



Washington State Graduates: Course-Taking Patterns among African-American Students

Research demonstrates that some racial and ethnic groups are not achieving school success at the same rate as other students (Ashley, 2007). In Washington State, course-taking patterns for African American students may limit access to post-secondary education.

Studies show a relationship between students' course-taking patterns and achievement in high school and beyond. Students who took more rigorous courses scored higher on the National Assessment of Educational Progress and were more likely to enroll in college and earn degrees (Bottoms & Feagan, 2003; Adelman, 2006). Because these findings hold regardless of race or socioeconomic status, preparing students to succeed in advanced courses ultimately contributes to closing the achievement gap.

The Washington State Board of Education (SBE) is revising high school graduation requirements to better prepare students for career, postsecondary education, and citizenship. The proposed Core 24 graduation requirements framework, approved in July 2008 with implementation contingent on funding, is more rigorous than current Washington State graduation requirements and, in some content areas, more rigorous than minimum college admission standards set by the Washington Higher Education Coordinating (HEC) Board. Table 1 summarizes graduation requirements, including notations about course levels.

Prior to proposing new requirements, the SBE commissioned a transcript study. Researchers from The BERG Group examined course-taking patterns for 14,875 students who graduated in 2008 from 100 schools in 100 districts across Washington. This research brief, with an emphasis on African-American students, is one in a series of research briefs. More information about the study can be obtained at http://www.sbe.wa.gov/documents/SBETranscriptStudy2008_FINAL.pdf.

Table 1.
Comparison of Washington State High School Graduation Requirements with Four-year Public College Admission Requirements

Subject	2008 State Minimum Graduation Reqs.	2008 HEC Board Reqs.	Core 24 Default Reqs.
English	3	4*	4*
Math	2	3**	3**
Science	2***	2***	3
Social Studies	2.5	3	3
Arts	1	1	2
World Language	0	2****	2****
Career Concentration	1	0	3
Health & Fitness	2	0	2
Electives	5.5	0	2
Total	19	15	24

*Including 3 credits of literature

**Algebra I, II, and geometry or Integrated Mathematics I, II, III

*** Including at least 1 credit of laboratory science (2 labs in 2010)

****Including 2 credits of the same world language

Note: The Core 24 default college and career ready requirements align with the Higher Education Coordinating Board minimum college admissions requirements. Some students may choose an alternative Core 24 pathway.

This study was conducted to provide a baseline of information that would inform the SBE's graduation requirements initiative. The proposed Core 24 requirements were not in place for the class of 2008, and students were not trying to meet these requirements.

Analysis of course-taking patterns showed fewer African American students took courses that would meet the

minimum entry requirements of a Washington four-year public college. Specifically, 41.1% of African-American students met HEC Board requirements, compared to 48.5% of students in the study, and 9.8% met Core 24 default college and career ready requirements, compared to 16.4% of study participants (see Figure 1).

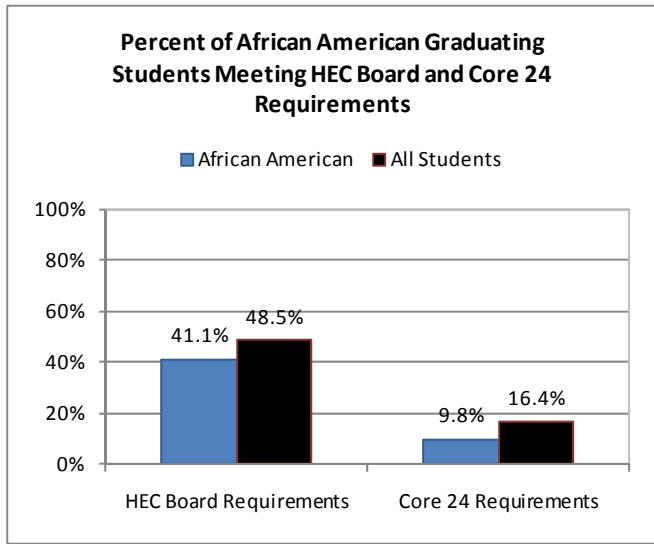


Figure 1. Percentage of African-American Students Meeting HEC Board and Core 24 Default College and Career Ready Requirements.

For the HEC Board requirements, the greatest differences were in math (9%) and world language (5%) (see Figure 2). Among the subjects where the proposed CORE 24 requirements differed from HEC Board requirements, fewer students met the fine arts (7%), science (5%), and career concentration requirements (4%) (see Figure 3).

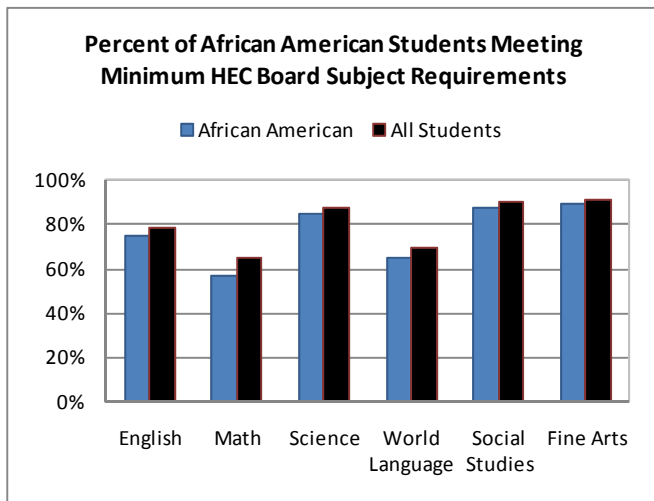


Figure 2. Percentage of African-American students meeting HEC Board requirements by subject area.

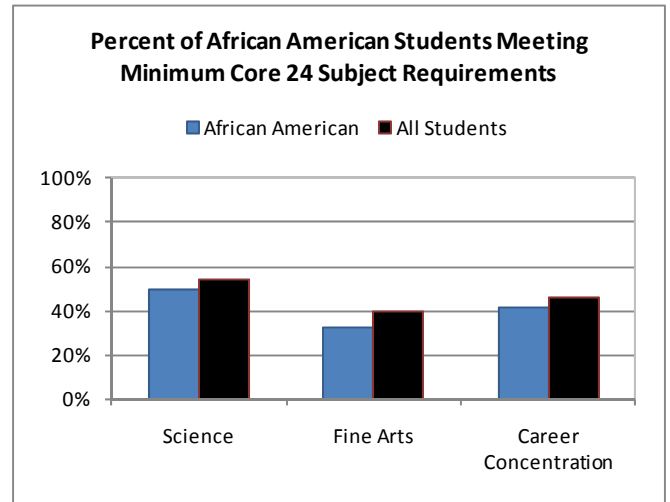


Figure 3. Percentage of African-American students meeting Core 24 default college and career ready requirements by subject area. Note: This brief does not include an analysis of health and fitness requirements. The health and fitness requirements were analyzed from a sample of students after the original study was completed.

Further analyses showed African-Americans earned high school math credits in middle school at about half the rate of all students in the study (13.0% compared to 26.1%). However, rates for earning world language credits were comparable to study participants (6.2% compared to 6.3%). In high school, African-American students were less likely to take AP/IB classes (28.3% compared to 35.1%) and Running Start classes (8.8% compared to 13.3%). Finally, course-failure rates for African American students were significantly higher than in the rest of the sample, with 71.7% failing at least one class, as opposed to 47.3%.

References:

Adelman, C. (2006). *The toolbox revisited: Paths to degree completion from high school through college*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education.

Ashley, N. (2007). *Educating all our children: A comprehensive plan for reducing the dropout rate in King County*. Prepared by Heliotrope for the Reinvesting in Youth Steering Committee.

Bailey, M.H. & Dziko, T.M. (2008). *A plan to close the achievement gap for African-American students*. Submitted to OSPI by the HB 2722 Advisory Committee.

Bottoms, G. & Feagin, C. (2003). *Improving achievement is about focus and completing the right courses*. Southern Regional Education Board, Washington, DC.