Defining College and Career Readiness: Take Action Now

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“If I had eight hours to chop down a tree, I’d spend six sharpening my axe.”

[President Abraham Lincoln](http://www.jimpoz.com/quotes/Speaker%3APresident_Abraham_Lincoln)

Preparation is imperative for success in any endeavor whether the activity is chopping down a tree, taking a trip, or cooking dinner and is especially critical for those activities and events that have significant meaning for people and their futures. Success in college or a career is one such life experience that is dependent on sufficient preparation. What students learn in school and while they grow from children to young adults makes a world of difference in their ability to find employment directly out of high school or succeed in college and later find a job. While many pundits and policy makers are focused on outcomes in community colleges and higher education in general, higher education faculty know that inputs to the systems matter. In response to the quality of high school graduates, new emphasis in the nation has been placed on raising expectations and standards for students in K-12 with the adoption and implementation of the Common Core State Standards. California is part of a consortium of 46 states that has decided to voluntarily adopt new standards for students in K-12 that have an emphasis on college and career readiness including assessment of that readiness. Higher education faculty in California should define college and career readiness, and community college faculty are positioned to have excellent contributions to the definition because of our career technical programs and emphasis on general education where students are initially exposed to college level work.

Unfortunately, faculty in higher education have been mostly absent from the development of standards of college and career readiness. Governors, legislators and state boards of education adopted the primary and secondary school standards and eagerly look forward to implementation of them without any contributions from college or university faculty. This is true for California too. Given the speed at which the new K-12 standards will be implemented, the time is now to define college and career readiness and help K-12 partners successfully learn, teach and assess what readiness looks like. If someone asked you to describe the skills and habits that are expected for college or career success, what would you say?

Without actually surveying colleagues in the state to answer this question, a general response can be determined from anecdotal information and water-cooler grousing. Faculty can identify what students and entry level workers cannot do: cannot write a complete sentence and certainly not a paragraph and cannot make change thus relying on the cash register for calculations. Students/workers are late to class/work, do not read the syllabus/manual, do not take ownership of their education/work, do not take initiative, etc. On the other hand, employers and faculty often mention skills that are valuable for success, such as commitment, work ethic, ability to communicate, being team player, and self-recognition of one’s locus of control. Based on these sentiments, readiness is not simply content knowledge. Careful and comprehensive preparation for the world of work or further study is more than knowing how to write an essay or be punctual. College and career readiness means more to most faculty and employers in the state and nation.

David Conley, of the Educational Policy Improvement Center (EPIC) in Oregon, in a formal study asked higher ed faculty what skills and knowledge they believe contribute to preparing students to succeed in college. Conley’s definition of college and career readiness is very basic: *Success – without remediation – in credit-bearing general education courses or a two-year certificate program*.[[1]](#footnote-1) The state of Colorado has also adopted this definition for college readiness.[[2]](#footnote-2) This definition might satisfy some community college and university faculty, but it is not comprehensive enough to really prepare students for the world of work or college level studies. There are productive behaviors that faculty expect in students and that employers expect in employees as well.

EPIC went further to define college and career readiness by expanding the definition into one that is more comprehensive. The expansion includes more of the habits, skills and attitudes that faculty and employers know are essential to success. It includes 4 areas:

1. **Key Content Knowledge** (writing, simple research, core/GE subject area knowledge)
2. **Key Cognitive Strategies** (inquisitiveness, reasoning, intellectual openness, precision and accuracy)
3. **Key Learning Skills and Techniques** (self-control, note taking, time management)
4. **Key Transition Knowledge and Skills** (understanding college or work as a system, interpersonal and social skills, culture of college)

These four areas are a good first start to expanding the definition of readiness and convey the holistic nature of readiness. Since many community colleges teach study skills or academic preparation courses, we have the opportunity to enhance the curriculum to include, if they don’t already, elements from these areas to help students see that we are not only preparing them to succeed in college but in life beyond college. Many of the courses in a general education package also touch on themes in the four areas, and as faculty create syllabi and grade student assignments, all of us can help mold regular people into good students and employees.

In California, higher education faculty have developed some standards for college readiness, separate from the work being done with the Common Core State Standards, in two ways First, the University of California Academic Senate has defined the “a-g” course requirements for high school students.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The intent of the "a-g" [Subject Requirements](http://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/admissions/undergrad_adm/paths_to_adm/freshman/subject_reqs.html) is to ensure that students can participate fully in the first-year program at the University in a wide variety of fields of study. The requirements are written deliberately for the benefit of all students expecting to enter the University, and not for preparation for specific majors. UC faculty consider the Subject Requirements to be effective preparation, on many levels, for undergraduate work at the University. This [pattern of study](http://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/admissions/undergrad_adm/paths_to_adm/freshman/subject_reqs.html) assures the faculty that the student has attained a body of general knowledge that will provide breadth and perspective to new, more advanced study. Fulfillment of the "a-g" pattern also demonstrates that the student has attained essential critical thinking and study skills.

CSU faculty also agree that “a-g” courses prepare students for university level work. Yet, even UC and CSU faculty go beyond course taking behaviors, GPA, and AP credits. Both systems require students to write admissions essays where they learn of student motivation, interest, and determination to accomplish goals. Those students communicating high levels of commitment to education and perseverance toward goals are admitted.

And second, the Intersegmental Committee of Academic Senates (ICAS) has prepared competency statements[[4]](#footnote-4) in several key areas, such as literacy and mathematics, which can be used by high school teachers in conjunction with state standards, to prepare students for college level work. These statements focus on content knowledge and do not address the behaviors and attitudes associated with successful learners and workers. Local senates and discipline faculty can use the ICAS competency statements when meeting with local K-12 teachers to discuss successful transitions into college. ICAS might consider creating a new competency statement - one that addresses overall college and career readiness. The final ICAS document might not be a competency statement as much as it is statement of expectations for behaviors, habits and knowledge that will help students come to the colleges and universities prepared to learn or work.

Another resource for higher ed faculty to consider is the work done by Arthur L. Costa regarding habits of mind for effective participation in the workplace and beyond. Costa’s recommended habits of mind are popular today and can be used for college students and employees alike.

The 16 Habits of mind[[5]](#footnote-5)

1. Persisting
2. Communicating with clarity and precision
3. Managing impulsivity
4. Gathering data through all senses
5. Listening with understanding and empathy
6. Creating, imagining, innovating
7. Thinking flexibly
8. Responding with wonderment and awe
9. Metacognition
10. Taking responsible risks
11. Striving for greater accuracy and precision
12. Finding humor
13. Questioning and problem posing
14. Thinking interdependently
15. Applying past knowledge to new situations
16. Remaining open to continuous learning

Community college faculty and their academic senates can review the work of EPIC, Costa and ICAS to lay a foundation for defining college and career readiness. Locally, senates can create messages for new students through outreach programs, orientations, and study skills courses. But much more work needs to be done to influence the Common Core State Standards for California and how K-12 students will learn and be assessed on readiness. Higher ed faculty must shape the assessments for measuring student preparation for college study and work after high school. Author Alvin Toffler is quoted as saying, “The illiterate of the future will not be the person who cannot read. It will be the person who does not know how to learn.” The future success of employees in the state is dependent on habits of mind that lead to specific content knowledge, but more importantly the ability to keep learning and thinking both independently and interdependently.

Additional Resource

College Tools for Schools <http://collegetools.berkeley.edu/index.php>

1. Conley, David T. (2007), Redefining College Readiness, Volume 5. Eugene, OR: Educational Policy Improvement Center. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Condition of College Readiness Colorado (2011), ACT http://www.act.org/newsroom/data/2011/states/pdf/Colorado.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. University of California http://www.ucop.edu/a-gGuide/ag/a-g/welcome.html [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. ICAS Competency Statements <http://icas-ca.org/competencies> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Costa, Arthur and Kallick, Bena: Learning and Leading with Habits of Mind (2008), Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development, with exerpts available from <http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/108008/chapters/Describing-the-Habits-of-Mind.aspx> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)