

# Why Diploma Types Matter

Experts predict that by 2018, at least 65 percent of all jobs will require some type of postsecondary education or training (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010). But what determines college success? A recent research project sponsored by the Virginia Department of Education revealed that high school diploma type is an important factor in predicting Virginia graduates' success in college (in both two- and four-year colleges). More specifically, high school graduates who took courses that are required to earn Virginia's Advanced Studies diploma (or an International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma), were almost twice as likely to remain in or graduate from college after four years compared to graduates who earned Standard diplomas.

In Virginia, the most commonly awarded High School diplomas are the Standard and Advanced Studies (or International Baccalaureate) diplomas. Additionally, Virginia offers the Modified Standard diploma and the Special diploma to students with disabilities. These diploma types demand vastly different requirements of students during their four years in high school (see Table 1). For example, the Standard diploma requires only three years of Mathematics, Lab Science, and History and Social Sciences, while the Advanced Studies diploma requires four years of the same subjects.

## Diploma Type Requirements

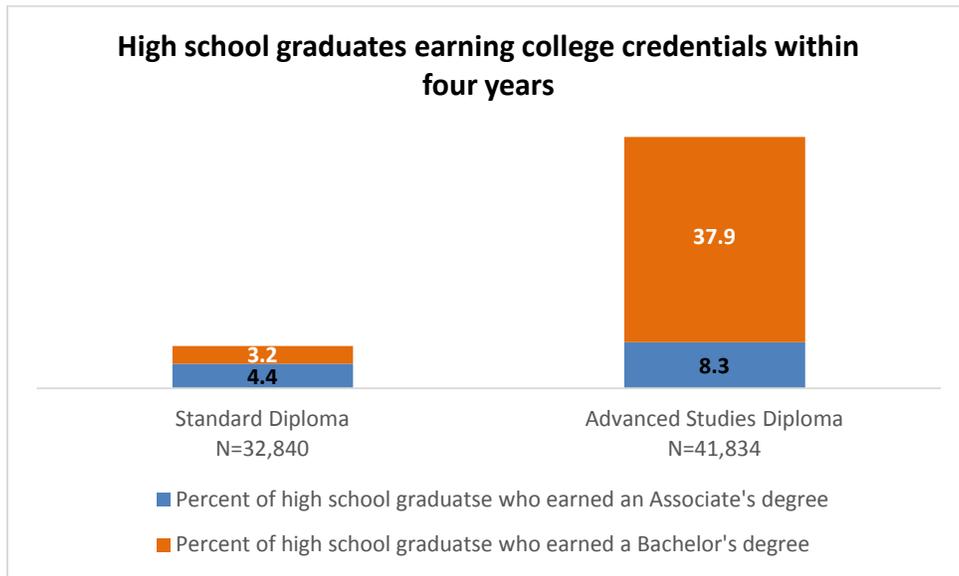
Diploma type	Core Course Requirements	Minimum high school credits required
Advanced Studies diploma	English	4
	Mathematics	4
	Lab Science	4
	History and Social Sciences	4
	Foreign Languages	3
Standard diploma	English	4
	Mathematics	3
	Lab Science	3
	History and Social Sciences	3
	Foreign Languages	0

Using data from the Virginia Longitudinal Data System (VLDS), the study, *Virginia's 2008 On-Time Graduation Rate Cohort Four Year College Enrollment, Persistence, and Completion*, examined the 2008 Virginia high school graduates and followed their success rates in college. Of the 78,087 high school graduates in the cohort, 54,024 students (or 69 percent of graduates) enrolled in a college or university in the first year after graduation. However, the study found that of these, students with Advanced Studies diplomas were far more likely to enroll, remain, and graduate college within four years. Some of these findings were as follows:

- High school graduates with Advanced Studies diplomas were more likely to enroll than graduates with Standard diplomas (88 percent vs. 50 percent).



- Four years after high school, Advanced Studies diploma-earners were twice as likely to stay in college or earn a degree as Standard diploma-earners (83 percent vs. 46 percent).
- High school graduates who earned Advanced Studies diplomas were more likely to earn Associate’s or Bachelor’s degrees than those who earned Standard diplomas. Overall, of the 41,834 Advanced Studies diploma-earners, 46 percent earned a degree after four years, compared to the 7.2 percent of 32,840 Standard diploma-earners.



Finally, an examination of student successes at four-year colleges revealed that the difference between the two groups’ success rates was not as stark, but nonetheless still exists. According to the study, “Ninety-three (93) percent of the college-enrolled Advanced Studies diploma-earners and nearly three-quarters (73 percent) of college-enrolled Standard diploma-earners whose last enrollment was a four-year IHE persisted for four years.”

The differences between the two diploma-type earner types are not surprising. As the study pointed out, “In Virginia, the requirements of the Advanced Studies diploma are aligned to the entrance requirements for typical college and other postsecondary training programs. Students who complete a program of study consistent with or exceeding the Advanced Studies diploma requirements will be better prepared for college-level coursework and other types of training programs upon graduation. Students who earn the Advanced Studies diploma are more likely to enroll in college, stay in college, and earn a degree.”

The results of this study can help parents, students, and educators understand the potential impact of their students’ course-taking choices and decisions. Diploma types, which have different course requirements, can affect students’ future chances for success in college and career training programs. By ensuring that more high school students participate and succeed in the high school courses consistent with the Advanced Studies diploma, more graduates’ will leave our schools with a better shot at success in college, career training, and life.

