



Research in Practice

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

Paper No. 3

Dashboard of College and Career Readiness: Moving the Needle in Schools

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With a firm sense for how a college and career ready culture is defined, it is now important to plan strategies that will create a readiness culture in schools. As seen in the first two papers of this series, *The Importance of School Culture and Climate* and *Creating a College and Career-Ready School Culture*, the school environment plays a critical role in underscoring the significance of high academic expectations for all students. By addressing the essential ingredients of readiness, schools can foster a climate of goal-setting, performance monitoring, and motivation among students and teachers. With support from the research and capacity building strategies, this paper will highlight key action steps for schools that will be valuable in contributing to a high achievement culture and to moving the needle on college and career readiness. In order to accomplish this goal, two particular avenues will be discussed: measuring culture and planning for intervention.

Measuring Culture: How do we know we have a college and career-ready culture?

All measurement begins first with clear definitions of desired outcomes. In this case, the outcomes include college and career readiness, or more specifically “for all for all students to be prepared for a full range of post-

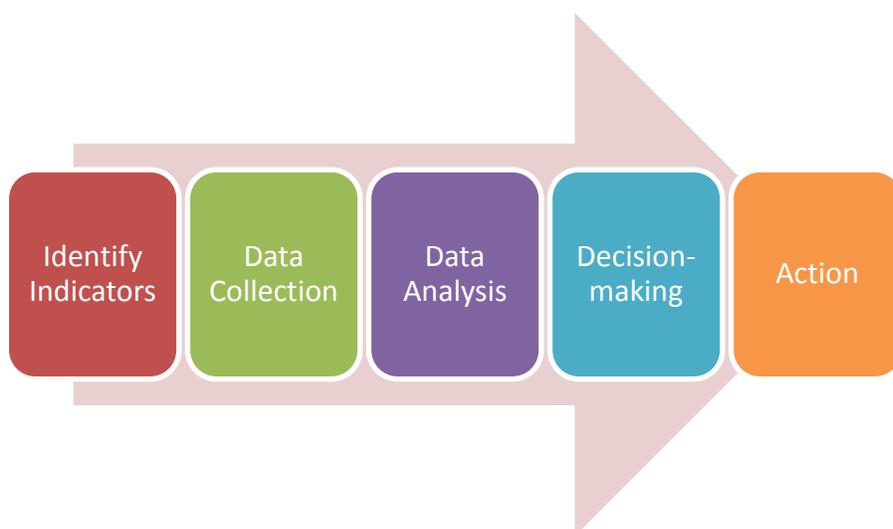


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a project of
Northern Arizona University,
supported by the U.S.
Department of Education*

secondary options through structural, motivational, and experiential college preparatory opportunities” (MacDonald & Dorr, 2006). High educational expectations among students, parents, and teachers indicate a school climate that supports the shared goal of college readiness for all students (Schneider, 2007).

Following from this definition, culture and climate can be measured by identifying indicators for college and career readiness (Gurantz & Borsato, 2012). According to the College Readiness Indicator System (CRIS) Cycle of Inquiry, the measurement process would then involve a process for selecting data collection methods, interpreting the data, and making decisions about how to intervene with the school climate.

Figure 1. Overview of the CRIS Cycle of Inquiry



High educational expectations among students, parents, and teachers indicate a school climate that supports the shared goal of college readiness for all students.

Figure note. Adapted from the CRIS Toolkit (2011).

Identifying Indicators

Traditional indicators of college and career readiness fall into three categories: grades, test scores, and college performance (Conley, 2007). **Grade point averages**, as well as courses taken, are typical indicators of achievement. High school graduation requirements have become more rigorous in recent years as greater attention has been paid to academic expectations and postsecondary success. As students are expected to take more demanding coursework simply to meet graduation requirements, they are inherently becoming more in-line with expectations for college and career readiness.

Standardized tests are another typical indicator of college and career readiness. In addition to national tests of student performance (ACT, SAT, National Assessment of Educational Progress), many states have their own standards-based tests. In Arizona, this is known as Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS). However now with the adoption of the Common Core Standards or very similar standards in many jurisdictions, caution should be used in relying too heavily on state tests as an indicator. Many of these statewide assessment measures are not well-aligned with postsecondary learning requirements, and too much focus on these measures can create education systems that are not in sync with what is needed to be college ready (Conley, 2007).

As described in the second paper of this series, *Creating a College and Career-Ready School Culture*, there are several factors that are targeted for student development that contribute to traditional indicators of college and career readiness. These included cognitive strategies, academic knowledge and skills, academic behaviors, and college skills and awareness. Through academically-oriented attitudes, motivations, and behaviors, these skills and knowledge sets are intended to lead to the final indicator of college and career readiness: **college performance** (Gurantz & Borsato, 2012). Oftentimes, college performance is defined as student academic success in general college-level classes, including whether students need to take remedial coursework for particular subjects upon college entry.

Data Collection and Analysis

A main criterion for indicators is that they must be measurable. Once these measurable indicators are identified, data collection mechanisms need to be determined. For the three traditional indicators mentioned, schools often already have methods in place for collecting this data. Grade points averages and completed coursework (as well as any Advanced Placement tests taken) are regularly assessed and communicated to students and parents. Statewide standardized test scores are systematically collected and reported to students, parents, schools, districts, and to state departments of education. College performance in courses is reported to students and university personnel. Though programs such as GEAR UP and repositories like the National Student Clearinghouse, this data may also be reported back to program staff and secondary schools.

Many statewide assessments are not well-aligned with postsecondary learning requirements, and too much focus on them can create education systems that are not in sync with what is needed to be college ready.

Decision-Making

College and career ready cultures are built upon data-driven decision-making. With information on student performance in classes, on standardized tests, and potentially into college, administrators, teachers, and counselors can make informed decisions about programming and curriculum. When decisions are made with data, they are based on scientifically collected and readily observable patterns in student performance and engagement rather than anecdotal information or irregularly occurring events.

College and career ready cultures are built upon data-driven decision-making.

Taking Action and Creating College and Career Ready Cultures

Once indicators have been identified, measured, and analyzed, action planning needs to occur. In this planning, the data that was used to make decisions about student strengths and weaknesses, in addition to potential areas for curriculum and program improvement, is translated into specific actionable steps.

Getting to Outcomes: Identifying Programmatic Goals

The first step in action planning is to identify goals. Indicators should directly correspond to anticipated goals for school improvement. Through examination of indicator data and the status of current programming, school personnel can identify mechanisms, or intervening factors contributing to student performance. As the second paper in this Research in Practice series stressed, mediating variables to improving achievement include enhancing student cognitive skills, study strategies, knowledge acquisition, and opportunities for skill practice and success (e.g., Conley, 2007). Therefore, goal selection should include theories about how promising outcomes could be achieved and identification of points of intervention in curricula and programs.

The most significant way for reaching college and career readiness goals and outcomes is to enhance school culture and climate.

Setting the Foundation for a College and Career Ready Culture

The most significant way for reaching college and career readiness goals and outcomes is to enhance school culture and climate. The fundamental precursors of creating a college ready culture include a number of components, such as school leadership and staff support, college access and success expectations, and stakeholder involvement in readiness efforts (MacDonald & Dorr, 2006). These main components are highlighted in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Precursors to College and Career Ready School Cultures.

<p>1. School Leadership and Staff Commitment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administrator support and resource allocation • Specified staff roles and responsibilities
<p>2. College Access and Readiness Expectations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher and school staff beliefs that everyone in school has a role in fostering college readiness
<p>3. Stakeholder Support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active support and involvement from all stakeholders in college preparedness: Teachers, counselors, administration, students, and parents

What this model of college and career readiness suggests is that improvement in student outcomes must be a whole-school approach (Schneider, 2007). Messaging about postsecondary expectations must be consistent, with a universal undertone that postsecondary preparedness is an attainable goal for all students. Moreover, educational goals should be well-aligned with career goals. In order to fully foster student academic success, this whole-school culture approach must also integrate academic goals with the social-emotional development of adolescents (Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012). Stemming from this approach, school-wide incentives should be developmental in nature and should motivate students and teachers to contribute to a college and career ready culture.

The basis of developing a college and career ready culture is the promotion of strong relationships among students, parents, and school personnel that support high academic expectations and action steps to reach them (Schneider, 2007). Encouragement of reciprocal trust and robust social connections among these stakeholders is the foundation for creating these relationships.

In order to fully foster student academic success, this whole-school culture approach must also integrate academic goals with the social-emotional development of adolescents.

Action Planning for a College and Career Ready Culture

Researchers have identified key principles that illustrate the degree to which school cultures embody postsecondary expectations (MacDonald & Dorr, 2006). It is suggested that action planning should encompass these principles, as well as evaluation methods to assess the extent of their implementation throughout program and curricular improvement.

College Communications	•Clear and continuous communication about college threaded throughout the school environment
Clear Postsecondary Expectations	•Postsecondary goals are clearly defined and communicated in multiple ways by teachers, school staff, students, and parents
Access to Postsecondary Information and Resources	•Students have access to current, comprehensive, and quality postsecondary information and resources
College Counseling	•Counselors assume the role of college counseling in addition to typical counseling responsibilities
Testing and Curriculum Requirements	•Students are informed about and well-prepared for standardized tests and curriculum requirements
Faculty Collaboration	•Teachers are actively involved with counselors, students, and families in college and career readiness initiatives
Family Collaboration	•Families have the opportunity to learn about college and to understand how they can have a role in postsecondary readiness
College Partnerships	•Active linkages between colleges and K through 12 education systems
Coordinated Academic Experiences	•Academic experiences and high expectations are continuous from Kindergarten through high school graduation

Recommendations for Moving the Needle on College and Career Readiness

In summary, there are several recommendations that can move schools closer to action planning for a college and career ready culture. Most of these recommendations require interventions to change or augment daily school operations, while also speaking to what it takes to successfully implement and sustain readiness efforts (Gurantz & Borsato, 2012).

- Whole-school and cross-departmental buy-in is important to bringing important collaborators and stakeholders on board
- Leadership support is critical in order to secure and allocate the necessary resources for college and career readiness culture development and data-driven decision-making
- School staff turnover must be addressed in order to protect initiatives from stalling or being phased out because key personnel are no longer involved
- Meaningful, measureable, and data-driven indicators of readiness need to be selected
- Universal best practice actions should be utilized to address identification of indicators and outcomes, measurement techniques, and plans to meet academic goals
- Evidence-based practices for creating a culture of college and career readiness need to be identified, well-understood, and evaluated for their fit with targeted school environments
- Useable and friendly data systems must be developed to inform a cycle of inquiry, action planning, and evaluation around college and career readiness

Action planning should encompass school cultural principles for college and career readiness, as well as evaluation methods to assess the extent of their implementation throughout program and curricular improvement.

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The *Research in Practice*
Paper Series
is a project of
The Initiative on the Study
of College and Career
Readiness (ISCCR),
Northern Arizona University