



# College Readiness and Preparing 'Career Ready' Students

A Literature Review

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To cite this report: Lund-Diaz, S. (2015) A Literature Review of College Readiness and Preparing  
'Career Ready' Students. Miami, FL

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## INTRODUCTION

This literature review looks at “*college readiness*”, “*career readiness*”, *globalization* as well as the roles of teachers in preparing secondary education students for college readiness and in preparation for career success.

K-12 teachers play a critical role in preparing their students with the skills they will need to be “college ready”, able to succeed at a wide range of higher education institutions. This is an important issue for community colleges that constitute a vast sector of higher education and the entry point into post-secondary learning for millions of students. Community colleges also play an overlooked role in teacher education, especially in view of the fact that, according to the National Science Foundation, a large percentage of prospective teachers begin their education in two-year colleges. I am interested in perusing literature that points to the tools K-12 educators (teachers and principals) have, or need to have, to facilitate the learning of knowledge and acquisition of skills that will prepare secondary education students for entry to higher education and the workforce and to attain their college completion goals.

Being *college ready* and having *career readiness* require similar skills and knowledge bases. These two terms are intricately entwined as important factors that will contribute toward the success of the future of community colleges in terms of being able to provide an education to a student population prepared to learn. One of the challenges of identifying and verifying *college readiness*, however, is that there is no consensus about what it means to be ready for college attendance and completion (Klepfer and Hull, 2012). Likewise, there are no guidelines that delineate the skills and knowledge required to be ready to enter into the workforce or a career. Therefore, complementary to this review is a discussion of literature related to workforce needs that will require post-secondary training and the acquisition of skills for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, as well as a review of internationalization in higher education to respond to the rapid globalization of the workforce and of society at large.

With college- and career-readiness issues becoming key priorities for the PK–20 education community and the nation at large, today’s teachers will need to be qualified to help their students be successful in learning – in a wide range of subject matters, forming a springboard for them to continue to learn post-secondarily, and acquiring skills that will ultimately prepare them for the workforce and become productive citizens in society. Yet high schools across the nation face the many similar challenges in ensuring that their students are college-ready or prepared to enter the workforce.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Projections from reliable sources such as the U.S. Department of Education, chambers of commerce and university research indicate that within the next decade, 63 percent of all jobs in the United States will require some post-secondary education, and 90 percent of new jobs in growing industries with high wages will require some post-secondary training; however, institutes of higher education and the business community (Committee for Economic Development, 2005) have long expressed great concern over the inadequacy of a traditional high school education in preparing students for post-secondary education or to receive the training necessary to succeed in careers. There is general consensus that high schools should produce “college and career-ready graduates,” and that “a rigorous curriculum” is the way to do so. This begs the question, what do these two phrases mean? How do we determine what makes a prepared high school graduate, and how do we know if the current high school curricula produce them?

While college- and career-readiness issues are a priority in PK–20 education, much of the attention has focused on secondary education, fueled by economic projections and secondary reform efforts. The literature presented facts that should raise some concerns:

- Almost two-fifths of high school graduates “are not adequately prepared” by their high school education for college-level courses or subsequent entry-level jobs, according to a survey of college instructors and employers;
- Many low-income schools lack access to a rigorous high school curriculum by any definition. The U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights Data (Dervarics and O’Brien, 2012), for example, recently reported that 3,000 high schools serving nearly 500,000 students offer no classes in Algebra II, a key subject encompassed by the SAT and other indicators of college readiness.

- Some studies estimate that only ten percent of eighth graders are on target to graduate from high school without need for remedial work in college.
- Public universities invest billions annually to remediate roughly a third of their freshmen.
- Many students who enroll in college struggle academically and personally in a post-secondary setting and eventually drop out.
- At the societal level, producing college-ready students carries significant social and economic consequences.

### College Readiness

Literature on college readiness focuses on a wide range of issues. Research draws a distinction between ‘*college eligibility*’ and ‘*college readiness*’. For example, a student may graduate high school with sufficient credits to enroll in a post-secondary institution, but still lack the academic skills and study habits to succeed. There will be a gap between what high schools teach and what colleges expect as long as the two sectors do not develop expectations jointly. Approximately half of the students entering the less-selective four-year institutions are not ready for college (Gheen et. al., 2012). Yet these students, for the most part, have completed a college-prep curriculum and have attained the required combination of grade point average and college admission test scores-in addition to earning a high school diploma and passing an exit exam. This discrepancy points to a major disconnect between *college readiness* as defined in terms of course completion, credit hours, and standard assessment scores, and defined in terms of what colleges and universities expect from entering students. Further complicating the situation is the diffuse nature of readiness standards within college and university systems. The placement tests administered by colleges are *their* readiness standards, but they vary substantially across institutions - even within a state or a postsecondary system - both in the tests and cut-off scores used. Additionally, postsecondary placement tests may bear little connection to the high school curriculum or to high school assessments, which also vary radically across the nation. Common Core attempted to unify efforts to standardize the curriculum (Rothman, (2012), but not all states ascribed to the project, and some of those who did have now withdrawn their participation.

In a report prepared for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, “*Toward a More Comprehensive Conception of College Readiness*” (Conley, 2007), focus is placed on the importance of imparting cognition and metacognitive skills:

*Recent research has shed light on several key elements of college success. Most important for this paper is the realization that a range of cognitive and metacognitive capabilities, often described as “key cognitive strategies,” have been consistently and emphatically identified by those who teach entry-level college courses as being as important or more important than any specific content knowledge taught in high school. Examples of key cognitive strategies include analysis, interpretation, precision and accuracy, problem solving, and reasoning. Close behind in importance is knowledge of specific types of content knowledge. Several studies have led to college readiness standards that specify key content knowledge associated with college success. Writing may be by far the single academic skill most closely associated with college success, but the “big ideas” of each content area are also very important building blocks.*

Much as transpired since the publication of this report almost a decade ago. However, colleges still use commonly-recognized academic indicators to determine access through an admission process, where testing being applied to incoming community college students is supposed to measure whether or not the applicant is *college ready*. These indicators include completion of coursework required for college admission, achievement test scores and GPA. Sociological researchers emphasize that in addition to measured qualifications, a student’s *college readiness* will be shaped by whether he or she has the information, resources, and skills necessary to effectively navigate the college admission process, commonly referred-to as “*college knowledge*”, non-academic and non-cognitive factors that can prove as, if not more, important than standard measures of academic readiness or college eligibility. *College knowledge* includes factors that promote long-term learning and achievement that can be brought together under the label *academic tenacity*. At its most basic level, academic tenacity is about working

hard, and working smart, for a long time. More specifically, academic tenacity (Dweck, and Cohen, 2014) is about the mindsets and skills that allow students to:

- look beyond short-term concerns to longer-term or higher-order goals, and
- withstand challenges and setbacks to persevere toward these goals.

These factors do not figure into typical early warning systems, if there are any at all. Findings suggest that low-income and minority students face additional barriers to college access beyond their qualifications due to not understanding the college application process, the financial aid system, and the range of choices within the postsecondary system, as well as not being able to navigate these complex processes and systems. There is a growing recognition, for example, that the complexity of the federal financial aid application creates barriers for students, especially those from disadvantaged communities. Another important strand of research on college access suggests that low-income and first-generation college students do not engage effectively in a college search. They have difficulty identifying the kinds of colleges they might like to attend, as well as the range of options that are available to them and how much they will be expected to pay for college. Successfully enrolling in college requires such knowledge, which high schools can support by providing norms, information, and guidance about college-going to their students.

If educators are to use *college readiness* as a strategy for accomplishing the goal of college access and success, they must couple academic preparedness with the knowledge and skills students need to navigate the college-going process. They will also have to take responsibility for teaching *college knowledge* and providing support for students throughout the education continuum and learning process.

High schools cannot focus on the *college readiness* and post-secondary outcomes of their graduates if they do not know what happens to their students after they graduate and do not have measurable indicators of what determines college access and performance. *College readiness* indicators help focus high schools’ attention on post-secondary readiness, but they do not build the capacity of schools to improve. It is suggested that high schools will have to do more than raise graduation requirements and align standards. At times, teachers and counselors must also motivate students to succeed in school and go on to postsecondary education. In a nationwide survey of high school dropouts (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2010), 69 percent said that school had not motivated or inspired them to work hard. In fact, many of the students who remain in school are not motivated or inspired either, and the more time students spend in K–12 education the worse it gets (Eccles, Wigfield, and Schiefele, 1998). This lack of motivation to do well in school represents a serious loss of human potential, with implications for students’ well-being later in life and for our country’s future economic growth (Stipek, 2001).

Increasing *college readiness* is fundamentally an instructional challenge that will require developing classroom environments that deeply engage students in acquiring the skills and knowledge they will need to gain access to and succeed in college. They will have to build instructional environments where students are learning content knowledge and core academic skills, as well as develop the non-cognitive skills that traditionally have not been the domain of most high schools (Corcoran and Silander, 2009). There must be a fundamental shift from strategies that focus on credit accumulation, such as increasing graduation requirements, to strategies that focus on preparing students for college. The organizational structure of high schools shapes assignments of teachers to various courses and categories of students. It also affects teachers’ opportunities for support and collaboration, the norms governing their professional responsibilities and instructional practice, the content and focus of their professional development opportunities, and the nature and strength of their professional commitments. Supporting the previously-mentioned shift within the classroom will require a serious investment to increase the capacity of high schools to provide teachers with development opportunities to enhance their instructional practice to meet this challenge.

### **Preparation for being Career Ready**

Literature on career readiness is equally interesting and diverse. Research demonstrates that increasing the percentage of Americans completing a postsecondary education will prove important to bolstering and sustaining the middle class, largely because the percentage of jobs requiring a college degree (at minimum) will rise sharply over the next decade. In “*Making it Real: How High Schools can be Held Accountable for Developing Students’ Career Readiness*” (Darche and Stern, 2013), the authors explore measures states can use to hold high schools

accountable for developing students' career readiness. Their research focuses on implementing one specific indicator: obtaining a satisfactory performance rating by a supervisor in a job, internship, school-based enterprise or other experience that demonstrates a student's career-related transferable skills. Other predictors of later career success include not only academic achievement but also various abilities and behaviors, other than knowledge of school subjects, a written plan for their postsecondary education and careers, completion of a Career and Technical Education (CTE) course sequence, or obtain an industry-recognized skill certificate or credential.

Thresholds for jobs requiring a postsecondary education will likely spike due to the nature of jobs created after the recession and the increasing importance of technology in the American economy, and the U.S. is not on pace to meet the demand for college graduates. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2008), only 42 percent of Americans in the workforce at the time of their study possessed a college degree, and that number was forecasted to climb near 60 percent in the following decade. Failing to focus on *career readiness* carries major implications for the U.S. economy over the long-term.

To hold high schools accountable for developing students' *career readiness*, states need a practical measure that is not too burdensome. Students who perform well in regular, paid jobs are directly demonstrating their readiness for employment, and they are developing abilities and behaviors that contribute to long-term career success. Furthermore, school-supervised work experiences such as internships, volunteerism and other unpaid work actually provide more opportunity to learn and develop the productive abilities and behaviors that contribute to long-term career success. Giving schools credit for a higher percentage of seniors who earn satisfactory performance ratings in qualifying experiences will effectively encourage schools to engage more students in high-quality work-based learning that promotes long-term career success.

While significant changes will be required to ensure students receive the academic preparation, opportunity, support, and resources that allow them to navigate through high school, transition into college, earn a college degree or training, and successfully enter the workforce, business leaders can prompt change by:

- Demonstrating to governors, state legislatures and the public that budgetary support for higher education is an economic investment for the country;
- Encouraging and assisting higher education in developing more efficient and effective management structures and systems, adopting recognized standards for quality management and implementing systems that improve efficiency and productivity;
- Encouraging public-private partnerships with educational institutions to help leverage private investment, promote regional economic development, and serve as fora for exchanging ideas, research, technological innovation, and workplace skill requirements;
- Promoting education through direct corporate involvement.

### Closing the Gaps

A series of “gaps” present themselves in K-12 education and persist throughout the education continuum, into post-secondary education and beyond, that prevent students from accessing and/or completing their education. These include:

- **Achievement gaps:** Achievement gaps refer to the observed, persistent disparity of educational measures between the performance of groups of students, especially groups defined by socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity and gender. The achievement gap can be observed on a variety of measures, including standardized test scores, grade point average, dropout rates, and college enrollment and completion rates. The Education Resource Information Center (ERIC.ed.gov) sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education cites numerous sources attempting to close academic achievement gaps, especially those existing along racial lines.
- **Excellence gaps:** Excellence gap refers to the disparity in the percent of lower-income versus higher-income students who reach advanced levels of academic performance. The “gap” appears in elementary school and continues as students move through middle school, high school, college and beyond. The Education Commission of the United States "*Blueprint for College Readiness*" report analyzes policy across the 50 states in terms of high school policies to increase college readiness, higher education policies to increase college completion, policies that ensure alignment between high school and higher education.

- **Gender gaps:** For the past decade or so, there has been a raging debate about promoting education opportunities for girls, especially in STEM (sciences, technology, engineering and mathematics), some may say to the detriment of boys. Regardless where the reader stands on the issue, women are making progress in not only advancing in education, and therefore in professional careers, but in breaking the ceilings of leadership, business, economic development and other sectors of society.

### Globalization

We live in an intertwined globalized world that touches upon all sectors of society. In terms of *career-readiness*, globalization and technology also play major roles as factors in preparing students for a global workforce (Matherly, 2015). As is the case with *college readiness* and *career readiness*, there are no formal definitions for globalization, but outcomes are apparent in economic growth and an increase in the welfare of a nation. *Internationalization* is seen as an analysis of developments in higher education that focus specifically on rationales, approaches, strategies, activities and outcomes of higher education in a comparative perspective toward *globalization* (DeWit and Hunter, 2014). A special issue of *International Higher Education* (2009) highlights new and innovative dimensions in internationalization as it relates to *globalization*. The issue focused on dimensions of *internationalization* such as curricula, teaching, and learning outcomes, illustrating the increasing importance and diversity of internationalization’s conceptual understandings and prompt experiences in modern international higher education.

“Why it Matters” (2014) set forth the proceedings from a workshop sponsored by the University of Washington’s Bothell Global Initiatives, exploring how students adapt to situations of change and gain new knowledge from experiences. This touches upon Kolb’s Experiential Learning Cycle of Active Experimentation, Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation and Abstract Conceptualization. Skills that matter include intercultural skills such as being respectful, multilingual, flexible, and those needed to build trust, as well as understanding and accepting cultural differences while adjusting communication. Other important skills included those of being aware of one’s own culture, tolerating ambiguity, working in diverse teams and being open to new ideas, and noted other skills as well, such as adapting to different cultures, listening and observing as also being important.

The proceedings included the results of a 2003 RAND study surveyed 135 Human Resource managers from 75 companies. By consensus, the most important employee skill sets were:

- Substantive content/technical knowledge of the primary field of business,
- Managerial ability, with emphases on teamwork and interpersonal skills,
- Strategic international understanding, and
- Cross-cultural experience.

Cross-cultural competence ranked 5th out of 19 attributes that ‘Make a successful career professional’ according to the same study. A later study found that the top four skills that employers value are:

- Interacting with people who hold different interests, values, and perspectives, and
- Understanding cultural differences in the workplace.

We live in a challenging era with increased pressures on our workforce due to *globalization* and the demands of complex political, social and economic forces (Naghshpour, 2008). At the same time, students have an unprecedented range of opportunities available to broaden their world view and deepen their understanding of global issues—whether through formal study abroad programs, non-credit experiential learning programs, volunteer projects or work abroad (Adler et. al., 2012). There are many transferable skills a student can gain from, for example an overseas experience such as study abroad or interning and working for a multi-national enterprise, such as acquiring language competency and specific business skills (Clark, 2012). However, students too frequently accumulate international experiences in an ad hoc fashion, absent any clear relationship to their curricular choices and unrelated to their career goals. In addition, even with the best of intentions, students have difficulty articulating—in resumes and job interviews—how their travel, study or work abroad experience informs their overall career decision-making.

### Policy Issues for College Readiness and Career Readiness

In terms of increasing both *college readiness* and *career readiness*, policy is as disparate as benchmarks are for student performance. Many state leaders see the college-prep route as the solution to the readiness gap, despite the fact that college-prep curriculum does not ensure college readiness but has often become the default curriculum. Because of this discrepancy between the goals of state policy and the limitations of that policy in practice, the *college-prep-college readiness* gap is perhaps a more important and vexing dimension of the problem than is the *high school diploma-college readiness* gap (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2010).

At present, the K–16 alignment strategy embraces two sets of policy recommendations to improve *college readiness*. The first is to raise standards, such as making high school graduation requirements more demanding, increasing the rigor of high school exit exams (Klepfer and Hull, 2012), and aligning state curricular standards to college-level work. There is, however, limited evidence that tougher requirements will improve student achievement (Kless, et. al., unknown). The second is to develop integrated data systems, which would require developing clear indicators of college readiness and creating clear standards for those indicators, as well as provide educators and students with clear guidance about what students need to do to improve. Unfortunately, few districts and states now have such a capacity. No state uses existing measures to benchmark college readiness, and few have linked student indicators to actual college performance.

While many states have made progress in getting more students to take the high school courses necessary for college readiness and have strengthened the content standards in these courses, only a few have specified an explicit set of performance skills in reading, writing, and math that signify college readiness. While an emphasis has been on courses taken and knowledge gained, equal emphasis must be placed on integrating the development of higher level learning skills in the curriculum, specifically in reading, writing, and math. As previously mentioned, high schools cannot focus on the *college readiness* and post-secondary outcomes of their graduates if they do not know what happens to their students. A first step would be for districts and states to hold themselves accountable for students’ post-secondary performance, which, as noted, requires building a strong data system and validated indicators of *college readiness*. States will also require new feedback systems that both provide schools information on the college outcomes of their graduates and link their performance during high school with their college outcomes. Several states have begun to link high school and college data sets together for tracking purposes, but few states and localities have made post-secondary outcomes a core component of their accountability and data reporting systems. Policy decisions also have an impact on building the capacity of schools and teachers to respond to the challenges of increasing *college readiness* and *career-readiness*, which is fundamentally an instructional challenge that will require developing classroom environments that facilitate the acquisition of skills and knowledge needed for success through the education process and in the labor market.

### INTERPRETATION

One of the challenges of identifying and verifying “*College Readiness*” or “*Career Readiness*” is that there is no consensus about what these terms mean, what indicators can be standardized and how attainment is authenticated or tracked. There are also few to no mechanisms for accountability and improvement, or feedback on whether a student is actually college ready or has acquired necessary skills for the workforce.

Schools lacking access to a rigorous high school curriculum is another problem, indicative of the growing achievement gap – and gender gap - experienced by students from disadvantaged and underserved communities. The literature also focused on unweighted GPA as an indicator of college readiness, with a GPA of 3.0 being a key benchmark for college readiness—a cutoff that gave students a 50 percent or greater likelihood of graduating from a four-year college within six years. This prejudices students from disadvantaged communities, where low GPAs among African American and Latino graduates, particularly among male graduates, create significant barriers to college access as well as college graduation, and does not even address the issue of drop-outs or repeaters because of low GPAs. And although GPAs are also a central predictor of whether students will graduate from high school, grades are often not valid measures of student performance as they are not comparable across high schools.

In terms of public policy, the law holds states accountable for high school graduation rates irrespective of proficiency levels represented by the diploma. Despite competing pressures to ensure that all high school

graduates are college ready, states have found it politically difficult to set high school exit exams at higher levels. It is no surprise, then, that many students who earn a high school diploma and pass the exit exams are far from being college ready.

Educators and policymakers have quite a task before them to create valid measures of student performance. Policymakers need to focus on accountability through the development of data reporting systems, ideally with benchmark conformity throughout the states. Building the capacity of schools and teachers to respond to the challenges of increasing college- and career-readiness success by developing classroom environments that deeply engage the students in acquiring the skills and knowledge they will need to gain access to and succeed in college is a lofty goal. Supporting this shift within the classroom will require massive investments in an overhaul of an antiquated education system and an investment in educator professional development for ongoing lifelong learning. This includes strengthening schools' capacity by providing the resources, strategies, and know-how to counselors and teachers so that they are appropriately equipped to provide support to students throughout the college planning process.

### CONCLUSION

Indicators of *college readiness* include not only academic preparedness, but also academic tenacity and college knowledge. Implicit in this approach is a shift from focusing on simply completing high school to graduating ready for college academically, attitudinally, and in terms of basic knowledge about how post-secondary education works. The conclusion of this literature review is that not only must high schools raise their expectations and help students set more ambitious post-secondary goals, but they must also provide a wider array of supports in high school to help students meet their individual goals, master a broad range of knowledge and skills, and navigate the path toward post-secondary education

There is an important role for business and industry, too, in contributing toward a system that promotes *college readiness* and *career readiness*. Recommendations in the literature included:

- Persuade the President and Congress that federal support for higher education is critical to national economic competitiveness and security;
- Encourage increased investments in student aid that help more students attend and graduate from college;
- Contribute toward the promotion of minorities and students from disadvantaged communities to access college and graduate.

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