



# Research in Practice

Series I: Building a College and Career-Ready School  
Climate: Research in Practice

Paper No. 2

## Creating a College and Career-Ready School Culture

By Christine Totura, Ph.D.

As important as it is to understand school culture and climate, it is more important to understand how these factors can be understood and developed to meet academic goals. As seen in the first paper of this series, *The Importance of School Culture and Climate*, the traditions and norms that schools are built around, as well as the perceptions of those traditions and norms, are critical components that define a school environment. In many ways, aspects of school culture and climate are significant predictors of student performance (e.g., Higgins-D'Alessandro & Sath, 1998; Hoagwood & Johnson, 2003). When specifically directed, school cultures have the opportunity to provide supportive programming and policies intended to transform schools into environments characterized by high academic expectations and optimal college and career readiness.

### What are College and Career Readiness?

Many have considered a culture of college and career readiness an outcome of a positive, well-developed, and high expectations school climate – one in which student engagement and connectedness with academic tasks is optimized. **College readiness** can be defined “as the level of preparation a student needs to enroll and succeed, without remediation, in a credit-bearing general education course at a postsecondary institution that offers a baccalaureate degree or

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transfer to a baccalaureate program” (Conley, 2007). Guided by this definition, schools can be assured students are college ready if they are able to get the most out of college through an understanding of college course content and expectations, an ability to grasp key take-away messages from college coursework, and an effective adaptation to the culture and structure of postsecondary education.

A similar definition can be used for **career readiness**, an indicator of whether students are equipped with the skills and attributes they need to successfully seek and obtain gainful employment. Although college and career readiness are closely related, they are not the same (Conley & McGaughy, 2012). Researchers have suggested that the best way to view career readiness is through a developmental lens. What this means is that career decisions are made based on the life stage one is in and all of the attitudes, behaviors, and developmental tasks related to that stage (Phillips & Blustein, 1994; Super, 1957). Career maturity could then be considered the “readiness to cope with the developmental tasks of one’s life stage, to make socially required career decisions, and to cope appropriately with the tasks which society confronts the developing youth and adult” (Super & Jordaan, 1973, p.4). For teenagers, their life stage is one of exploration in which they are considering many potential interests and options that will help shape their identities (e.g., Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012). Any effort to enhance career readiness would need to keep the tasks and requirements of this stage in mind and the attitudes (i.e., planning and exploration) and cognitions (i.e., decision-making) indicative of teenage identity exploration.

### **The Essential Ingredients of Readiness**

Researchers have used definitions of college and career readiness to guide studies on exactly what readiness looks like. Many have successfully uncovered a number of “ingredients” that are key in determining the likelihood of students developing college and career readiness and of schools adopting a college and career-ready culture.

#### ***What is Needed for College Readiness?***

Schools are focusing on college readiness now more than ever because there is a wide-spread awareness that high school proficiency does not equal college readiness. What this means is that just because students graduate from high school does not mean that they are equipped with the skills, knowledge, and abilities that are needed to succeed in college. In order to bridge this gap, there are four main components schools can evaluate and consider in academic planning (see Figure 1).

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The best way to view career readiness is through a developmental lens. What this means is that career decisions are made based on the life stage one is in and all of the attitudes, behaviors, and developmental tasks related to that stage.

Fundamentally, it is critical for students to obtain adequate knowledge in specific college preparatory content areas, such as math, science, social studies, and English. Moreover, within each of these content areas, students are expected to demonstrate the cognitive strategies needed to achieve outcomes through problem formulation, research, analysis, and effective communication of their ideas. In order to implement these strategies, students must be motivated and engaged in school activities in which they show the ability to set goals, study well, manage time, monitor performance, and make adjustments to performance when needed (Gurantz & Borsato, 2012). Finally, goal setting and motivation can be fostered through exposure to the college context and the norms and values it entails, as well as what it takes to apply, enroll, and matriculate through college programs.

Figure 1. Components of a College-Ready Culture.

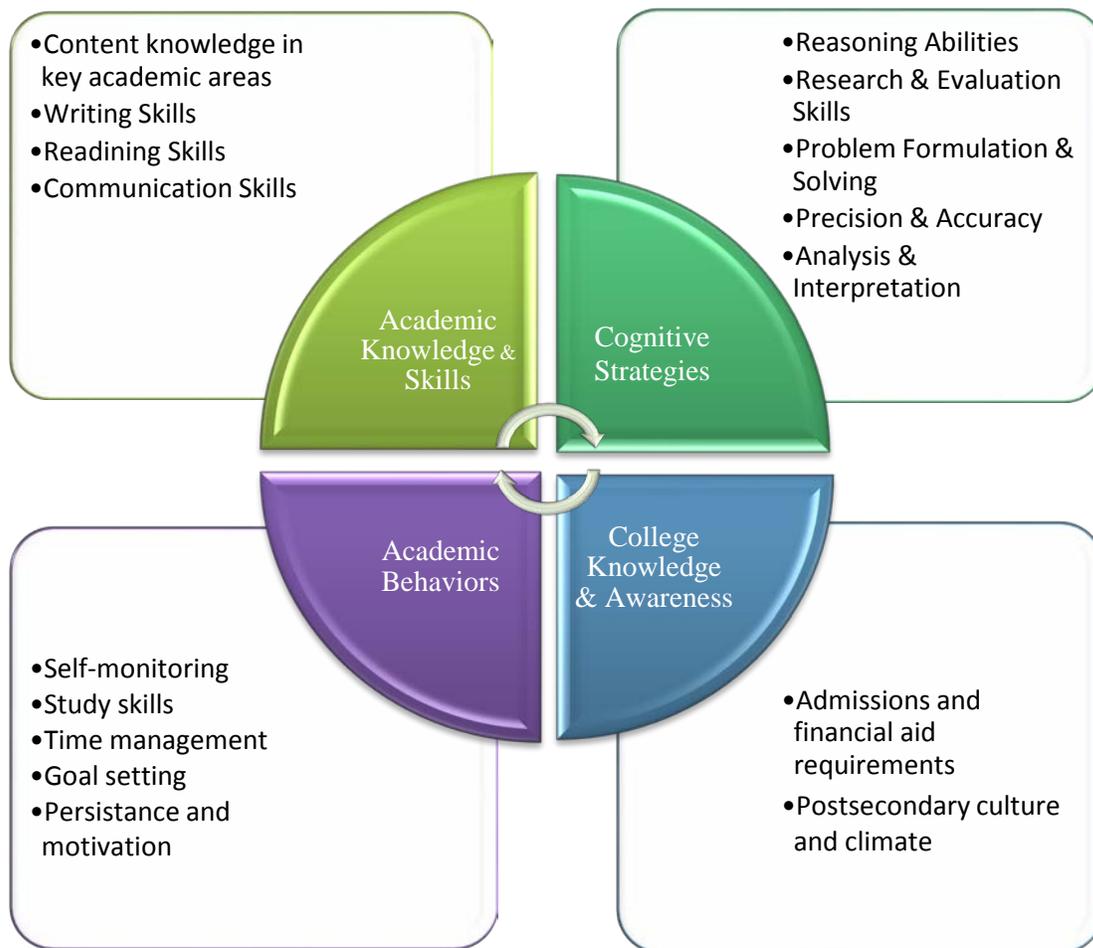


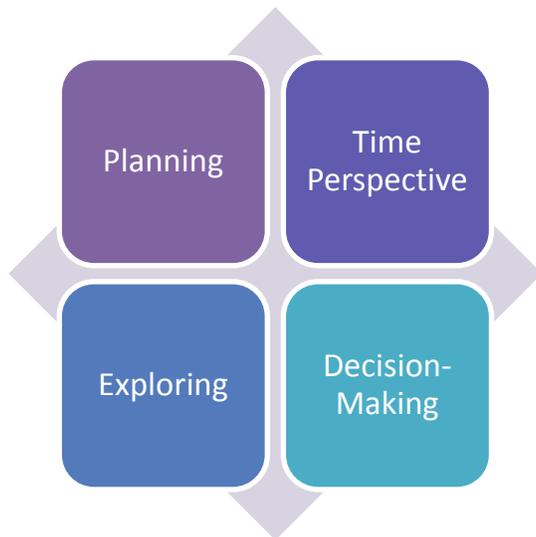
Figure note. Adapted from Conley (2007).

Traditionally, performance in this area of readiness has been evaluated using grade point averages, completed coursework, standardized tests (both nationally and locally-derived), along with self-report data on academic behaviors and strategies. These measures, however, are limited to simply understanding what is happening at the student level. Schools can gauge the college-readiness of their cultures by additionally assessing the opportunities, or scaffolding, they make available for students to develop competencies in key readiness areas.

### ***What is Needed for Career Readiness?***

Career goals are significantly related to achievement; higher academic expectations can contribute to greater career aspirations and attainment (Akos, Lambie, Milson, & Gilbert, 2011). Therefore, fostering career readiness may be similar to fostering college readiness in many ways. Early work suggests that specific ingredients help define what career readiness looks like (Phillips & Blustein, 1994). Figure 2 provides an outline of these ingredients.

Figure 2. Characteristics of Successful Career Readiness.



Planning refers to developing a knowledge base and set of actions for achieving a career goal. Related to planning is developing a sense of time perspective or an understanding of where one is in their career readiness process and the time needed to reach goals. Time perspective can directly fuel time management. Exploring is exposure to a variety of activities and opportunities that can expand student knowledge bases of career choices and enhance their

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planning process. Students who are particularly hard-working, open to experiences, and have competency (i.e. self-efficacy) around career decision-making are more likely to engage in planning and exploration (Rogers, Creed, & Glendon, 2008). Finally, decision-making involves considering options, information at hand, and possible alternatives.

So now that the ingredients of career readiness are known, what strategies are important in reaching a stage of readiness? The cognitive skills of problem-formulation and solving, reasoning, critical thinking, and effective communication are significant precursors for success in career-oriented work (Conley & McGaughy, 2012). Further, motivational skills such as time management, goal-setting, persistence, and having an orientation toward learning are critical and also among the most common strategies identified across both college and career readiness.

### **What does it take to Create a College and Career-Ready School Culture?**

What may have been noticed through the discussion on ingredients for college and career readiness is that there is quite a bit of overlap. Many of the cognitive strategies, attitudes, and behaviors students need to develop for college success are much the same as they would need for career success (Conley & McGaughy, 2012). Schools that are consistently responsive to these elements through policies, practices, and resources are far more likely to build effective college and career-ready cultures.

The connection among career self-efficacy, outcome expectations, career goals, and career planning and exploration is stronger in highly supportive contexts (Rogers et al., 2008). Schools provide specialized contexts in which student personalities, confidence, and career development can be fostered. Teachers and guidance counselors spend significant amounts of time with students building their academic and social competencies. By working together, they have a unique opportunity to encourage time management, organization, and openness to opportunities among students, each of which has been found to impact career goals, planning, and exploration (Rogers et al., 2008).

### **Next Steps...Moving the Needle on College and Career Readiness**

In this paper, college and career readiness were defined and the important ingredients of each were identified in order for schools to gauge student performance and focus culture-building efforts. Based on what years of research and field experience had presented,

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schools would benefit from a number of recommendations and actions to optimize characteristics of a college and career-ready culture:

- 1) Develop shared expectations that the purpose of school is not just college prep for some, but development of college and career readiness for all (Conley & McGaughy, 2012). School staff can communicate messages to students about how critical it is to use their time in school to plan and prepare for what comes after graduation. Teacher efforts to push a higher standard of academic performance are a key component of culture building (Gurantz & Borsato, 2012).
- 2) Focus measurement of school outcomes on what is most important for college and career readiness such as key cognitive and motivational strategies, in addition to factors associated with college knowledge and awareness (Conley & McGaughy, 2012). These strategies can be assessed in academic activities similar to essays, in-depth projects, research papers, and experiments that showcase student knowledge, critical thinking, and problem-solving.
- 3) Align coursework with college and career readiness standards. Researchers have found that a student's course of study is one of the greatest predictors of future career aspirations (Mau & Bikos, 2000). Students who are either not exposed to or elect not to take academically rigorous coursework are at risk of limiting their postsecondary career options. In addition to knowledge gain in academic content areas, it is just as important to teach the skills that predict college and career success: time management, study skills, and goal-setting. Integration of middle school and high school student performance and coursework expectations will further move schools toward cultures of college and career readiness. One solution is for schools to offer courses that are not only academically challenging and rigorous, but include content that requires students to apply knowledge to real-world and career-oriented situations (Conley & McGaughy, 2012).

Teacher efforts to push a higher standard of academic performance are a key component of culture building.

The next paper in this series will dig deeper into these recommendations. Specifically, it will focus on measuring aspects of a college and career-ready school culture and highlight the school-wide capacities that will be valuable in contributing to this culture. By understanding these key aspects of culture building, schools will be better positioned to move the needle on college and career readiness for their students.

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