

Mending The Leaky College Pipeline

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For every 100 students who enroll in ninth grade in Texas public schools, only around 16 complete a college degree or certificate within six years of finishing high school. Though Texas ranks lower than the national completion average (around 21), even the top-ranked state on college completion is only at 30%. Texas is near the bottom, ranked 45 of out 52. Postsecondary completion, especially resulting in a four-year bachelor's degree, is a gateway to a host of lifetime benefits. Higher paying jobs, increased quality of life, and resilience in economic downturns are just a few of the advantages college graduates enjoy. Among educational policymakers and leaders, the widespread problem of low college completion in the United States has reached a fever pitch.

There are multiple culprits responsible for the prevalence of high school to college pipeline problems. Some education reformers blame the rising costs of a college degree while others point to misguided student, teacher, and parent expectations for postsecondary success. These two problems in particular trip up even the highest performing high school students. Students without the supports to navigate cost barriers and develop more accurate academic expectations either don't show up on the first day of college, or fail to persist from first to second year. Policymakers, educators, and the general public recognize rising costs of higher education as a national crisis. Level-setting expectations receives relatively less attention but is no less critical to fixing the pipeline. Indeed, according to a recent policy brief from the ACT (2015), "helping students adjust to academic expectations of postsecondary education" is a prerequisite step in the effort to improve postsecondary completion.

OnRamps Reduces College Costs and Level-Sets Student Expectations

OnRamps is dedicated to addressing issues of cost and misguided expectations for success in Texas. As the signature dual enrollment program of The University of Texas at Austin, OnRamps currently offers high school students opportunities to earn up to 21 transferable UT Austin credit hours at no cost to students or their parents. Moreover, UT Austin faculty and staff design OnRamps courses to intentionally level-set student expectations for what they will encounter in academic coursework at the college level. In a study of 2014-2015 OnRamps students (n=1621, response rate 70%), the majority of students made statements that suggested this level setting was the number one thing their OnRamps course taught them.



OnRamps students appreciate the benefit of free college credit

Students in OnRamps demonstrate an appreciation for the chance to earn college credit at a substantially reduced cost. When asked what is their favorite part of OnRamps courses, "free college credit" was a common response. One student accepted to attend The University of Texas at Austin said the best thing about his OnRamps experience was that "it provided really cheap or free college credit with all the support of high school." Another, who aspires to be an engineer, said OnRamps "is a wonderful opportunity to earn additional college credit for free AND be prepared for college courses!" A Rhetoric and Writing student emphasized both the cost and timesaving benefits of OnRamps: "I like that I now have the credit and it will save me time and money in the future." OnRamps students agree: the program simultaneously reduces costs, saves time, and boosts college preparation.

OnRamps helps align high school students' expectations for college rigor

OnRamps students report that their experience in our courses demonstrates just how rigorous college is going to be. "College is going to be a lot harder, much more difficult [than high school]," said an OnRamps Rhetoric and Writing student who aspires to be a physical therapist. In his course, students are immersed in intensive reading, writing, and research about American identity formation. They learn to analyze arguments presented by others and write effective arguments of their own. These unique and advanced writing skills will accelerate students' postsecondary success in the writing intensive courses they will encounter in college.

Other students report similar awareness about the academic difficulty they may encounter: "college is going to be hard" and "college will be very difficult" were repeated phrases throughout the survey responses. One student enrolled in OnRamps Statistics (who will also be a first generation college entrant) stated that the main thing she learned from this yearlong data, modeling and inference course was that "college will be challenging, but not impossible."

OnRamps cultivates independent learners

Obtaining a college degree requires independent learning, persistence and self-regulation. Students who succeed in postsecondary education are able to monitor and control their own learning, manage their time effectively, and are self-motivated to overcome academic obstacles.

After taking an OnRamps course, our students demonstrate an understanding that independent learning strategies are critical to navigating the college experience. One of our computer science (CS) students, already accepted to a four-year university, said the biggest gain from his course was learning that "self-studying is crucial in college." In this project-based CS course, students learn to code programs that serve useful functions and engage in hands-on exploration of computer science and its impact on our society.

Students also reported that their OnRamps experience helped them recognize the importance taking responsibility for their own learning.

A pre-calculus student reflected, "college is a lot of teaching yourself what you need to learn" and another who is interested in a career in medicine stated "I am going to have to become more independent when it comes to learning and research things on my own." Similarly, an OnRamps Rhetoric student who wants to be a veterinarian said that OnRamps taught her that, "Teachers aren't going to baby me anymore. Whatever I need done I need to get it done on my own without a teacher reminding me."

By cultivating independent learners and illuminating the vast gap between high school and college expectations early, we better prepare students for postsecondary success. The vast majority of students do not have these critical learning experiences until they are in the middle of their first semester in college. On the other hand, experiencing college before college through OnRamps, as one student explained, "prepares you best for college, you will have a better idea of what your classes will be like... College will not be a shock..."

What Starts Here

Higher education is a channel to a host of lifetime advantages, especially for those who complete four-year degrees. Such graduates have dramatically increased lifetime earning capacity, greater access to benefits-eligible jobs, and more career resilience in times of economic downturn. College also provides access to unique windows that open to influential professional opportunities, increased civic engagement, internships, research experiences, and well-connected alumni networks.

Students who experience dual enrollment programs are twice as likely to enroll in college and complete their degree (JFF, 2012). According to the ACT, dual-enrollment programs result in improved "persistence, promote academic integration, and increase degree attainment" (ACT, 2015). Yet only 10% of Texas students enroll in dual-enrollment or dual-credit courses.

The mission of OnRamps is to increase the number and diversity of students who engage in learning experiences aligned with the expectations of leading research universities before their first year of college. By extending dual enrollment opportunities to thousands of students, OnRamps offers an innovative solution to Texas's leaky pipeline.