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High School Preparation is the Best Predictor of College Graduation

What increases students' chances of earning a bachelor's degree? According to a widely-acclaimed study of over 10,000 students, the high school curriculum is key. Called *Answers in the Tool Box*, this study by U.S. Department of Education researcher Clifford Adelman examined more than 20 variables—including high school courses, educational aspirations, race, socioeconomic status (SES), on-time versus late high school graduation, and parenthood prior to age 22—to determine what really influenced the college completion rates of these students.

In Adelman's study, about 40 percent of students attended a four-year college and about 25 percent earned a bachelor's degree. What were the main differences between those who did and did not graduate? Socioeconomic status had some impact (but it was minimal after the first year of college), and race did not have a statistically significant impact at all. Much more important than either SES or race was the students' academic preparation for college (which Adelman defined as students' high school courses, scores on a short SAT-type test, and GPA/class rank).

Adelman's study clearly shows that for students of all backgrounds, tackling a tough curriculum in high school is the best way to maximize their chances of earning a B.A. Here are a few more findings to note:

- Of all the high school indicators of academic preparation, the one that is the strongest is taking rigorous and intense courses in high school.
- Taking rigorous and intense high school courses has a greater impact on African-American and Latino students than on white students.
- Of all the high school courses, the highest level of mathematics taken is the most important for college success. The odds that a student who enters college will complete a bachelor's degree more than doubles if that student completed a mathematics course beyond Algebra II (e.g., trigonometry or pre-calculus) while in high school.