

Curriculum Leadership Institute E-Hint

Are High Schools Really Preparing Students for College? Part II

Part I of this E-hint pointed out misconceptions about what constitutes a necessary foundation for college study. (Find Part I in the *E-hint* archives at www.cliweb.org.) As stated there, the three most-used criteria for college preparation are problematic in their assumptions: (1) that completion of certain courses will mean students are prepared; (2) that a high enough GPA indicates a student's likely success; and (3) that proficient or advanced scores on state assessments would mean a student is college-ready. These criteria are flawed because: (1) a course title doesn't guarantee degree of rigor or what a student has actually learned; (2) grading techniques vary widely from one geographic area to another, and even between and among teachers in the same building; and (3) not only is there a wide variance in state assessment content and proficiency requirements, but students are only tested through the 10th grade.

So, what can high schools and students do to promote college readiness? First, a high school must create a culture focused on the intellectual development of all students. This begins with the curriculum, as it must be carefully designed and based on "big ideas" (Wiggins and McTeague 1998) that are supported by lasting understandings that span multiple courses and grade levels. The school must have a formal, published curriculum, stating specifically what students will know and be able to do in each course with a logical progression and development of *knowledge* over four years of high school. *Thinking and reasoning skills* should also be sequentially developed by a progressively more challenging curriculum throughout the four years.

In addition to structuring course content and thinking skills, high schools should develop academic programs to help students progressively assume more control and responsibility for their learning. Students need to become better at critiquing their own work and knowing how to make improvements. Expectations should include progressively more independent work outside of class on increasingly larger, more complex assignments. For this to happen, their time management and study skills need to become more challenging each year as well. High school students often enter their senior year thinking they are ready for college because they have completed required courses. Many think they can coast that last year, which results in the development of particularly bad study habits and skills at a time when those abilities should be maximized.

High schools also need to improve guidance services regarding admission systems used in post secondary and higher education. Students need to know more about requirements in terms of coursework and grades, admissions tests, letters of recommendation, and transcripts. They also need to know more about financial aid options and the application process. While those elements need to be upgraded, other guidance services should be implemented or dramatically expanded, such as experience in preparing a résumé or other summary document; recognizing that different kinds of post secondary schools and colleges appeal to different kinds of learning styles and interests; and that some institutions are more demanding and selective in their admissions processes. Many students, particularly first-generation college students, simply give up because they feel intimidated or overwhelmed by all the requirements. A high school is the

only place where *all* students have the opportunity to gain this type of information, and it is the high school's responsibility to see that they get it either in the guidance program or in a special required course offered early in their high school program.

Obviously, students themselves must assume responsibility in preparing for admission to colleges; the high schools can't do it all for them. However, it is up to the school district to get things started. Students must accept that a college education is a reasonable and realistic goal, and without the right guidance, many students whose parents did not continue their education beyond high school would not recognize or believe in their own potential. Encouragement must be presented while students are in middle school or even earlier. Students who don't consider post secondary or college until they're in high school may already have made poor decisions in course work.

It is particularly important for school districts to examine the connection between middle and high school math, science, and language arts programs so that students naturally transition into the necessary high school courses. In fact, a number of states have now instituted what they call "default" high school programs. These programs of study meet the entrance requirements of the state university program, and all students are enrolled in them unless their parents specifically exempt them. Regardless of whether students choose a four-year college, a community college, or other type of post-secondary education, all of them will have received the same quality of education.

Students need to discuss options with decision-making adults in their lives. Students without supportive family environments should have strong connections not only with the school's counselors but with mentor teachers, community service staff, and/or volunteers in a planned, dynamic and well organized process.