



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF STUDENT FINANCIAL AID ADMINISTRATORS

NEWS FROM NASFAA

Could The International Baccalaureate Program Change U.S. Education?

Recent statistics portraying the U.S. educational system as losing its position as a world leader recently motivated the Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce - a bipartisan group of business, government and education leaders - to call for a complete restructuring of everything from preschool to higher education.

Some of the statistics that motivated the Commission to call for such a radical change included:

- Eight developed nations have surpassed America's high school graduation rate.
- Among U.S. students that graduate from high school, less than half are ready for college-level math and science coursework.
- Almost 30 percent of incoming college freshman require remediation in reading, writing, or math.

The Commission recommended the introduction of an exam which would allow students as young as 16 to move on to a two-year college preparatory program similar to an international baccalaureate (IB).

Once thought of as another way to pad a student's academic transcript, the IB is becoming increasingly more important as education leaders seek ways to help students excel academically and prepare earlier for a postsecondary degree. Giving even more credence to the IB are recent Department of Education regulations allowing the IB to fulfill the "rigorous course of study" requirement for Academic Competitiveness Grant (ACG) funds.

The Department Gives a Nod to IB Coursework

The ACG was created to "encourage students to prepare themselves academically for success in higher education and the highly competitive workforce," according to Secretary Spellings in [General Dear Colleague Letter 06-08](#). To that end, Congress mandated that a major eligibility component of this new grant program would require students to complete a "rigorous course of study."

The Secretary determined that all existing advanced or honors diploma programs should be recognized as rigorous courses of study. Because of the short time given to implement the ACG program and because advanced or honors diplomas are not offered in all states, the Secretary also recognized the IB Program as an acceptable alternative for students wishing to meet the rigorous eligibility requirement. Under current regulations, students must complete at least two IB courses in high school and obtain a four or higher on all IB exams.

The Secretary plans to recommend a more demanding set of requirements to define a rigorous secondary school program by the 2008-09 academic year. However, the Secretary has indicated that IBs will remain viable options for students to meet the rigorous secondary school requirement.

Understanding IB Programs

While most financial aid administrators know that the IB meets the rigorous eligibility requirement for ACG funds, many are not so sure what the IB consists of, how it prepares students for college, and why many are pointing to it as a way to lift the U.S. educational system.

The IB was created by the [International Baccalaureate Organization](#) (IBO), a nonprofit educational foundation that began in 1968 in Geneva, Switzerland. The IBO developed the program to provide schools with an international curriculum that would be accepted at universities worldwide. The IBO is widely known for creating intercultural and challenging programs centered on international education with rigorous assessment standards, sometimes labeled as "a high school program geared to the university-bound elite."

The IB program helps students understand their own culture and national identity and then encourages them to explore other cultures. The program also focuses on critical thought to develop students' research skills. Besides the high school IB program, the IBO has also developed the Primary Years Program for students ages 3-12 and the Middle Years Program for students ages 11-16. The high school IB program or the "Diploma Program" is for students ages 16-19 and is the most widely offered of the three programs.

Critical thinking is stressed over multiple choice or standardized tests in all IB programs. Students enrolled in IBO courses are given the skills to deliver major academic projects as early as fifth grade. This teaches students how to learn instead of just what to learn.

Schools that offer IB courses are also helping schools integrate low-income and higher-income students. Low-income schools that offer IB courses are more successful at retaining children from higher-income backgrounds whose parents might otherwise send them to private or more affluent schools. At the same time, IB courses offered in traditionally low-income districts seem to help large numbers of low-income students better prepare themselves for college. The results seem to be in line with the Commission's goals to raise the number of students who are truly prepared for postsecondary coursework.

Some universities may even accept IB coursework as college credit, cutting down on the amount of time a student attends an institution and providing further incentive for students and parents to explore this option.

Trends in IBs

Financial aid administrators will likely see more IBs in the future as they continue to grow in popularity. With more than 683 IB programs, the U.S. has more IB schools than any other country, 450 more than the next highest, Canada. Worldwide, statistics show that in the last five years, IB high schools have increased more than 50 percent. The Primary and Middle Years Programs have grown even more dramatically, increasing by 335 percent and 112 percent respectively.

Are IBs the Answer?

The IB program seems to fall in line with the Commission's suggestions on how to revamp the U.S. educational system to better prepare youth for the rigors of a postsecondary education.

"The country will not succeed unless everyone has at least two years of college by age 18," said Marc Tucker, president of the National Center on Education and the Economy which published the Commission's report.

Clearly the Department sees the value of the IB program as demonstrated by its acceptance - now and into the future - of the IB as meeting a core requirement for ACG funds. The ACG program may actually increase demand for advanced high school curricula, such as the IB programs. Hopefully this will contribute to an increase in high school graduates who are prepared for college work, reducing the amount of time students take to complete their educations and opening the doors of access to more students nationwide.

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