



# Removing Roadblocks To Rigor Linking Academic and Social Supports to Ensure College Readiness and Success

## Executive Summary

April 2009

Today's leaders in government, higher education, secondary schools (middle and high school), and local communities are constantly seeking new ways to improve student achievement at all levels and to increase higher education attainment. To accomplish these important goals, education stakeholders have pushed to increase academic rigor and set high expectations for all students. Much progress is being made in promoting academic rigor in schools and raising standards for college degree attainment. However, less attention has been given to the academic, social, developmental, and financial needs of students that must be addressed in order for them to respond to high expectations and achieve rigorous academic standards. Without strategies to support students in nurturing their talents, building new skills, and mastering tough challenges, many will be unable to meet these increased academic demands.

The Pathways to College Network—a partnership of national organizations and funders working to improve postsecondary opportunities for underserved populations—is undertaking a national initiative to ensure that such student needs are addressed. As a first step, Pathways commissioned this paper to focus on one piece of the initiative: an understanding of what we mean by “academic and social support.” The paper proposes a unifying framework in which academic and social support policies and practices go hand-in-hand with increased expectations and student success. Social support builds the networks, connectedness, and motivation which underpin students’ willingness and capacity to take advantage of academic strategies such as tutoring,

learning communities, and other helpful policies and practices. In other words, social support provides the foundation on which students are most likely to benefit from academic support strategies.

A *network* of academic and social supports is critical to ensure that all students—regardless of their socio-economic background or previous educational experience—have the opportunity to succeed at high levels. However, conversations about academic rigor often miss the importance of providing adequate support for students to meet such standards. A detailed understanding of the types of academic and social support and how they work in tandem with academic standards must be a part of these conversations. This paper offers a broad definition of academic and social support aligned with rigor, as follows:

*Academic and social support comprises intentional strategies that enable students at all levels to benefit from academically rigorous curricula. These strategies are interrelated, developmentally appropriate, and provide integrated, coordinated, and comprehensive support in order to improve student achievement. Academic and social support strategies fall into one or more of the following categories: emotional, informational, instrumental, appraisal, and structural.*

Adapted from a previous typology developed by House<sup>1</sup>, these categories are not mutually exclusive and reflect the interdependent dynamics of an integrated concept of academic and social support.

<sup>1</sup> House, J. (1981) . *Work stress and Social Support*: Addison-Wesley Series on Occupational Stress.

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There are numerous, specific examples of support strategies in schools and higher education institutions that illustrate the various aspects of academic and social support included in this definition. While it is helpful to categorize these examples in order to best inform policies and practices, many of them fall into more than one category.

## Emotional support

Emotional support fosters self-esteem and trust by providing students with empathy, caring, love, respect, concern, and a willingness to listen. Examples of emotional support include:

- Individual counseling
- Group and peer support
- Mentoring
- Social-emotional standards
- Proactive advising
- Activities that develop strong, supportive interpersonal connections among students, parents, faculty, and school staff

## Instrumental support

Instrumental support is perhaps the most “active” type of support. This category encompasses specific behaviors that help students reach a particular outcome or goal, including giving students the chance to spend time with a caring adult, as well as providing them with in-kind or monetary support, or other types of direct help. Examples of instrumental support include:

- Workshops that teach study skills, financial literacy, test-taking strategies, time management, critical reading, career exploration, organization, and planning skills
- Summer transition programs – middle to high school, high school to college, two-year to four-year colleges, undergraduate to graduate school
- Tutoring programs, on-line tutorials, math, and writing centers
- Supplemental course instruction to improve students’ academic performance
- Developmental guidance curricula

- Offering college credit courses for high school students (IB, AP, dual enrollment)
- State and national career development standards
- Need-based financial aid
- ACT/SAT/AP/IB test fee waivers
- Admissions test preparation

## Informational support

Informational support refers to an exchange of information that can help students meet academic goals by providing them with advice, suggestions, directives, and information.

Examples of informational support include:

- Education plans for achieving college goals
- Advisories focused on preparing for future options and success
- Freshman orientation programs, success seminars
- Academic advising
- Job shadowing and internships
- Guidance with college admission and financial aid application process
- College planning and financial aid information for parents
- Career exploration and placement services
- Early college awareness programs, campus visits

## Appraisal support

Appraisal support involves the transfer of information derived through assessment; it provides affirmation, feedback, social comparison, and facilitates self-evaluation.

Examples of appraisal support include:

- Assessments of student progress toward meeting academic standards that trigger support for struggling students
- PSAT, ACT’s PLAN, Accuplacer, WorkKeys, and the Collegiate Learning Assessment to identify students’ academic strengths and needs
- Data systems to help monitor student performance

- Early warning systems with mid-term reports sent to parents
- Mid-semester progress reports sent to students and their academic advisors
- Early subject area testing program to identify students with potential for AP/IB participation
- Activities that recognize academic achievement

## Structural support

Structural support reflects formal and informal structures that embed support into social institutions or programs. These structures foster positive outcomes for students, such as community and school engagement, self-confidence, resiliency, social networking, internal motivation, and academic achievement. Examples of structural support include:

- Full service schools
- Student support services aligned with educational instruction
- Culturally relevant practices and strategies
- Learning centers that provide tutoring, skill-building, and other academic support
- Ninth grade academies and first-year college programs
- Small learning communities
- College-going culture in middle and high schools
- Strong partnerships between academic and student services offices
- Offices of postsecondary planning and support
- Dropout prevention and recovery programs

## Recommendations for Educators and Policymakers

Ultimately, policies and practices that integrate a range of support strategies hold the most promise for increasing student achievement and success. Students need a network of individuals and resources embracing multiple strategies to provide them with effective academic and social supports. By fostering self-confidence, resiliency, and internal motivation, social support creates the

conditions that allow students to take advantage of effective academic support strategies and develop the skills, knowledge, and abilities necessary for them to realize their hopes and dreams.

Recommendations for school and higher education leaders and policy-makers who wish to implement research-based academic and social support strategies include:

- Integrate and coordinate academic and social support strategies focused on enabling students to meet rigorous academic standards.
- Enhance training and make more efficient use of school counselors and college support services staff, especially those who work with underserved students.
- Infuse principles of adolescent development into training programs for teachers, principals, and higher education faculty professional development programs.
- Provide more incentives for secondary teachers and postsecondary faculty to engage with students in meaningful ways.
- Make timely, frequent assessments a priority so that secondary school teachers, college faculty, and support staff can identify and address academic problems to help students early on.
- Pay special attention to institutional context and how social relationships within institutions foster emotional support and academic achievement.

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## About the Authors

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The Pathways to College Network is an alliance of over 30 national organizations that advances college opportunity for underserved students by raising public awareness, developing new research that is both innovative and actionable, and promoting evidence based policies and practices across the K-12 and higher education sectors. Pathways' work focuses on the education pipeline from middle school through college graduation in four key areas: Academic Readiness for College, College Access and Information, Financial Aid and Affordability, and College Success. Our website provides a comprehensive collection of college access and success studies and other resources to inform policy, practice and research. Pathways is directed by the Institute for Higher Education Policy, a nonprofit organization in Washington, DC. Visit our website for more information: [www.pathwaystocollege.net](http://www.pathwaystocollege.net).



The Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) is an independent, nonprofit organization that is dedicated to increasing access and success in postsecondary education around the world. Established in 1993, the Washington, D.C.-based organization uses unique research and innovative programs to inform key decision makers who shape public policy and support economic and social development. IHEP's web site, [www.ihep.org](http://www.ihep.org), features an expansive collection of higher education information available free of charge and provides access to some of the most respected professionals in the fields of public policy and research.

## Pathways to College Network

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