

December 2004

Revising Minimum Basic Admission Standards

Background

Washington state statutes require the Higher Education Coordinating Board to define minimum freshman admission standards for Washington's public four-year college and universities. This responsibility was confirmed when the Legislature and governor revised the board's statutory responsibilities in 2004 (RCW 28B.76.290). These standards signal to students, parents and K-12 educators the academic preparation students need to succeed in college. They also inform high schools of the content and quality of courses they must offer to ensure their students have the opportunity to gain admission, enroll in institutions of higher education, and earn bachelor's degrees.

The vast majority of prospective freshmen – residents and non-residents; citizens and international students; from public, private or home schools – must meet the minimum basic admission standards to enter any of the state's four-year college or universities. The institutions retain the flexibility to admit a small number of freshmen from prospective students who demonstrate college readiness by alternative means.

The board adopted most of the current minimum standards for freshman admission in 1988, and these requirements were fully implemented in 1992. In 2000, the board revised the science requirement, requiring entering college freshmen in 2010 to complete two years of laboratory-based science. At least one year must be in a course that requires the student to use algebra.

Over the past several years, the higher education community has reached broad agreement that the current admission standards are inadequate and that more rigorous preparation is required for freshmen entering the state's colleges and universities to succeed in their studies and complete baccalaureate programs.

Since 2003, members of the HECB staff have studied this issue and met with K-12 and higher education leaders to determine whether to revise the current standards and, if so, in what ways. Early in 2004, a work group convened by the HECB suggested revisions based on research and the institutions' recent admission experiences. The institutions' presidents and provosts reviewed, revised, and approved the recommendations before they were presented to the board for consideration. The proposal reflected in this document represents broad agreement among HECB staff and the participants in the project work group.

Board Action Requested

At its December 10 meeting, the HECB will be asked to direct its staff to publicize the recommended minimum admission changes, conduct a public comment process, and prepare final proposed standards and background materials for consideration and possible adoption by the board early in 2005.

Key Recommendations

The full recommendation proposed for students who seek freshman admission to college in fall 2008 is included at the end of this document. The key changes to the current standards would:

- **Increase the high school mathematics requirement to four years.** Currently, students must complete three years of math in high school, beginning with algebra. This proposal would add a fourth year of math, with students choosing from two optional sequences.
- **Revise the high school science requirement.** Currently, students are required to take two years of science, of which one year must be laboratory-based. The proposal would require two years of laboratory-based science, of which one year would require the student to understand and use algebra. This change was approved by the board for entering college freshmen in 2010. This proposal would advance that requirement to entering freshmen in 2008.
- **Require students in each year of high school to take at least three college preparatory courses that last for the entire school year.** Students would have the option of taking additional year-long courses.
- **Eliminate the statewide college Admission Index,** a formulaic scoring and ranking system used to evaluate high school graduates based on their cumulative grade point averages and scores on the SAT or ACT college entrance exams. However, the proposal would leave intact the requirements that students achieve as least a 2.0 grade point average on a 4.0 scale, and that they submit college test scores (SAT or ACT) to be considered for admission.

If, after a period of public review and comment, the board ultimately approves these changes or some modification of them, staff would work vigorously to communicate the new requirements to students, parents and schools in the years leading up to their implementation, and for as long as they remain in effect.

Why These Changes?

The proposed minimum requirements are designed to accomplish three primary objectives:

- Encourage and support more rigorous student academic preparation for college, and reduce the number of recent high school graduates who require remedial instruction at college;

- Promote rigorous coursework in all four years of high school; and
- Emphasize the *content* of high school study rather than simply promoting the achievement of a high grade-point average and the accumulation of “seat time” credits.

In doing so, the proposed standards would help to reverse recent national and state trends that have left many prospective college students unprepared or under-prepared for postsecondary study. In its recently adopted 2004 Strategic Master Plan for Higher Education, the HECB places a priority on improving the college-readiness of recent high school graduates, and the proposed admission standards are one element of a multi-pronged strategy to achieve that goal.

Numerous national studies have determined that rigorous academic preparation in all four years of high school is the most important indicator that students will earn college degrees. Rigorous coursework in high school is so critical, in fact, that it helps students overcome every other barrier to higher education that they might encounter, including factors related to socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity and others.

- In his landmark 1999 study on college preparation, *Answers in the Toolbox*, U.S. Department of Education researcher Clifford Adelman found that completion of a rigorous, high-quality high school curriculum better predicts whether a student will earn a college degree than his or her high school grades, college admission test scores, or class rank. Further, the positive impact on bachelor’s degree completion for African-American and Latino students is more pronounced than for Caucasian students.
- Adelman found that students’ level of mathematics completion in high school has the strongest influence on the likelihood they will attain a bachelor’s degree in college. Students who complete a course beyond the level of algebra 2 (such as trigonometry or pre-calculus) more than double the odds that they will complete a bachelor’s degree once they enroll in college.
- Research conducted by a national blue ribbon panel in 2001 confirmed what American educators have observed for decades: Too many students “coast” through their senior year of high school, causing their skills to erode and increasing the likelihood that they will have to take remedial courses at college. “Practically every college-bound student knows that what (he or she has) accomplished through grade 11 will largely determine whether or not (he or she attends) college,” the National Commission on the High School Senior Year concluded. “As a result, serious preparation for college ends at grade 11.”
- Another national initiative, the American Diploma Project, has advocated for several years that the requirements for high school graduation be strengthened, especially in English and math. In a 2004 study, the project found that in almost every state, high school graduation requirements are inadequate for the demands of college and the workplace. “The confidence that students and parents place in the diploma contrasts sharply with the skepticism of employers and post-secondary institutions, who all but ignore the diploma, knowing that it often serves as little more than a certificate of attendance,” the researchers wrote.

- Poor preparation is not only the result of a lack of academic rigor. The expectations of colleges and universities – and increasingly those of employers – have steadily grown more demanding and are not widely known or understood by students and their families. In 2003, Stanford University researchers found 88 percent of eighth-graders expected to participate in some form of postsecondary education, and approximately 70 percent of high school graduates actually do go to college within two years of earning a diploma. Yet fewer than 12 percent of high school students know the courses required to prepare them for admission to and success in college.

These findings are mirrored by students' experience in Washington:

- The state's current minimum basic college admission standards are no longer strong enough to actually qualify for admission at the state's more selective public universities. Further, students who do gain admission to a university by meeting only the current minimum requirements now frequently find themselves under-prepared for college academics.
- State and local high school graduation requirements do not meet even the current minimum college admission standards, and many parents and students do not realize this. For example, the state requires three years of English to graduate from high school, compared with the four years needed for college admission; two years of unspecified science versus two years of laboratory-based science; and two years of unspecified mathematics compared with three years of mathematics (including algebra, geometry and intermediate algebra). Most local school districts do require students to complete additional courses in order to graduate, but few if any high schools require the current minimum basic admission standards for all students.
- The WASL is not enough. High school graduates in 2008 will be required to show proficiency in reading, writing and math on the 10th grade Washington Assessment of Student Learning. While the WASL exam may help students know if they are on track for college, it remains a 10th grade test and does not measure college readiness. A 2004 report by Achieve, Inc., found that the 10th grade WASL writing examination was among the best writing assessments in the country required for graduation. However, Achieve also found that the 10th grade math examination largely measured pre-algebra skills, and the WASL reading test at best emphasized middle and early high school reading skills.
- Seventy (70) percent of Washington high school graduates go on to some form of postsecondary education within two years. Of these, more than 50 percent are not prepared for college-level study, particularly in mathematics. About 80 percent of the remedial classes required of recent high school graduates are in mathematics; while the remaining 20 percent are mostly in English. The bulk of remediation takes place in community and technical colleges, which have open admission policies. Four-year institutions require almost 10 percent of their freshmen to take remedial courses, according to a 2004 report by the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges.

- The state’s educators have not done enough to communicate to students and parents what is required for college-level success. With an average student-to-counselor ratio of 500:1 in the state, the current guidance system cannot reliably provide every student with this critical information, according to a 1999 report by the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction. Nor are state agencies and colleges and universities effectively reaching out to every student with college planning information.

Why Change Minimum Admission Standards Now?

In its 2004 Strategic Master Plan for Higher Education, the HECB has charted a new course to define college readiness. The board’s long-term objective is for minimum college admission standards to be expressed as a set of skills – identifying what students must know and be able to do to succeed in college – rather than reflecting the time spent learning particular subjects. The board’s implementation plan calls for adoption of official “college readiness” standards in December 2006, for mathematics, science, English, social studies and world languages.

This effort to define college readiness will provide high schools the critical information they need to ensure that their curricula reflect the knowledge and abilities students need to succeed in college and earn bachelor’s degrees. It also closely links college readiness to the state’s K-12 reform agenda to set learning goals for students through grade 10.

While that project progresses, the HECB believes it is important to convey to students, families and K-12 educators the urgency to upgrade the state’s minimum college admission standards for students who will reach high school age in the next few years.

Certain Aspects of the College Admission Process will Remain Intact

Adoption of revised admission standards is expected to improve the college readiness of high school graduates who meet the new requirements. Meanwhile, certain important aspects of the current admission process will remain intact. For example:

- **Colleges and universities would retain their current flexibility in two important ways.** They could designate additional requirements for admission beyond the basic standards set forth by the board. And, they could continue to admit some students who do not meet the minimum requirements, but who have otherwise made a compelling case that they are ready to succeed in college study. The number of students who may be admitted under special consideration would remain limited to 15 percent of each freshman class.
- **Simply meeting the new minimum requirements would NOT guarantee students admission to any of the state’s public four-year institutions.** Colleges and universities make admission decisions based on a variety of economic, demographic, and institutional factors – many of which change every year. The new minimum standards would tell students that, if they meet the requirements, they are likely to be ready for college-level work and have a reasonable opportunity of being admitted to one of the state’s public four-year institutions. As the college admission process becomes more competitive, certain students who meet the *minimum* standards may not be admitted to their first-choice institutions.

Next Steps

With the board's approval, HECB staff will implement the following procedure for public review and final consideration of the recommended changes:

- December 2004:** Develop public briefing documents, publicize the proposed changes, and schedule public hearing dates. Communicate to the media and to students, parents, citizens, employers, school directors and administrators, teachers, and higher education administrators and faculty.
- January 2005:** Hold public hearings in at least two locations in Washington. Develop a summary of the testimony for board review.
- March 2005:** Present final recommendations for board consideration. Information will include a summary of public comments received at the hearings and any changes to the proposal that result from the hearings. The final proposal will include a statewide communication plan to publicize and explain the changes.

Minimum Freshman Admission Standards for Students Entering College in Fall 2008 and Thereafter

Goals of the minimum basic admission standards are to ensure that:

- Freshmen selected to enroll at the state's public baccalaureate institutions are ready to succeed academically and earn bachelor's degrees;
- The amount of remedial instruction required for recent high school graduates is minimized;
- Universities recognize that experiences and activities beyond academic achievement can contribute to a successful college application; and
- Students and families understand that completion of a rigorous curriculum in high school is critically important to prepare for success in college.

	Current Minimum Standards	Proposed Standards Effective Summer 2008
Academic Distribution Requirements		Students must take a minimum of 3 year-long academic courses (core and/or other rigorous courses beyond core) each year of high school, including the senior year. Students are encouraged to take additional or advanced academic coursework when available.
<i>English</i>	4 years , including 3 years of literature and composition.	No change.
<i>Mathematics</i>	3 years , including algebra, geometry and advanced mathematics.	4 years. Students must complete one of the following math options: (1) successful completion of math through Intermediate Algebra (or Integrated Math III) and a year of elective math, algebra-based science or statistics in the final year of high school; OR, (2) successful completion of math through pre-calculus.
<i>Social Science</i>	3 years.	No change.
<i>Science</i>	2 years , including one year of laboratory science (the equivalent of biology, chemistry, physics, or principles of technology). Note: Students applying for college freshman admission beginning in fall 2010 must have completed two years of laboratory science, including one year of algebra-based biology, chemistry or physics.	2 years of laboratory science , including one year of algebra-based biology, chemistry or physics.
<i>Foreign Language</i>	2 years of the same foreign language, Native American language, or American Sign language.	No change.
<i>Arts</i>	1 year of fine, visual or performing arts or electives from any of the other required subjects.	No change.

**Minimum Freshman Admission Standards for
Students Entering College in 2008 and Thereafter**
(continued)

	Current Minimum Standards	Proposed Standards Effective Summer 2008
Minimum Grade Point Average	Minimum unweighted cumulative Grade Point Average of 2.0 on a 4.0 scale.	No change.
Admission Index (Each student receives a score based on grade point average and college admission test scores.)	Achieve a minimum score of at least 13 at Central, Eastern and Western Washington universities and The Evergreen State College, and at least 28 at Washington State University and the University of Washington.	Eliminate.
Required tests	SAT or ACT	SAT or ACT. Students unable to provide standardized test scores may petition the institution for a waiver. International students are not required to provide test scores. No more than 5 percent of the new freshmen enrolled annually at each institution may receive waivers from this requirement. Note: Students who pass all sections of the WASL will be determined to have completed the first two years of high school core requirements in English and mathematics.
Comprehensive Review	Institutions may admit students who do not meet the minimum standards by considering such non-academic characteristics as a personal essay, community activities, personal circumstances or special talents. No more than 15 percent of new freshmen at each institution may be admitted through this alternative process.	No change.



STATE OF WASHINGTON
HIGHER EDUCATION COORDINATING BOARD

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RESOLUTION NO. 04-32

WHEREAS, The Washington Higher Education Coordinating Board (HECB) is directed by the Legislature (RCW 28B.76.290) to establish minimum admission standards for the state's public four-year college and universities; and

WHEREAS, A rigorous academic preparation during all four years of high school is the single best indicator of higher education success and bachelor's degree attainment; and

WHEREAS, Washington's higher education community has reached consensus that the current minimum basic admission standards established by the board in 1988 no longer reflect the level of rigorous preparation required for freshman entering the state's colleges and universities; and

WHEREAS, The state's public four-year institutions have reached consensus on recommended changes to the current minimum basic admissions standards, and board staff have studied those recommendations and concluded that they will improve student preparation for college; and

WHEREAS, Students, parents, and schools need to understand the preparation needed for successful college study, and all of these groups look to the state's minimum basic admission standards as the threshold requirements for college opportunity;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, That board staff will publicize the recommended changes to the minimum freshman admissions standards for students entering college in 2008, conduct a public comment process, and prepare final proposed standards and background materials for consideration and possible adoption by the board early in 2005.

Adopted:

December 10, 2004

Attest:

Bob Craves, Chair

Gene Colin, Secretary

