

Defining Multiple Pathways for High School Graduation*

[From: Saunders, M., & Chrisman, C. A. (2008). *Multiple Pathways: 21st Century High Schools that Prepare All Students for College, Career and Civic Participation*.
<http://epicpolicy.org/publication/multiple-pathways>]

With a specific focus on the need for high school reform, there is a growing movement for revisiting multiple pathway approaches in preparing 21st century students for college, career and civic participation. Saunders and Chrisman argue this is based on the fundamental insight that career and technical education – previously called vocational education – can be academically rigorous. The following excerpt from their writings on the topic illustrates their argument.

“Multiple Pathways programs connect rigorous academic preparation, technical knowledge, and opportunities to learn from adult, real-world settings, including the workplace. The approach rests on three research-based propositions:

- Learning both academic and technical knowledge is enhanced when the two are integrated and contextualized in authentic situations;
- Connecting academics to real-world contexts promotes student interest and engagement;
- Students who gain both academic and career education stand the best chance of accessing the full range of postsecondary options and a solid start toward a personally and socially productive middle-class life.

That being said, Multiple Pathways is not a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to high school education. Rather, students and their families choose among a variety of high school programs that provide the academic and real-world foundations that students need for advanced learning, training, and responsible public participation. While each pathway is academically challenging, the various ‘pathways’ differ in their curricular emphasis (e.g., the thematic or career focus), in how courses are organized, in the extent to which students spend time on and off campus, in their relationship with colleges, and in their partnerships with business and industry. Pathways can be offered through a variety of school structures, including career academies, industry/career majors in large high schools, magnet schools, small learning communities, and Regional Occupational Programs/Centers.

Despite their thematic and structural differences, each pathway consists of four essential components to ensure high standards, program coherence, and personalized learning:

- A college-preparatory academic knowledge core (satisfying the course requirements for entry into a state’s flagship public university), delivered through project-based learning and other engaging instructional strategies that bring real-world context and relevance to the curriculum where broad themes, interest areas, and/or career and technical education (CTE) are emphasized;

- A professional/technical knowledge core, well-grounded in academic and real-world standards;
- Demanding opportunities for field-based learning that deepen students' understanding of academic and technical knowledge through application in authentic situations; and
- Support services to meet the particular needs of students and communities, which can include such elements as supplemental instruction, counseling, and transportation.

Most important, every pathway leads to the same destination: preparation to succeed in both college and career, not one or the other. It assumes that almost all students will eventually end up in the workplace and that most workers will need to learn advanced knowledge and skills to sustain or advance their careers. Although any given student may decide to bypass college in favor of directly entering the workforce, a pathways approach offers all students the preparation to seek the college option and/or do well whenever the need for additional learning arises.

Notably, the ‘single destination’ approach of Multiple Pathways—preparing all students for both college and career—defies and seeks to change a long-standing social hierarchy that makes college ‘better than’ work, and makes ‘work’ preparation the default for those who cannot succeed in college preparation. It firmly rejects a tracking system that provides different curriculum for students perceived to be headed for very different post-high school opportunities.”

***This Information Resource is online at:** <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/definingmp.pdf>

For more on postsecondary education, see the Center report entitled

**Interventions to Support Readiness, Recruitment, Access,
Transition, and Retention for Postsecondary Education Success: An Equity of
Opportunity Policy and Practice Analysis**

(<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/postsecondary.pdf>)

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