

Curriculum Leadership Institute E-Hint

Are High Schools Really Preparing Students for College? Part I

Educators agree that not all students should plan to go to college. There are many excellent career options that involve other types of postsecondary education or on-the-job training. On the other hand, every high school is expected to provide the necessary educational foundation for students who *do* want to earn a college degree. However, parents and educators alike have some misconceptions about what indicates that necessary foundation. In a study prepared for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation,¹ college readiness is defined operationally rather than according to more traditional representations. Here are the three most-used traditional criteria and why they are not reliable.

1. Course titles.
 - a. Assumption: If students take a prescribed number of courses, including particular course titles, they should be ready for college, i.e. four years of English; three years of science, including biology, chemistry, and physics.
 - b. Problem: This doesn't tell us what they learn in these classes or how rigorous the classes are. State education agencies have been creating standards since the 1980s, yet most of these standards-setting activities end at the 10th grade. Few states have tried to define 12th grade high school standards and the curriculum necessary to attain those standards. Additionally, some high schools have low academic standards and expectations in general – so, just because students completed the right titles of courses doesn't mean they have the background knowledge and skills necessary for college work.
2. GPA.
 - a. Assumption: If students have a high enough grade point average they should do well in college.
 - b. Problem: A study completed by ACT researchers and data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress indicate grade inflation. A grade average of *B* in high school now may reflect knowledge and skills equivalent to something more like a *C* average thirty years ago. Additionally, high schools are allowed to adopt their own weighting criteria, which results in myriad ways to compute a grade point average. Factor in the problem described in #1 above – the lack of rigor in a course – and a grade point may mean very little as far as how well a student will do in a college course.

3. State assessments.

- a. Assumption: All states administer assessments, including at the high school level, in the areas of reading, math, and science. So if students score well on these assessments, they are college-ready.
- b. Problem: First of all, most state-standards tests are not well aligned with postsecondary learning. They are perhaps good measures of basic academic skills, but not necessarily of the knowledge and skills necessary for college learning. Second, assessments vary widely from one state to another, both in content and proficiency requirements. Thus, data would not be comparable for two students from different states wanting to attend the same college. And finally, because high schools concentrate on helping students pass state tests to meet NCLB's measure of Adequate Yearly Progress, their programs of study may not align well with college eligibility requirements.

So, how *should* we define college readiness? Conley tells us there are four key areas:

Key Cognitive Strategies. These strategies are intentional behaviors that are practiced until they become habitual ways of working toward more thoughtful and intelligent action. They include intellectual openness, inquisitiveness, reasoning/argumentation/proof, interpretation, precision and accuracy, and problem solving.

Key Content. The overarching academic skills needed are writing and research. Core subjects include English, math, science, social studies, world languages, and the arts. What, specifically, students need to know and be able to do in these areas can be found in numerous sets of standards that focus on expectations attendant with entry-level college courses. The Standards for Success project, sponsored by the Association of American Universities, developed a comprehensive set of readiness standards in six subject areas. The American Diploma Project, sponsored by state governors, developed standards that reflect both college and work readiness in math and English. Both the College Board and ACT have published their own versions of college readiness standards. Several states are now developing "definitions" of college readiness that connect to high school academic standards.

Academic Behaviors. These include such behaviors as self-monitoring and study skills. College learning requires considerable time devoted to study outside of class, and students need to know how to proceed. They need skills in time management, preparing for and taking examinations, using information resources, and participating successfully in study groups.

Contextual Skills and Awareness. This refers to information necessary to understand how college operates as a system and culture. Students need to understand the customs and conventions of interactions in the college context, and the human relations skills necessary to cope – how to collaborate and work in a team, how one interacts with professors, and how to interact with people from different backgrounds and cultures. This area also includes "college knowledge" – understanding processes for gaining admission, college options and choices, tuition costs and the financial system, placement requirements, testing and standards, the culture of college, and the challenge level of college courses.

Watch for a *CLI E-Hint* this fall that will provide Part II of "Are High Schools Really Preparing Students for College?" In Part II, we will discuss what schools and students can do to provide the appropriate foundation in the areas described here in Part I.

¹Conley, D.T. (2007) *Toward a more comprehensive conception of college readiness.* Eugene, OR: Educational Policy Improvement Center.