D. • February 2010

Topic: Helping Students Navigate the Path to College
Practice: Prepare Students Academically

Highlights

- Dr. Neil D. Finkelstein, panel member of the IES practice guide *Helping Student Navigate the Path to College*, discusses the recommended practice: Prepare Students Academically.
- Dr. Finkelstein describes key actions that schools should take to ensure students are prepared for the demands of college, including communicating a college-going trajectory of courses to students; communicating key milestones; emphasizing core, foundational courses; checking in with students on progress; and providing counseling and supports to keep students on track for college.

About the Interviewee

Neal D. Finkelstein, Ph.D., is an education researcher at WestEd in San Francisco who designs and implements rigorous field-based program evaluations and impact studies. Part of his work includes the design and implementation of large-scale randomized controlled trials in education settings.

Dr. Finkelstein served as director of educational outreach research and evaluation for the University of California Office of the President. He served as senior program officer for the National Research Council and, as such, supported the Committee on Education Finance in the investigation of equity, adequacy, and productivity considerations in the financing of K-12 public schools. He also served as assistant director of policy analysis for California Education and Research Associates at the National Center for Research in Vocational Education.

Dr. Finkelstein received a B.A. in economics and psychology from Swarthmore College and an M.P.P., M.A., and Ph.D. in education policy and management from the University of California, Berkeley.

Full Transcript

My name is Neal Finkelstein. I am a senior research scientist based at WestEd, in San Francisco. I was a member of the panel that developed *Helping Students Navigate the Path to College* that was put forward as an IES Practice Guide by the What Works Clearinghouse in 2009.

One of the things that's been so clear over the past couple of decades is students without some form of postsecondary education just don't keep up in the labor market. They don't have the skills they need to get the kinds of jobs they want, and they haven't had the preparation they need to keep their options open. It's been clear in economic terms. It's been clear in social terms. And there is every reason to believe that the more we can do to prepare students early and often for some form of continuing education, the better they will do in their own choices.

The obligation of the K-12 system is to make sure that these students are ready for whatever they choose and, importantly, without the need for remediation. We really believe that students who finish high school ready to move on to their next objective in education are those who will meet their own educational objectives best.

The entrance requirements for postsecondary education, at least in four-year colleges, somewhat less for two-year colleges, have become quite standardized around the country. And in many states there are formal requirements that set up a cascade of required courses in core areas of the curriculum that students need to follow in order to be college-ready. You know, at the end of the day the basis for whether a student is college-prepared is whether they can do the work at the college level—again, without remediation. But we believe that that preparation should happen early in core areas of the curriculum which meet most colleges' basic entrance requirements. It's in math, and it's in language and literacy, and it's in science and history, and it usually requires some amount of foreign language training and some art training as well as part of the core course requirements. Those students who choose their core sequences can know a trajectory very early on, and we believe one of the things that schools can do to ensure that students are on that path is

to put those cascades or those trajectories of courses forward to them. You know, they are 13 years old and 14 years old in ninth grade. There is no reason why students shouldn't be able to understand the kind of pathways or roadmaps that they might take as they wind their way through high school. How well a student does in Algebra I in ninth grade, for example, becomes an enormously strong predictor of how likely it is that the student will progress on to geometry as a tenth grader and trigonometry as an eleventh grader. And how well teachers support their students both in the instructional side and also in the assessments that allow us to see how students are doing along the way make for these trajectories to be more smooth as opposed to less smooth.

In the best cases, more and more students are taking college-ready courses even before they get to high school. There are many states and many examples where we now see Algebra I being completed by eighth grade, which would be 12- and 13-year-olds having that level of preparation in math which becomes such an important precursor to many steps associated with college readiness.

In schools that are making college preparation easy, there is emphasis on certain courses early on in ninth and tenth grade that really pave the way for a strong foundation and a strong preparation path towards college. The best examples are schools where there is checking in with students, even as early as the end of the first semester, on whether or not the courses that have been chosen are going well and utilization of that first summer and after-school help and concurrent enrollment to provide support for students through their freshman year as a way of catching on an early intervention some areas that might need additional reinforcement and support.

There is evidence from the research that students have trouble, once they have moved too far along, getting back on track. So if it's a natural progression to move through four years of math and three years of science and four years of English, for example, then it all works out so much more simply when one year builds on the next, which builds on the next. What we would like to discourage are students being surprised by the time they get to being eleventh graders and twelfth graders with the aspirations of college that have developed over time, but having missed the key milestones along the way that would have allowed their transition from secondary to postsecondary education to be smooth with the appropriate counseling, with the appropriate support, with the appropriate feeds of information through traditional, and now through technological sources of information—the web and other kinds of ways of feeding information to students. There is no reason why students in ninth grade and in tenth grade can't have a map in mind as they make their way through their coursework being ready for college when they graduate.