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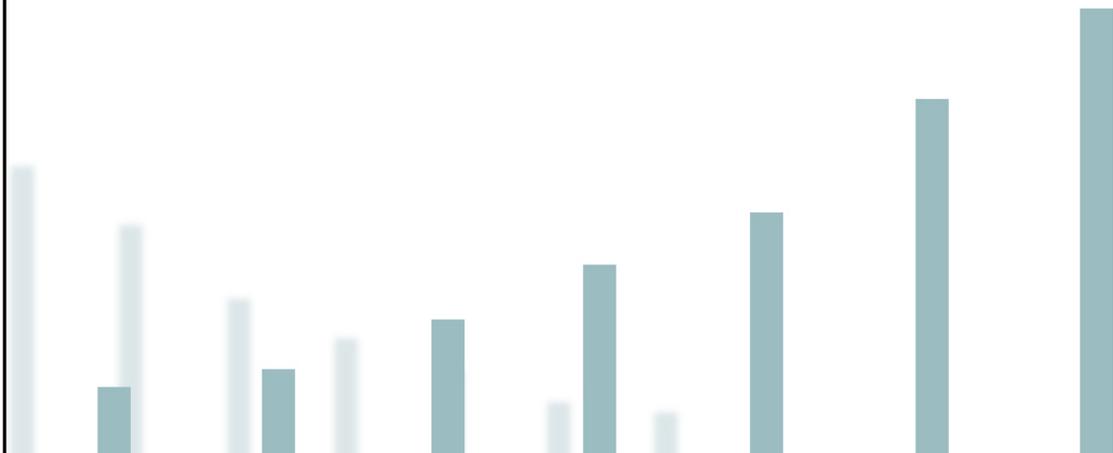
# Reclaiming the American Dream

## Executive Summary

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The contrasts are stark. In the United States today, a high school dropout is four times as likely to be unemployed as a college graduate is. If he does find a job he will earn nearly 60% less. He will be half as likely to participate in the democratic process by voting, or to feel he is in good or excellent health.

Differences in access to college are equally stark. Only 60% of America's low-income youth (defined as students eligible for free or reduced meals) can expect to graduate from high school. One in three can expect to enroll in college. Only one in seven will earn a bachelor's degree.

Efforts to rectify these disparities are multiplying; but it is not yet clear which of them have the greatest impact. To address this question, the Bridgespan Group, in partnership with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, analyzed data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS: 88, 2000) to identify the kinds of support that appear to make the greatest difference in helping low-income youth enroll in and complete college.

Academic preparation is by far the most effective means of increasing the odds that students will graduate from high school ready for college and eventually receive their degrees. A student who graduates from high school having met even a very lenient definition of academic preparedness has an 85% chance of entering college and a 50% chance of receiving a degree. In contrast, students who fall short have only a 14% chance of completing college. Shockingly, only 46% of high school graduates meet even minimal levels of academic preparation.

Academic preparation is necessary but not sufficient, however, in helping low-income students enroll in and graduate from college.

- Expectations about college attendance are important, with one in particular standing out: a student's expectation that a college degree will be essential to pursue his or her desired career. Students who make this connection are six times more likely to earn their college degrees than those who do not.
- Information about college and the requirements students must satisfy in order to enroll are also critical. Many low-income students expect to go to college, but they do not plan to take the academic courses that will enable them to pursue that path.

- Peer culture (particularly having a cohort of friends who plan to attend college) is more influential than parental encouragement. The most important thing parents can do for students is to make college a tangible part of their world (for example, by visiting a college campus).
- Supports that address the issue of college affordability are important across the board. Many low-income students lack reliable information about affordability and the financial aid process.

For a country in which education is the premier means for promoting equal opportunity and social mobility, increasing college access and success for low-income students is a moral, social, and economic imperative. Taken together, the findings indicate a clear action agenda for achieving that goal. Community-based organizations demonstrate what success can look like and create the environment to drive for change. Policy-makers in Washington must reform the current financial aid system so that college becomes affordable for low-income students. State policy-makers must define a college-ready high school curriculum and ensure that it becomes the default in their schools. School districts must provide the infrastructure to support the transition to a college-ready curriculum. Last not least, schools must create a culture in which college preparation and attendance is the norm for every student.